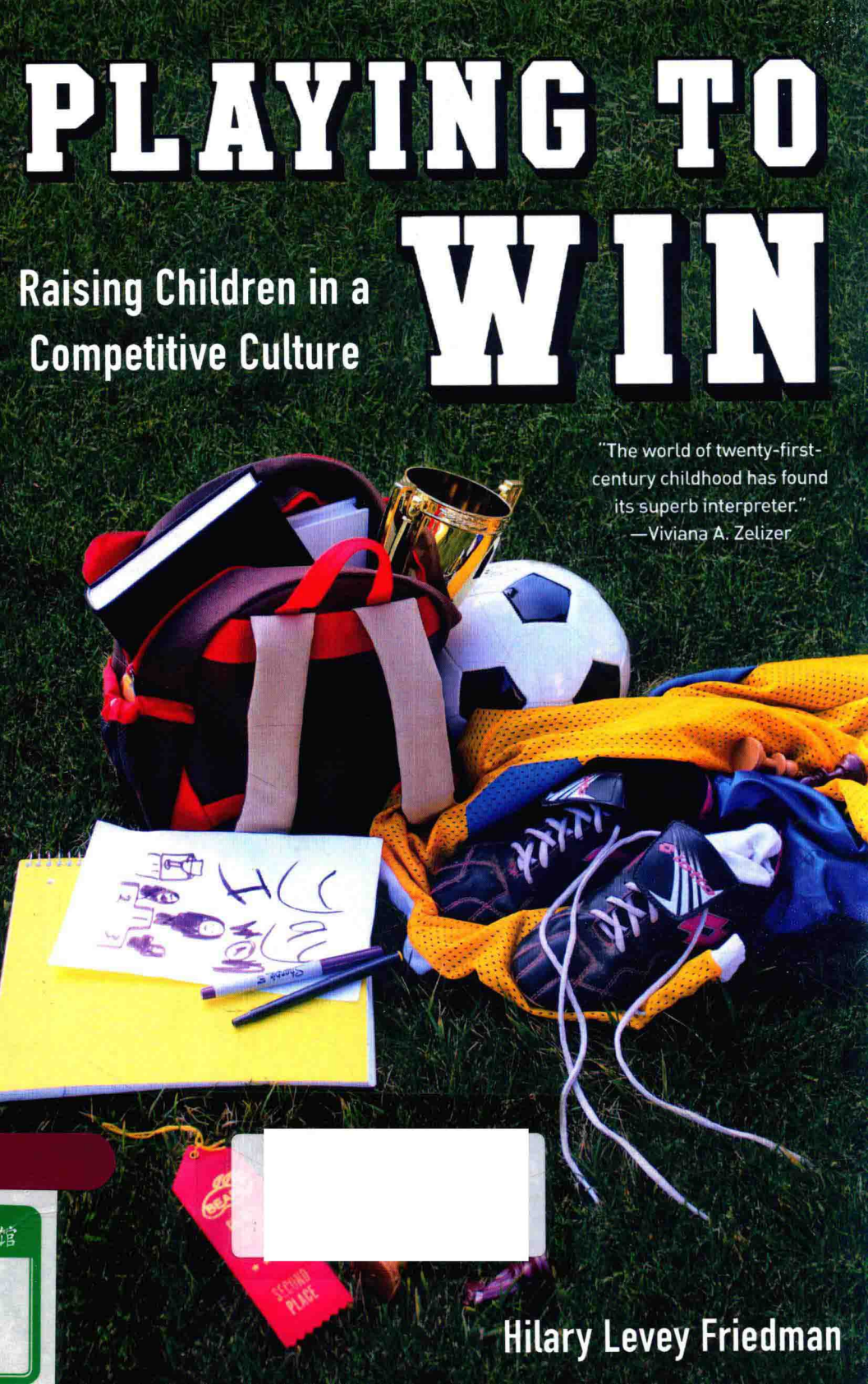
# PLAYING TO WIN

## Raising Children in a Competitive Culture




Hilary Levey Friedman

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## RAISING CHILDREN IN A COMPETITIVE CULTURE

HILARY LEVEY FRIEDMAN

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"Beautifully written, relentlessly insightful, and methodologically innovative, *Playing to Win* expertly captures the perspectives of parents and children regarding the importance of after-school activities for socialization and childhood in contemporary American society. Hilary Levey Freidman has produced a sociological gem."

—William A. Corsaro, author of *The Sociology of Childhood*

"Hilary Levey Friedman's *Playing to Win* is an essential social science volume that transcends the boundary between scholarship and popular critique. Levey Friedman successfully explains how upper-middle-class Americans think about their children's engagement in serious leisure: competitive chess, dance competitions, and youth soccer. Listening carefully to both parents and children, she reveals the tensions and contradictions, benefits and drawbacks of intense competitions, and provides a perspective necessary for researchers who examine child development and for parents who wish to raise happy, healthy children."

—Gary Alan Fine, author of *With the Boys: Little League Baseball and Preadolescent Culture* and *Gifted Tongues: High School Debate and Adolescent Culture*

"The world of twenty-first-century childhood has found its superb interpreter. With sparkling arguments and fascinating evidence, Hilary Levey Friedman's *Playing To Win* introduces us to one of America's most remarkable contemporary innovations: the proliferation of organized, competitive after-school activities. An important contribution to the sociology of culture and inequality."

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"Hilary Levey Friedman has managed to convince numerous upper-middle-class parents and their children to pause in their mad dash between extracurricular activities to explain why they have chosen this lifestyle. Using information from detailed interviews across a variety of activities, she provides a revealing account of the motivations that lie behind the dramatic rise in competitive children's activities. This fascinating book forms a key part of an emerging body of research that links the increase in time devoted to childcare to parents' worries about their children's economic futures."

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For my Family—
Past, Present, and Future

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# Preface

ENTER TO GROW IN WISDOM

I have a favorite gate.

Dexter Gate is one of the walking entrances into Harvard Yard off Massachusetts Avenue. Across the street from Harvard Book Store it proclaims, "Enter to Grow in Wisdom."

I first walked through the quiet, darkened archway of Dexter Gate as a gawky seventeen-year-old, a recently admitted student visiting campus for the first time from a world away, my hometown in the suburbs of Detroit. At that time I thought anything was possible in the world. I thought that being a college student meant endless opportunity, kindred spirits, and a level playing field. On most counts, I was right.

However, during the first weeks of my freshman year I quickly learned that there was much I did not know. People living in my dorm had gone to historic high schools that I had never heard of. On campus many of them seemed to know each other through some magical network that I was lucky to realize even existed, given how removed I was from it. I did not attend a nationally known high school; I did not know what "crew" was;

and I did not have any family connections to the university, or to any Ivy League school, for that matter. In fact, when I called my father to tell him I had been admitted to Harvard, he said, "But only rich people and the Kennedys go there!"

My first semester I stumbled upon a sociology class. Having never considered studying anything besides history or government before, I was quite taken by this new-to-me social science. That course on social stratification helped me make sense of the new community I was suddenly part of by exposing me to research on class, status, and prestige.

Fourteen years later, I am still trying to make sense of the world using the sociological tools I learned about in that class. After graduation I left Harvard for other Ivy-covered campuses, where I studied parental aspirations for their children. During that time I wrote a dissertation—the basis for this book—on competitive after-school activities (specifically chess, dance, and soccer) in which I link parental anxieties about their elementary school–age children's futures, especially anxiety about the increased importance of educational credentials, to their parenting behavior and strategies in the present.

At heart *Playing to Win* is a story about social reproduction. I am interested in how everyday parental decisions impact the social structure across generations. My research shows one way that these practices have been institutionalized: through the professionalization of children's competitive after-school activities.

In contemporary sociology the question of how social reproduction occurs is often approached from the "bottom up,"[1] looking at those toward the lower rungs of the social class ladder. But it is equally important to know how those in the middle and upper-middle class get there and how they prepare their children to stay there (or move up in the class structure). This is especially important given the increasing inequality in the United States over the past quarter-century, particularly when it comes to childhood and parenting.[2]

My findings on children's participation in competitive after-school activities provide a small but revealing window into how social reproduction happens as parents actively strategize about child-rearing practices. Training a lens primarily on the affluent middle class helps us

understand how and why decisions made during childhood might have long-term consequences for future credentials acquisition and careers—which in turn deepens our understanding of how less advantaged parents can leverage cultural activities to help their children.

I should know because I didn't grow up like most of the children I studied. I never played travel soccer, nor did I play on any athletic team. I took dance but never participated in a competition. And I never even learned how to play chess, so forget about playing in a tournament. In fact, I never competed in any activity in an organized way before middle school, and even then I competed only in the school-sponsored activities of reading and public speaking competitions. I was definitely a competitive child and thrived in any high-stakes environment, especially in educational settings, but not in the way the kids I study do today.

And yet I ended up walking through Dexter Gate. My own interest in how people from different backgrounds can end up in the same place has shaped my sociological imagination, and it is one of this book's motivating factors.

I am married to a man who had a much different childhood, one that more closely resembles that of many of the kids in *Playing to Win*. He was born and bred in Harvard's 02138 zip code and attended Philips Andover Academy (one of those historic boarding schools I had never heard of before college), where he was captain of the cross-country team. He also played select soccer while still in primary school and learned chess at his elementary school. His father graduated from Harvard, where he is a professor, and his mom graduated from Smith, one of the Seven Sisters.

Despite our varied upbringings we were in the same college class. Some believe that once we passed through Dexter Gate as freshmen, we were equal. But the sociologist in me knows this is not the whole truth. We brought with us very different views of the world and bundles of resources when we entered Harvard Yard, ushered in by the gatekeepers who read our admission files. For instance, my husband brought with him all the cultural capital that comes with attending an elite boarding school; I brought with me all the wisdom that comes from growing up with a hardworking single mom determined to provide her daughter with the best educational opportunities she could.

So how did I get so lucky on a day back in November 1997, when a Harvard admissions officer decided I was worthy, despite my lack of an elite high school education and participation in myriad organized, out-of-school, competitive activities? I have asked myself that many times, and as part of my work I have spoken with admissions officers at Ivy League schools. One of them explained to me why participation in extracurricular activities is so important and in the process helped me understand why my application ended up in the admit pile.

Ivies are looking for smart students with a great deal of ambition. But it is hard to measure ambition. Participation in activities—and awards and leadership earned through participation—are a proxy for that ambition. The specific activities are less important; what matters is that you play a sport or seriously participate in an activity such as debate or drama. But you should also do something else—perhaps play an instrument or be part of a Model United Nations team or volunteer or compete in dance competitions. While in high school I participated in Model United Nations, drama club, literary society, French Honor Society, National Honor Society, and more.

What Harvard, and schools like it, is looking for are ambitious individuals who are not afraid to take risks. When freshmen get to campus they will be exposed to new activities and academic disciplines, as I was. Admissions officers want to create a campus full of ambitious kids who are willing to try swimming or journalism or glee club or anthropology for the first time. So to be admitted you can't do just one thing; you need to show you are flexible and versatile. Of course, you are still expected to excel in whatever you try, especially in academics first and foremost, but you must first be willing to try.

Being ambitious and versatile and taking risks are traits that many also think of as being American, part of our nation's DNA. A former president of the American Psychological Association said that America is "a success-oriented society whose attitudes toward achievement can be traced to our Protestant heritage with its emphasis on individualism and the work ethic."[3] When Alexis de Tocqueville toured the United States in the mid-nineteenth century he famously wrote about the participatory nature of Americans, declaring that we are a nation of joiners.[4] When

another European, the developmental psychologist Jean Piaget, toured the United States, he was also struck by the degree of social involvement of Americans—specifically American parents. Piaget was shocked by how many parents asked him whether it was possible to speed up children's development.[5] He named this concern "the American Question" because he said Americans are always trying to hurry things along.

"The American Question" symbolizes not just ambition and involvement; it also symbolizes competition. In his book on competition in the United States sociologist Francesco Duina argues that competition is central to finding our place in the world in both a physical and a symbolic sense.[6] Why? Because competition allows us to prove our worth (to ourselves and to others) and offers a way to determine whether something, or someone, is actually working well and succeeding.

It is no secret that Americans have long loved competitions and rewarded winners. General George Patton often declared in his speeches to troops during World War II, "When you were kids, you all admired the champion marble shooter, the fastest runner, the big league ball players, the toughest boxers. Americans love a winner and will not tolerate a loser. Americans *play to win* all the time."[7]

In contemporary American society competition seems to be everywhere. Organized, tournament-like competitions are held for the seemingly mundane, the inane, and the arcane. We have beauty pageants, bodybuilding competitions, spelling bees, and video game tournaments—not to mention organized competitive events for any sport you can imagine, from soccer on inline skates to childhood games such as dodgeball.[8]

On top of the tendency to make everything competitive, Americans also like to do everything *big*. In a book on competitive eating competitions the author explains, "[America is] different because we have more of it, more types of contests in more places. We do it broader and bigger, and unlike the British, the French, and the Germans . . . we make no apologies."[9]

One of the most competitive domains in American life remains the labor market. Individuals are rewarded for being competitive in the workplace, often with higher salaries, which can also bring more status and prestige. In her comparative study of the American and French

upper-middle class, Michèle Lamont found that what was highly valued in the U.S. workplace was having a "competitive attitude, fighting to be the best, to be 'number one.'"[10] Today workers not only want more money, they also want more titles and accolades, so it is easy for others to determine if they are indeed number one.[11]

It appears that a huge part of succeeding in the labor market is going to the "right" schools, where you can make the "right" connections.[12] A recent study by Lauren Rivera found that elite employers not only rely on a degree from an elite university to signal employability, but they also pay attention to extracurricular activities, including lacrosse, squash, and crew.[13] Parents who want their children to someday gain employment at management consulting firms, investment banks, and law firms are right that they need to start early.

Not surprisingly the quest to be number one and get into the "right" school begins in childhood, and this process of learning about competition is beginning earlier than ever before for American kids. Not only is there Phi Beta Kappa in college and the National Honor Society in high school, but now there is the National Elementary Honor Society (founded in 2008). Not only is there test preparation available, for a price, for graduate admissions tests (LSAT, MCAT, GMAT, and GRE) and college admissions tests (SAT and ACT), but now there is also test prep for kindergarten and preschool admissions. Some parents will pay up to $450 an hour to ensure their kids are prepared for a preschool admissions test.[14] In 2009 a company called Bright Kids NYC started a weekend "boot camp" to help children prepare for the gifted exams, and they quickly had a waiting list for their sessions.[15]

Many kids today who win a competition, do well on an exam, or gain entry into a select group receive a trophy or some other tangible reward.[16] Yet research shows that it is best for kids to be intrinsically motivated if they are to stick with an activity over the long haul. Intrinsic motivation happens when you are motivated to compete in order to excel and surpass your own goals and previous performance, and not just beat others.[17]

In a seminal study by psychologists Mark Lepper and David Greene, preschool children were observed drawing a picture.[18] Those who expected a reward based on their performance showed less interest in

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drawing just a few weeks later. The reward created more extrinsic motivation instead of intrinsic motivation.

What happens when we extrinsically reward kids yet demand intrinsic motivation from them just a few years later, when they apply to college? It makes American childhood a confusing and contested time. Tensions about children's achievement and the "right" way to raise kids were magnified during the furor surrounding the 2011 publication of *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother,* written by Amy Chua, a Yale University law professor. Chua's daughters were expected to play to win at their music competitions; she wrote, "The only activities your children should be permitted to do are those in which they can eventually win a medal . . . that medal must be gold."[19] Chua claimed her American-born daughters were at a disadvantage relative to their Chinese counterparts because her husband and his family wanted the girls to have fun. She wrote about her mother-in-law, "Florence saw childhood as something fleeting to be enjoyed. I saw childhood as a training period, a time to build character and invest for the future."[20]

Later that year Chua's eldest daughter, Sophia, was admitted to Harvard (the Holy Grail for many competitive parents) during the most competitive admissions cycle to date, when only 6.2 percent of the roughly thirty-five thousand applicants were admitted. Meanwhile thousands of parents whose children would be applying to college sometime in the next decade worried that they should be parenting like Chua.

All of the parents I met while studying competitive after-school activities expressed ambivalence about their elementary school–age children's participation in these activities. But no one wanted to deny their child the opportunity to succeed. No one was willing to take the chance of not enrolling their kids in competitive activities, especially when all of their classmates appeared to be playing to win all the time.

And yet, some of the two thousand students admitted to Harvard in 2011 were like me: ambitious students who worked hard without a background in organized, elite competition. At the same time some of the lucky admitted students were reared to be Ivy-bound from a young age (like Sophia Chua), fortunate to grow up in affluent families. Many of them worked hard and deserve their slot. But what happens to the equally

smart and talented kids who don't have access to the same resources, who don't even know to take the chance to try to get past the Ivy gatekeepers?

We tend to hear about the kids who beat the odds, like when the child of the driver for a rich family gets a slot at an Ivy over the boss' child, because it makes a good story.[21] But for every one success story there are thousands who did not make the cut, or who did not even try. In many cases this failure to try goes beyond differential material resources—it is the result of a different way of seeing the world. Sociologist Dalton Conley put it eloquently in a piece on social class: "Just as the social reproduction of the working class involves a constraining of the horizons of the minds of its members, the construction of an upper class involves the expansion of the sense of possibility among its members."[22]

*Playing to Win* tells the story of how parents work to expand the sense of possibility among their children by developing what I call "Competitive Kid Capital™." This book is not a diatribe against crazy parents. Are some of the parents I met overinvolved? Yes, but instead of simply condemning them I put their choices into perspective by detailing the historical development of competitive after-school activities. I also situate them in the present day, a world filled with businesses advocating for competitive childhoods. I am not uncritical about all the parenting decisions discussed in *Playing to Win*, but I do place them in context, a process that ultimately reveals middle-class insecurity and concerns about children falling behind.

In the rest of this book you will find the story of what many think you need to do at a young age to successfully get to Dexter Gate, or the gates of other institutions of higher education, and beyond. You will also find a story about the ways in which competition is a central focus of American family life, shaping the lives of young kids who tend to view their competitive activities simply as fun.

# Contents

# Introduction

## PLAY TO WIN

It's just after lunchtime on a Saturday in June. In the basement cafeteria of a public elementary school the smell of Doritos, doughnuts, pizza, and McDonald's fries hangs in the air. Although there is a chess tournament in progress in the gym, less than fifty feet away, the atmosphere in the cafeteria is boisterous. Some children are entertaining themselves by running between the tables. Others, almost all boys, are engaged in rambunctious games of team chess, known as "bughouse."[1] A few kids sit apart, absorbed in playing their Game Boys. The youngest of the children are huddled at the back of the cafeteria, drawn to a table that has been set up near a wall of industrial-size, silver-colored refrigerators. Mesmerized, the kids stare at, and sometimes tentatively touch, the shiny gold trophies that cover the table's surface. Together they try to count all the trophies—but some are too young to count high enough.

Their parents pass the time in their own ways. Groups of dads sit together, some talking, others gossiping about the event and the other children. Mothers sit by themselves or in pairs. One mom reads *The Kite Runner,* another labors over the Sunday *Times* crossword puzzle, and still another keeps an eye on her son while her knitting needles click rhythmically.

Close to half of the parents are not sitting, however. They are jockeying for position in front of two sets of doors that lead from the cafeteria into the gym, where the tournament is taking place. Those closest to the doors strain to see through the single, one-foot-square window in each door to get a glimpse of their child's game board. Parents are banned from the tournament room because of poor behavior at previous tournaments: helping their children cheat, distracting other children, or even getting into fights with other parents. Some pass messages back to other parents—"He's down a knight," for instance—but most fret silently. Every so often a child exits the gym. As the doors swing open, they slam into the faces of parents who had been peering through the windows.

As soon as a child emerges, the interrogation begins. The first question is rarely "Did you win or lose?" A child's body language usually makes the outcome of the match obvious. Instead parents ask, "What happened?" One girl answers simply, "I blundered my queen." A boy launches into a blow-by-blow description of the game: "I put my knight on e6 and he put his pawn on f4 and . . ." Some parents, especially moms who generally know less about the fine points of chess, just praise their kids for their success or offer them comfort for their loss.

Within the din of this 140-player tournament, many languages can be heard, including English, French, Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, and Arabic. One tournament participant is deaf. Not everyone in the overcrowded, noisy cafeteria is friendly. When a boy, no older than eight, asks a dad standing next to him if his section has been called to play the final round, the man replies tersely, "I don't know. I don't work here. Go ask someone over there," as he gestures toward the trophy table, where tournament organizers are standing.

The youngest players, who are soon to graduate from preschool or kindergarten, finish their four games quickly. The tournament directors

hold the awards ceremony for this group early in the afternoon. As the children sit down near the trophy-filled table they had been inspecting so closely earlier, their parents gather around, cameras at the ready. The tournament announcer explains that this section had seventeen competitors. Miraculously they have all tied for first place.

"Quite an achievement," the announcer intones, deadpan, as the parents look at one another and laugh.

The children clap excitedly. This section is the only one in which all the players receive a trophy for participating. A father whose child is too old to compete in this group laments to another dad, "My son is going to explode if he doesn't get a trophy."

Another father, sitting in the back of the cafeteria with his wife (they are one of the few couples present), watches the youngest kids with a smile. His son is a second-grader who is already playing in the tournament's most advanced section. This father and son seem to share a special bond, signified by their matching T-shirts emblazoned with characters from *Toy Story* and a tagline from the movie, "To Infinity and Beyond." As his son prepares to play his last-round game, the man turns to me and declares, "I never would have thought I'd end up spending my weekends in a cafeteria basement, waiting around for my son!"

Why do so many families spend their weekends watching their children compete? To answer this question I present evidence from three case study activities (one academic, chess; one artistic, dance; and one athletic, soccer) drawn from sixteen months of fieldwork with ninety-five families who live around a major metropolitan area in the Northeast—including 172 separate interviews with parents, children, and teachers and coaches. I argue that the extensive time devoted to competition is driven by parents' demand for credentials for their children, which they see as a necessary and often sufficient condition for entry into the upper-middle class and the "good life" that accompanies it. I develop the concept of "Competitive Kid Capital" to explore the ways in which winning has become central to the lives of American children.

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