



Search

Write

15



Bad Sport



Emily Schleiger

5 min read · Aug 27, 2021

100



Photo by [Adrià Crehuet Cano](#) on [Unsplash](#)

“ANSWER BACK!”

I startle at the loud voice and tone of a woman nearby. I look around for explanation. Is there some emergency? I’m bundled under coat and blankets in a camp chair at a frigid spring morning soccer game, watching my fourth-grade son play on a team with his school friends. The Illinois snow survives in some shade, I can see my breath, and, as always, my hopes of the game being cancelled due to weather have been let down.

I recognize the voice as that of a mom from my son’s team. What she says is not a literal command, but an expression of some sort, a verbal response and coaching directive to our kids’ team after the opposing team has scored a goal. I presume by “answering back” she means our boys’ team would score a goal in return. I’m only half confident about my assumption. I sit at each of these games like Jane Goodall observing primates. Making mental notes. Hypothesizing. Then thinking about how I’d rather be Jane Goodall. Sometimes I check in with myself on what I know to be facts. They’re a park district team, not a travel team. Fun is the goal. Olympic preparation is not. No one dies if our team loses. The parents near me are not official coaches. It’s completely normal for my kid to play in this drizzle/fog/ice/eighty-five-degree sun/forty-five mile per hour wind gust. Sports are good for kids (how, again? I Google it on my phone. Are fouls good or bad? I’ll look that up again too.)

Sometimes a ball will roll to me and I’ll panic like I’m in middle school P.E. class.

Here is what I know about sports, other than tennis, which I played for a year in high school because the team did not make cuts: There is a lot of running around, unless it’s golf. There are usually time-outs or pauses or

whatever you call them, and these are tempting times for me to check my Instagram for something I understand better. Then halftime happens and there is a change in the location of the goals. In other words, if my kid aimed to the right, after halftime they will aim to the left. And vice versa. The whole team works together on this. Usually. When our kids were little, sometimes they were confused.

I sympathize. On one occasion, having gotten distracted at halftime at a basketball game, when I “came to” I cheered for the rival team by accident. I distractedly noticed a ball going in the basket where I’d been previously sort of focused.

I’ve called a basket a goal. I’ve called a goal... “points.” Occasionally I have missed seeing goals scored by my kids.

“Hey Emily, your kid just made a basket!”

“Oh, cool! I must have looked down for a...second,” I say, red-faced, looking up from my phone.

“Go go go go go! That way! All right, come back!” Some dad yells. His voice is hoarse.

Sometimes I have been obligated to volunteer in some way that supports a team or the school. (Let it be known: “volunteer obligation” is a clear oxymoron.) These duties comprise generally the opposite of my skill set. They do not involve reading books or taking observational notes on the torturous small talk strangers conduct just because we all have kids of similar ages involved in the same activity. I have learned, because my kids play sports, that I do not excel at smiling and collecting admission fees. Or

assembling “walking tacos”, a game-time food atrocity that consists of a haphazardly ripped open tiny snack sack of Doritos topped with a spoonful of greasy ground beef, a pinch of shredded cheese, and a dollop of disastrously messy sour cream. Passed carefully to the customer with a fork. Passing as a meal.

“Two minutes left! Stay aggressive!” Now the voice is another dad yelling to his son. I like to give the benefit of the doubt when it comes to the helpfulness of the vague parental advice from the sidelines. Perhaps the son didn’t know the time at all, had no idea. Perhaps, despite his continued sweaty sprints back and forth down the soccer field, the kid was not being aggressive, just wasn’t giving it his all. Perhaps the son can actually hear the father from way across the field, and over the din of all the other parents and coaches, all of them yelling useful and novel information simultaneously.

These other parents and I don’t agree on stakes. I want to see my kids win games. I like to see their smiles and pride when that works out. If it doesn’t, and they’re sad, I’ll find a way to cheer them up. There is life outside of whatever this is we’re watching. This is just exercise.

I don’t get veiny in the forehead about things being “unfair,” or require expulsion from basketball games because I won’t back down about a referee’s “blatant mistake.” I’m here because on some level I understand that my kids need to learn to work with others toward a common goal. I’m here because my kids expressed interest in whatever sport this is and how can you tell your kid you won’t let them sign up for sports because they bore you? In the canon of baseline decent parent behavior, that’s just not allowed. No matter how much you might like to do that. No matter how much you think, on the long drive to some game every weekend, or more likely several games, “We could have just said no.”

Sometimes I get tired of trying to understand why this is so important and I stare at trees or look at paintings of mascots and invent their backstories. Sometimes my husband grumbles and whisper-coaches his criticism for what he thinks our kids aren't doing right on the field/court/rink/trail. "What is she doing over there, what's she thinking about? She's not even paying attention!"

"Huh? Where is she?" I ask, looking up from my phone. "Oh come on, you're too hard on her."

Participation trophies are the worst, but I'm a participation cheerleader. I tell my kids all the time how proud I am of them for showing up and trying, and for knowing the rules far better than I do. I want to cheer when they've gotten up early and layered on clothing to run at a frosty cross-country meet. I'm proud of them for guarding against kids twice their size in basketball. I love to see them hustle down the field after a soccer ball. Or rogue golf ball. I love to watch that flip they can do at the end of a swim lap when they need to reverse direction in the pool. (That thing is magical. I can't even swim.) While the results are irrelevant to me, the effort is glorious.

"Good job showing up today!" I yell from my cold or hot or damp spot on the sidelines.

Parenting

Humor

Essay

Kids And Sports



Written by Emily Schleiger

Edit profile

231 Followers

Writer. Sometimes funny. McSweeney's, Reductress, Second City Network, The Big Jewel, The Belladonna, etc.

More from Emily Schleiger



 Emily Schleiger in The Belladonna Comedy

I'm The Exclamation Point You Need! More!! Of!!!

Punctuation...For Her!! You're welcome!!!!

4 min read · Aug 16, 2018

 610

 1



 Emily Schleiger in The Belladonna Comedy

Get Ready For A Moms' Weekend Away, by Dionysus

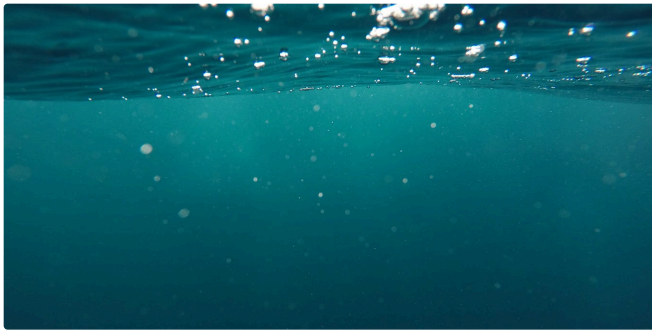
Prepare To Lose Your Minds!!!

4 min read · Aug 4, 2017

 172







 Emily Schleiger in The Haven

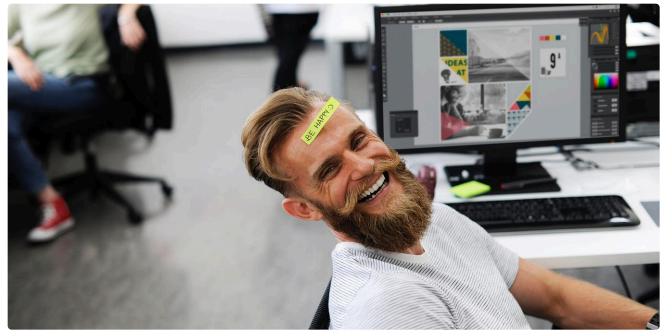
How To Face Your Fear Of Water

As A Child

9 min read · Aug 14, 2018

 73  1



 Emily Schleiger in The Belladonna Comedy

Signs You Might Have A Work Igor

Has Your Relationship Crossed A Line?

4 min read · Oct 11, 2018

 216 


[See all from Emily Schleiger](#)

Recommended from Medium



 Kim Fedyk  in Human Parts



 Kallol Mazumdar in ILLUMINATION

My Mom Introduced Me To Her Friend. A Week Later They Were...

How I navigated a debilitating fear of death as an eight-year-old

★ · 6 min read · 5 days ago



2.5K



21



I Went on the Dark Web and Instantly Regretted It

Accessing the forbidden parts of the World Wide Web, only to realize the depravity of...

8 min read · Mar 13, 2024



19.2K



349

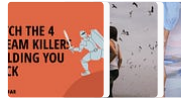


Lists



Some of My Favorite Personal Essays

19 stories · 1038 saves



My Kind Of Medium (All-Time Faves)

82 stories · 336 saves



6 Science-Backed Health Stories on Covid, Sleep, and...

6 stories · 129 saves



Visual Storytellers Playlist

60 stories · 322 saves



Erin Anne Lynch

What I wish I'd known about unemployment

Have you ever watched a friend spend months unemployed?

8 min read · Apr 22, 2024

10.3K 288



Orrin Onken in Crow's Feet

I Asked Some Old Men I Know to my House for Lunch

And the world did not end.

· 5 min read · 4 days ago

3.1K 61



Joshua Goldberg

Now That Steve Albini is Dead, Let's Reflect on His Admitted Love (an...

If you are reading this, then you probably have heard that the esteemed rock musician and...

6 min read · May 8, 2024

500 11



Karolina Kozmana

Common side effects of not drinking

By rejecting alcohol, you reject something very human, an extra limb that we have...

10 min read · Jan 21, 2024

33K 855

[See more recommendations](#)