We know the problems.

The parents demand too much of the coaches, the coaches demand too much of their kids, parents and coaches have a tendency to demand too much of the officials, and the bottom line is that youth and scholastic sports often run amok.

The problems aren't hard to identify.

The solutions, well, they're a little more difficult to find.

The Lehigh Valley Coalition on Sports Ethics, or LVCOSE, discussed many of the familiar topics on Thursday night at a community forum on youth sports ethics at DeSales University.

Several area sports personalities, including Bethlehem Catholic baseball coach Mike Grasso, Allen lacrosse coach Mark Smith, wrestling official Bob Getz and recent Emmaus and DeSales basketball player Doug Spadt offered their input.

In a week in which Serena Williams had a meltdown at the U.S. Open and a Kentucky high school football coach was on trial for the death of a player who collapsed at a practice, the timeliness of a discussion on sports ethics couldn't have been better.

What was accomplished? Well, no magic cure was invented to cure all that ails athletics. But discussing these problems, acknowledging that things could be better, keeps important issues at the forefront.

"We had people here who know what's going on in the real world and we want to help them respond to it and help the community grapple with what are pervasive difficulties," said the Rev. Thomas Dailey, the director of the Salesian Center for Faith and Culture at DeSales. "There are many multi-faceted issues, and you just have to take them one step at a time, one sport at a time. We just want to try to raise the conscientiousness of everybody ... parents, coaches, players ... and remind that there's an ethical dimension to everything we do."

The 90-minute discussion focused on a variety of issues and it was not merely an anti-parent rant, although the excessive pressure applied by parents on coaches and their own children was discussed.

Coaches were also taken to task for "bullying" their athletes to play just one sport and their unwillingness to share athletes with other coaches.

It was noted that this is more common with football coaches than any other sports.
The pressure to win was mentioned as the primary reason high school coaches attempt to have control over the players on their teams 12 months per year and run "voluntary" practices even when they are anything but "voluntary."

But the win-at-all-cost mentality begins much earlier at the youth level where officials take more verbal abuse from parents and coaches -- usually one in the same when it comes to youth teams -- than even at the high school level.

"We've gotten away from the fact that sports is a great vehicle to teach life," Dailey said. "Oh, it's fun when we're little kids.

"But when it comes to competitive sports, you're trying to learn something about yourself, your teammates, your opponent, about life. The professionalization of sports, either from a money point of view or from a winning point of view, takes away from the educational dimension. That's what we need to get back to."

It's a noble idea, but one that gets continually lost, especially as parents sign up their kids to play sports and over years invest considerable time, money and emotion into their kids' sports with the intent of it paying off in a college scholarship one day.

Playing sports for fun, friendship or just for what it can do to shape and develop your character are long forgotten.

And the coaches often have their own less-than-noble motivation for pursuing the 12-month, 24/7 cycle.

So, the problems are evident and the talk continues. Credit LVCOSE for at least trying to keep the ball rolling.

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