

**Chin Up** Lori Nickel

# To my sons: Choose sports over video games

Sorry, boys. (Not really).

My son announced to me that his friends think I am too strict because I won't let him play video games on school nights. They think I'm mean.

My other son's face confirmed this verdict. He also added that my refusal to let him play unlimited sessions of Minecraft — on an iPhone I have so far refused to buy him — has cost him bonding experiences with friends.

Sorry, boys.

But — not really.

I have told them my reasons many times, but after a while their eyes glaze over.

So, this is a letter to my grade-school-age sons. I will give it to them someday when they're older, if they're still on speaking terms with me. If not, I'll just give it to the therapist:

Dear boys:

I want you to play more sports and play less video games because you have the rest of your adult life to be a spectator. And being a spectator is just comfortable. Being a participant is hard and challenging and terrifying because there is always the option of failure and failure is humiliating. But that's why getting back up and trying again and seeing improvement is so rewarding and gratifying.

I base this theory mostly on memories. My company doesn't have a varsity basketball team.

I want you to play sports because too many of us are becoming full-time spectators anyway — on Twitter, on Facebook, on Netflix streamed to our portable devices

And spectators become critics. And critics become cynics. And nothing ever seems to get done from the cynical, critical crowd — except commenting. So pick up a ball and a bat and play now so that you can pick up a hammer and a shovel later in life and do what needs to be done rather than sitting around complaining about

the someone else who tried to do it.

I want you to play on a team because we're not all going to be stars in the Hall of Fame. If you are, I will be your biggest fan. But if not, it's OK, because we can all play a role that helps the team, and that is meaningful — to both contribute to, and belong to, a team.

Especially when you're just a role player who serves two aces to beat your school's biggest rival. You'll never forget the smile on your coach's face.

Which is good, because you'll also never forget how many serves you put in the blasted net before that and how many times poor coach just dropped her head — but never yelled — bless her soul.

I want you to go out and play because your body is meant to get stronger — especially right now when you're young and growing faster than I can buy the next-size-up pair of pants. I've learned that even when you're all grown up, you'll want to continue to strengthen your body. But I see no other way to engage in that stupid iPhone or iPad without the hunched posture of Igor.

Also, I don't know of any app that raises your heart-beat like a three-on-two fast

break, or the 10 minutes of stairs you did to train for them.

Please also go out and play because I have never seen any conflict resolution on Facebook, Twitter, Super Mario or Atari Breakout. But I have seen it on week-end-long softball tournaments where, if you didn't get things ironed out, everyone was going to be miserable on that awkward, long bus ride home.

I want you to play sports because you can pretend you can manipulate the rules of decency and respect while hiding behind a computer screen. But I'd like to see you try looking your teammates in the eye when you let them down by serving a suspension for poor grades or bad conduct or regrettable choices.

Also, good luck hiding in the 110-meter high hurdles.

I want you to play sports because, while I know you can play other opponents in video games over the Internet, there's nothing better in the world than sitting down and sharing a cold one with your opponent after a three-hour summer slugfest on the tennis courts.

I want you to go biking around the neighborhood because, first of all, I have a theory that kids who grow up on bikes become alert and defensive drivers on the road.

But also because every respectable athlete I ever

wrote stories about grew up playing more than watching. Aaron Rodgers didn't win MVP awards by building his thumb muscles on a little black screen with a dying battery. He threw baseballs all day and shot a basketball until nightfall and got kicked around silly by his big brother until he got as tough as gristle.

And I told you that Wii Ski was nothing like real skiing. Judging from the size of your eyes at Peak 8 in Breckenridge last year, you finally got it. Well, guess what? The butterflies you got then don't ever go away as long as you choose the real mountains over digital, animated ones.

I want you to play because I can't ever forget the kids at Children's Hospital of Wisconsin who would give anything to go scooter around the puddles at the park right now.

Admittedly, I have very selfish reasons for wanting you to be an athlete. I just spent the last six hours chained to my desk writing, staring at my computer, and I am a brain-dead zombie. I know I'm soft in the middle, but I can still run circles around you, kid. Let's get Dad and go to the driving range again — you know, our spot away from everyone just to be safe?

I want you to grow up knowing that life will be stressful, difficult and demanding, and one day something will disappoint you

and some problem will vex you. There will be news that hurts you and test results from the doctor that will scare you. I have never heard of anyone who dealt with it by diving into a video game. But I have tackled some of my life's toughest questions with a clearer head after a walk, or a run, or a round of kickboxing (so glad those bags can't punch back).

Please understand; this isn't about me wanting you to become a star athlete. Your education comes first, and family and faith. But I do want you to play some game that you like, and I don't care if you're the last one off the bench.

Really, I just want you to run and jump, and stumble and then soar — because all of those things work the most important muscle you will ever have. Your heart.

And it will have to be strong, not just for the high-sodium, high-fat American diet, but for the tough stretches and big messes that are ahead in your in life. And also the day when you'll wrestle the iPad away from your own furious child. And make him go outside and play.  
*Love,  
Mom*

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