

SIDELINES

KAREN VIGGERS

DISCUSSION STARTERS FOR SPORTS CLUBS

'Sidelines is a riveting novel. It takes our jittery, intensely competitive era and unpicks our self-deceptions until they bleed.'

JANE CARO



KAREN VIGGERS

ON THE INSPIRATION FOR *SIDELINES*

HOW DID THE IDEA FOR *SIDELINES* ORIGINATE?

Sidelines is about parental behaviour at junior sport and how this reflects onto children. It came from more than fourteen years of standing on the sidelines watching my own kids play and referee soccer. During that time, I witnessed a lot of interesting behaviour, including my own. As far as I know, this is the first time there's ever been a novel like this, looking at kids' sport and how overinvested parents can get, to the extent that a brawl can break out at a junior soccer game.

This actually happened at an U12s game in my home town. It was a boys Premier League game with a few girls playing on one of the teams. Two kids started hitting each other over a disputed line-call by a junior referee, then a parent ran onto the field and grabbed one of the kids by the throat, then another parent got involved and a brawl broke out.

The most disturbing thing is that my daughter could have been there that day, but she missed out on selection because of an injury, so she was playing elsewhere. I knew many of the parents and kids who were there, and I was shocked. How could kids start hitting each other on the field? And what sort of parents would get so pumped up that a kids' soccer game would end up in a fight? Were they ordinary people like me? Or were they flawed, *bad* parents? This became the trigger for *Sidelines*.

I knew this wasn't an isolated event, because I was regularly seeing reports about these kinds of things on the media: young and old referees being assaulted, serious fights, terrible head injuries. The fact is, there are millions of parents out there, jockeying with each other on the sidelines, trying to live vicariously through their kids, and trying to give their kids advantage. And yet none of this reflects the positive reasons why we want our kids to play sport or participate in activities. It seems that, these days, many of us view our children's success as a measure of own success.

In writing this book, I wanted to explore our society's obsession with success, and the ways in which it puts pressure on families. I drew on observations I've made from the sidelines of football fields, as well as through talking to other parents. I also had to take a deep look at my own behaviour and the impact it had on my family. So, in many ways, this is lived experience for me.

It's my hope that *Sidelines* will provide insights that are relevant to parents all over the world, not just those with kids playing soccer, but any sport or activity. Writing this book has allowed me to let go of my own missteps as a parent, or at least to acknowledge and take responsibility for my actions along the way. It is not my story. Nor is it my family's story. However, I hope you will find it as thought-provoking to read as I did in my own deep self-reflection as I wrote it.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

KAREN VIGGERS

is a novelist, wildlife and domestic animal veterinarian, and podcaster. She is the author of *The Stranding*, *The Lightkeeper's Wife*, *The Grass Castle*, *The Orchardist's Daughter* and *Sidelines*. Her work is set in Australian landscapes and communities, and explores contentious issues, such as dying with dignity, displacement of First Peoples, wildlife conservation, clear-felling of native forests, and now, modern parenting and junior sport. She is co-host of the *Secrets From the Green Room* podcast in which she interviews writers and other book industry colleagues about books and writing. Her novels have been translated into several languages and have enjoyed great success in France where she is a bestselling author and has won a literary award. Karen is the mother of two adult children. She lives on Ngunnawal and Ngambri land in Canberra with her ecologist husband. *Sidelines* is her fifth novel.

CONVERSATION STARTERS

- *Sidelines* is a commentary on modern society and parenting. What do you think the novel says about our attitudes to junior sport? Success? Modern urban life? The pressures on teenagers?
- “*Competition is normal, so if sport becomes difficult, kids should toughen up and learn to deal with it – that’s just life.*” What do you think of this statement?
- When kids play sport, how should parents support them? When does support become pressure? And how much pressure is too much?
- In the series *Beckham*, David Beckham’s father Ted, says that his son wouldn’t have made it so far in football if he hadn’t pushed him. Do you agree with this? If so, why? If not, what do you think is a better way for parents to approach junior sport?
- Why do we want children to play team sport? What are the benefits? Is this how it plays out on the field?
- Should sport be fun, or does that depend on what level you are playing at?
- Often there is no break in the sporting year for junior participants. When the season ends, trials start soon after and then there are camps and academies. Do you think sport has become too serious? Is there any advantage to trying different sports over summer?
- The injury rate of young athletes has increased dramatically in recent years, including head injuries and knee reconstructions? Is this acceptable? What does that tell us about junior sport and coaching regimes?
- What sort of behaviour is acceptable from coaches, parents and players in competitive sport? What can be excused as “passion”?
- How do you feel about referees at junior games? What do you do if a call seems unfair? Should young trainee referees be treated any differently?
- If kids shout or swear at referees, what should the penalty be? Should parents intervene or leave it to the coach? What would you do if you thought your child was behaving inappropriately towards a referee or another player/ other players?
- Sport is good for kids’ mental and physical health. But what if circumstances change or your child is not happy in their team? What would be an appropriate course of action? Should you let them drop out if they want to?
- Do you feel restricted in relation to matters you can discuss with your child’s coach? Do you worry about repercussions for your child?
- How much should parents encourage their children from the sidelines during a game? Who should intervene if a parent from your team is behaving badly? Or should it just be ignored?

- Did the novel *Sidelines* change your perception of how parents should behave at games?
- Did the book make you think about the potential impact of your actions, or those of others, on junior players?
- The brawl in *Sidelines* is fictional, but there have been many media reports of fights breaking out at junior games in all kinds of sport: soccer, rugby league, rugby union, netball, basketball. Why do you think this happens? What sort of behaviour have you seen from parents and coaches on the sidelines?
- Has this book made you re-evaluate your own, or anyone else's, behaviour when watching junior sport?
- How can we improve the culture around kids' sport and other activities? How can we foster greater respect?

JUST FOR FUN

- Who would you cast in a screen adaptation of *Sidelines*?
- If you could have a chat with any character from the novel, who would it be and why? What would you like to ask them?
- Pick out a passage that strikes you as particularly moving or interesting and read it to the group.

