

# **Carmel Valley-based Scripps sports medicine pediatrician urges parents/coaches to ‘redefine’ their definition of ‘success’ for kids in sports**

**By Arthur Lightbourn**  
*Contributor*

Paul Stricker is unique by any standard.

His father was a doctor. His mother is a doctor. His three brothers are doctors. And, he, of course, is a special kind of doctor.

Although he admittedly was a late bloomer when it comes to competitive sports, in college, he achieved NCAA All-American status in swimming, and later served as team physician for UCLA, Vanderbilt University and, for the U.S. Olympic team at the 2000 Games in Sydney, Australia.

And, for the past 11 years, he has served as a staff physician at Scripps Clinic in San Diego with the distinction of being one of only eight doctors in California and 150 in the entire U.S. who are board certified both in sports medicine and pediatrics.

Stricker is also the author of “Sports Success Rx!,” a guide for parents who want to provide their children with a positive experience in sports while avoiding physical overuse injuries, emotional stress and possible burnout.

We interviewed the youthful-looking 51-year-old sports medicine pediatrician in his office at Scripps Clinic Carmel Valley.

During the past decade, in his practice, Stricker says he has seen an alarming 25 percent increase in the number of sports-related overuse injuries among his young patients — and the injuries are becoming more severe.

“Stress fractures were unheard of in children just a few years ago,” he said, “but now have become relatively common. That’s what we get when we train kids at adult levels.”

Today, in the U.S., a record 44 million kids are playing in at least one organized sport, according to the National Council of Youth Sports.

While Stricker agrees that sports participation can bring many benefits, including improved fitness, better social skills and less downtime to get into trouble, too much

pressure on kids to succeed, by parents and coaches, however well intentioned, can result in serious problems, both physical and mental.

“Children build their athletic abilities in a progressive sequence that we can’t dramatically speed up,” Stricker warns.

Better knowledge of children’s developmental processes by parents and coaches, Stricker said, is essential “to help kids withstand some of the excess pressures that exist today in organized sports due to inappropriate training, unrealistic expectations and a distorted meaning of the term ‘success.’”

At a no-charge educational presentation on Aug. 25, from 5:30 p.m. to 7 p.m., at Scripps Memorial Hospital in La Jolla, Stricker will be providing parents and coaches with practical tips on how to improve the youth sports experience in today’s highly competitive organized sports climate.

If parents buy into society’s mantra that a child’s success in sports depends largely on coming out on top and winning gold medals, then they are likely in danger not only of becoming disappointed, but of harming their child.

He urges parents to examine and possibly “redefine” their definition of success when it comes to a child’s achievements in sports.

“If you have 44 million kids in organized sports from age 6 to 18, and you do,” Stricker said, “you are not going to have 44 million first place, gold medal winners. Not possible. And yet the other 43.99 million kids need to have success in order to have a positive outcome in their lives.

“On a day that there is a great personal achievement [for a child], an improvement, or a skill they learned but didn’t know before, mastering those kinds of things absolutely should be treated as success,” Stricker insists.

Stricker recognizes that in today’s tough economic climate some families are looking at a college sports scholarship as a hopeful financial way to pay for a child’s education.

“So some of these kids have an added pressure on them not only from a performance standpoint but now they may feel they have to find a way to take the financial burden off their parents.”

Yet, in reality, he said, only about 2 percent of promising young high school athletes actually succeed in getting college sports scholarships. Stricker was one of those lucky 2 percent.

He won a swim scholarship to the University of Missouri at Rolla, now called Missouri Science & Technology.

Stricker was born in Rolla, Missouri, and raised in nearby St. James.

His father, Eamil, was a general surgeon, who also made house calls. His mother, Paula, was also a physician. He was the youngest of four brothers.

“I’m from a small town of 3,000 people where our sports were hauling hay and mowing the yard. But lucky for me, I had three older brothers so we played baseball, football and basketball around the house and ran and chased each other and that kind of thing.

“So, we were involved [in playing sports] but it was always the way I would hope for kids. It was fun. No expectation, no pressure. And all generated by us and not by adults.”

He wasn’t good at ball sports, he recalls, and after he broke his elbow, part of the treatment was to swim — “and a swimming coach came into town that very year, lucky for me, because that was where I found my niche ...” and discovered a sport he loved and that had a natural ability for.

He was 10 at the time, “a very late starter,” he said, “compared to today ” where kids often begin participating in organized sports, as early as 4 or 5 years old.

His two eldest brothers knew from an early age they would follow in their parents’ footsteps. He and his next youngest brother took a little longer to decide on medicine as careers.

Initially, when he won his swim scholarship to college, Stricker was planning to study architecture but he changed his mind when he discovered the possibility of combining a love of sports with the newly emerging field of sports medicine.

Winning the NCAA All-American Swim Championship in the 400 meter individual medley in 1982 became the sports highlight of his college career “simply because I never envisioned myself as being able to achieve that because I was always very small, I was the smallest person in my class. I didn’t grow until I was a freshman in college. So I really always felt I was just glad to achieve whatever I could get.

“Based on the fact that I had a coach who was incredibly supportive and parents who were very, very supportive, I feel that I over-achieved my potential,” he said.

He earned his B.S. degree in life science from the University of Missouri, Rolla, Mo., in 1982; his medical degree from the University of Missouri, Columbia School of Medicine, in 1987; his pediatric internship and residency, Arkansas Children’s Hospital, University of Arkansas, Little Rock, 1988-91; and a fellowship in primary care sports medicine, UCLA.

“When we understand how a child’s sport skills develop,” he says, “and then allow those skills to progress with patience and support, we provide the best opportunity to maximize performance and minimize pressure.”

At his upcoming presentation on Aug. 25 at Scripps La Jolla, Stricker will offer a sampling of physical sports-skill milestones that parents can watch for in the development of their children.

Cost of the presentation is free and validated parking will be provided.

To register, call 1-800- SCRIPPS (727-4777).

### **Quick Facts**

**Name:** Paul R. Stricker, M.D., FAAP

**Distinction:** A college All-American swim champion, Dr. Paul Stricker is a sports medicine pediatrician at Scripps Clinic Carmel Valley. For parents and coaches, he will lead a free presentation at Scripps Memorial Hospital La Jolla on Aug. 25 at 5:30 p.m. on practical ways to improve children's experience in organized sports

**Resident of:** University Heights

**Born:** Rolla, Missouri, 51 years ago, and raised in nearby St. James, Mo., population 3,000.

**Education:** B.S. in life science, Missouri Science & Technology, Rolla, Missouri, 1982; M.D., University of Missouri, Columbia School of Medicine, Columbia, Mo., 1982-85, 1986-87; research in sports medicine, University of Texas, Southwestern Medical School, Dallas, 1985-86; pediatric internship and residency, Arkansas Children's Hospital, University of Arkansas, Little Rock, 1988-91; fellowship, primary care sports medicine, UCLA, 1991-93.

**Interests:** Swimming, cooking, and composing music

**Favorite getaways:** Santa Barbara and his home state of Missouri

**Favorite TV:** The new "Hawaii-Five 0," and "Top Chef"

**Favorite films:** "August Rush," 2007 drama starring Freddie Highmore, Keri Russell and Robin Williams, and the 2011 Academy Award winner "The King's Speech," starring Colin Firth, Geoffrey Rush and Helena Bonham Carter.

**Recent reading:** "The Wellness Revolution," by Paul Zane Pilzer

**Philosophy:** "If I feel like I've had a positive impact on a child's life, to me that's a day well done."