

The Arizona Republic

September 29, 2004 Wednesday Final chaser Edition

SECTION: OPINIONS; Pg. 6B

HEADLINE: **PLAY FAIR;**

OUR STAND: LET'S USE SPORTS TO TEACH TRAITS WE WANT KIDS TO LEARN

Think back. When was the first time you ever really cheated, or got into a fight?

For many of us, the critical moment happened while playing sports as a youth:

"I'm safe! He never touched me!"

Except that he did tag you.

"It was a ball! I get another swing!"

But you knew, in your heart, it was a third strike.

Now think about this:

What are the goals of organized youth sports?

Well, according to local sports psychologist Darren Treasure, the mission of youth sports is threefold:

- * Help the kids to have fun.
- * Help the kids learn to interact socially with other children.
- * Promote an active and healthy lifestyle throughout youth and adult life.

Hmmm.

Now consider this:

If the goal of youth sports is to develop professional athletes, then Pop Warner, Little League and Boys and Girls clubs are colossal failures.

Only an infinitesimal percentage of these players will ever go on to professional careers. Even the "stars," the overpowering Little League pitcher,

the breakaway back, rarely play in college, much less the major leagues or the NFL.

If the goal of sports is to develop character -- and you hear that bromide a lot -- then how is it helpful for parents to harass referees, complain about coaches, and fill in false addresses and birth dates so their kids can get on the best teams?

If Americans complain about the poor manners and self-absorption of their youthful pro basketball players -- and they do complain -- how did these athletes become that way?

The answer is clear. Sadly, they developed their win-at-all-costs, me-first attitudes from the pampering, recruiting and cheating they encountered as youthful stars.

Now consider the recent actions of Pop Warner officials in central Arizona to cancel this year's playoffs because of cheating by coaches and parents.

We reach one inevitable conclusion: The Pop Warner officials are right. It's time to clean up the rampant cheating. It's also time to eliminate the championships for the younger players, especially for kids 10 and under.

Let's remember a key goal of youth sports: We want to develop good people.

Good people don't cheat.