



SPOIL SPORTS

Have kid athletics gotten too serious?

When my daughter began playing recreational soccer at age 8, scouts for more competitive private clubs showed up regularly at the weekend games.

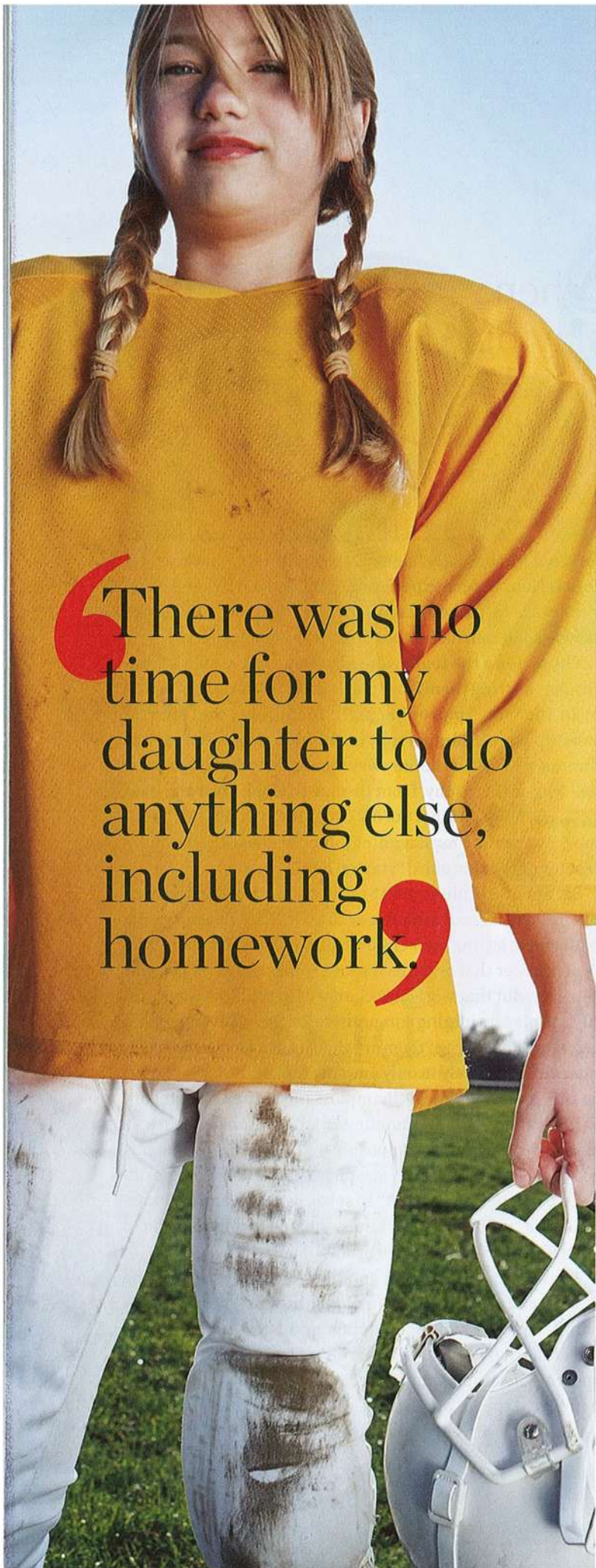
By the season's end, one scout had actually "signed" the team's star player—a far more serious soccer experience that involved twice-weekly practices, a 14-game season at venues up to 50 miles away, and weekend tournaments of four or five games each.

The girls on the team were also required to sign a commitment barring them from playing other sports that would get in the way. Improving skill, technique, and sportsmanship were all important in the club world, but so was winning, which was the only way for a team to move up a four-level league hierarchy, from Bronze to Gold. Over the next few years, more and more of my daughter's teammates "went club." By the time my daughter joined them at 12, the club's director noted that she'd "started late."

Between 30 million and 45 million American kids participate in some form of athletics each year. With fewer parents comfortable letting their children play outside unsupervised, it's no wonder that organized youth sports are more popular than ever. But that world has changed in troubling ways. Not only are players joining competitive leagues at ever younger ages, more and more of them are choosing to specialize, focus, and train intensively in only one sport. In 2009, for instance, the U.S. Kids Golf World Championship featured a category for boys under 6, the Amateur Athletic Union sponsored a national basketball championship for boys and girls under 8, the NCAA lowered the year at which a player could be considered a basketball "prospect" to seventh grade, and a 4-year-old tennis "prodigy"—Mia Lines—moved from Australia to south Florida to work with a professional coach.

These stories repeat in smaller, local ways across the nation, where 7- and 8-year-olds join year-round "travel teams," special kicking, batting, and running "coaches" advertise their services to parents of young players, and "sports gyms" offer youth programs "scientifically designed to improve speed, power, and agility." And there's no need to take time off between seasons: Thousands of camps

BY CAROL MITHERS



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offer hockey, lacrosse, soccer, volleyball, baseball, football, and basketball players—as well as swimmers, runners, and wrestlers—the chance to spend school breaks working on their skills. Although these camps can be a godsend to working parents, there’s something disturbing about this trend: Don’t athletes need some downtime just to be kids, too?

“What we’re seeing is the ‘professionalization’ of youth sports,” says Daniel Gould, Ph.D., director of the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports at Michigan State University. And, says former NBA player Bob Bigelow, this new world has one overriding belief system: “Getting better means training younger, training harder, training more.”

But there are two big problems with this philosophy: It’s a myth. And it’s really bad for the kids.

issue #1 Visions of grandeur

Parents have accepted the professionalized youth-sports scene for a number of reasons, Gould notes, not the least of which is the promise of a hefty college scholarship to help with tuition bills that continue to skyrocket in the face of our humbled savings accounts. And while we all know that the chances of our kids actually becoming seriously well-paid professional athletes are slim to none, we can’t help but think...maybe. Ego’s involved, too: What parent isn’t bursting with pride when a crowd of spectators erupts in cheers as her child makes a game-saving goal, hit, or catch? Finally, there’s fear. The more we see other kids starting specialized training early, and investing in ever pricier equipment, the more we worry that if ours don’t, they’ll be left behind. “There’s a constant buzzing among parents,” says Helen Nicholson Kwan, a Bettendorf, IA, mother of five: What teams are your kids playing on? What camps are they in? Which pitching coach are you going to? “You start to think ‘Have I chosen the right one? What if they won’t be good enough?’” Kwan notes.

What’s gotten lost in all the buzz and anxiety, however, is an awareness of the realities of child development. Children simply can’t “get” certain sports skills until they’re ready to learn them. “The motor skills required to play a sport continue to develop and fine-tune through childhood,” says Paul Stricker, M.D., a pediatric and adolescent sports-medicine specialist and member of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) Council on Sports Medicine & Fitness. “For instance, the ability to track a moving object is immature until around nine. That’s why T-ball is more appropriate for five- and six-year-olds. Over the years, there are changes in how kids respond to heat and dehydration. And no matter how much you push training, improving aerobic capacity beyond ten percent is difficult to accomplish until puberty.” The same kind of ongoing development occurs in mental capabilities important to sports prowess, like the ability to process instructions, make rapid decisions, and handle tasks involving complex memory. “You can’t teach an eight-year-old a long list of plays,” says Dr. Stricker. “He won’t be able to remember them.”

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Training a child with an eye on future greatness also fails to consider the fact that kids' bodies change enormously at puberty—and not always in ways that make them better players: The kid who's always been tallest and fastest may well be overtaken by the one who suddenly gains 30 pounds and shoots up a foot. "When Michael Jordan started high school at fifteen, he was only five nine and didn't make the varsity basketball team," says Bigelow. "There's no one in the world who can predict a future athlete's talent at age ten."

issue #2 Limited exposure

The current emphasis on having very young kids train exclusively in one sport is even more problematic. As a strategy for excellence, it rarely works. "Most elite athletes have a history of playing many different sports, and there's a reason for that," explains Gould. "Each teaches something different: Soccer gives you foot skills; baseball teaches you eye-hand coordination. If my daughter plays softball and learns how to throw, for instance, she'll have a better serve in tennis."

In fact, what early specialization and training does seem to do isn't pretty. It can leave behind the less coordinated, the kids who start later, those whose parents can't afford the extra expense, and those who need activity the most, the overweight. And it also puts physically talented kids, including some with the potential to go all the way, at high risk for premature burnout. Last year Jessica Takakjian's 11-year-old daughter was thrilled to be accepted by a highly competitive soccer team—but a grueling, relentless schedule quickly sapped the girl's enthusiasm. "There were practices four days a week, sometimes starting right after the school day ended, with a game every weekend and frequent tournaments," says the Los Angeles mom. "There was no time for my daughter to have friends over, take a dance class, play the piano, or do anything else, including homework. When the season ended, she told me, 'I don't want to play for this team anymore. I don't know if I want to play at all.'" While the girl later changed her mind (and her team), other exhausted, overwhelmed kids simply give up by the time they're teenagers.

issue #3 Serious injury

Most alarming of all is the injury that's resulting from levels of training and play that the AAP has called extreme even for adults: 12-year-old baseball players throwing not just too many pitches but dangerous curveballs before their arms are mature enough, or 10-year-old girls playing five soccer games in just over 24 hours. Consider that "Tommy John" surgery—a complicated, expensive elbow tendon repair named for a former Major League Baseball pitcher who was the first to undergo it—is increasingly performed on high school boys. And journalist Michael Sokolove, author of *Warrior Girls*, details an epidemic of knee injuries among female soccer players that has left some hobbling like old women in their 20s.



Competition Done Right

So you've got a kid who's a sports nut and begging to move up the competitive ladder to the travel clubs. Should you give it a shot? Definitely—there are many social and emotional benefits connected with sports, says Megan Bartlett, director of research for Up2Us, a national coalition working to make sports programs more available to children. Research shows that kids who are involved in sports are less likely to abuse drugs and alcohol and get involved in gangs, have a later onset of sexual activity, and are more likely to do better in school and have positive peer relationships. Make it a good experience for your child by:

>> Choosing a reputable team. Talk to other parents, observe a practice and the coach in action, and check out the team website, recommends Gould. Look for a clearly stated league philosophy and parental code of conduct, and ask how much playing time your child can expect.

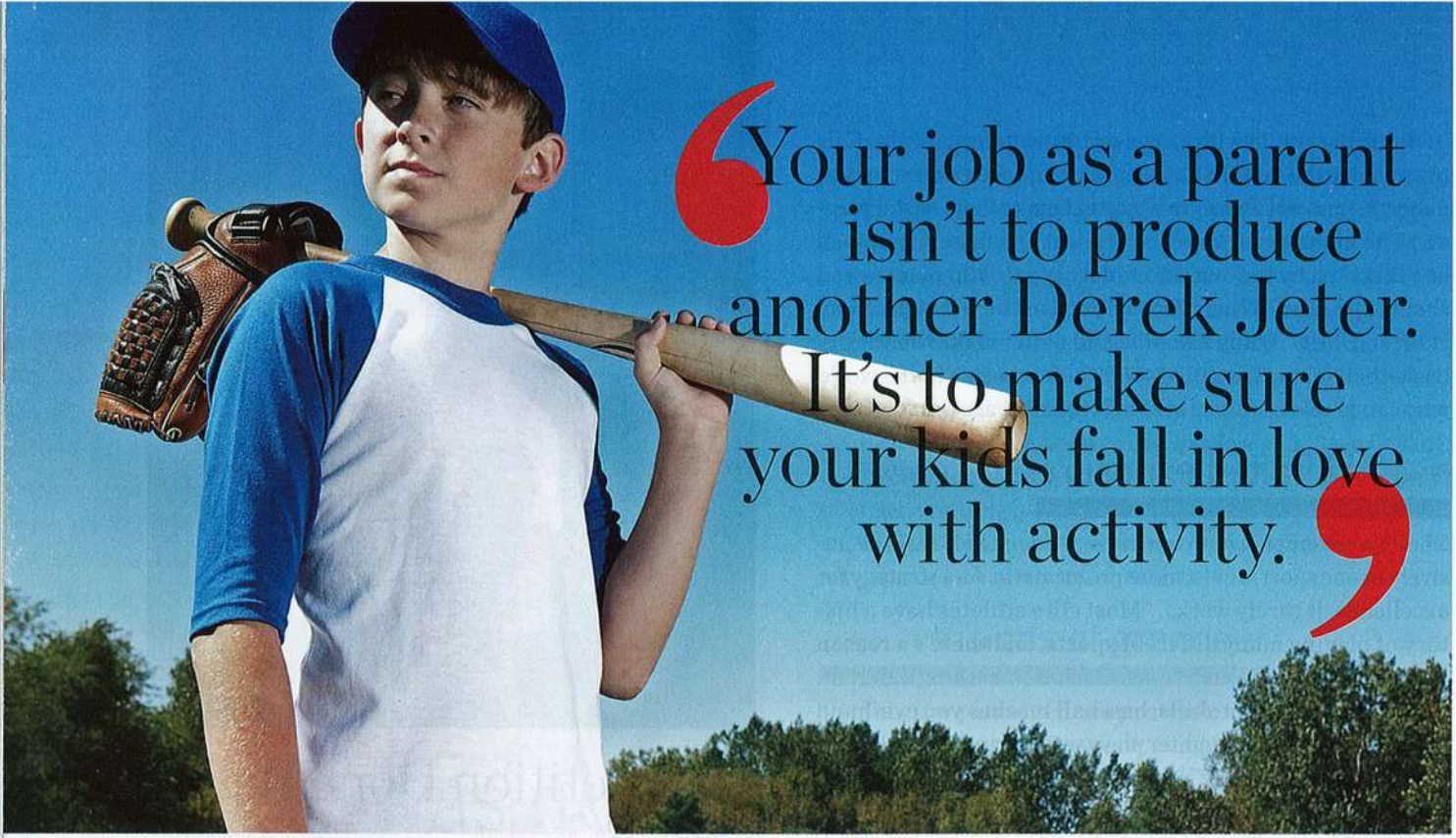
>> Sticking to a sane practice schedule. The AAP recommends that training in one sport be limited to no more than five days a week—and, frankly, we think that sounds pretty extreme—with at least one day off a week from any

organized activity. It also recommends that young athletes take a two- or three-month break from their primary sport each year.

>> Steering clear of tyrannical coaches. Many coaches in children's sports leagues are just parents with a passion. They're usually well-meaning, but they don't always have formal training in the sport or in dealing with kids. Never put up with a coach who tells your child to "work through" any kind of pain or who appears to have anything less than your child's best interest at heart. Trust your gut about what feels appropriate, says Gould. Swearing, belittling, sexist remarks, or encouraging cheating never are.

>> Putting your doctor on speed dial. Have your child monitored for any sign of overuse injuries and adequate nutrition. Don't ignore any low-grade or joint pain that persists for two weeks—it needs to be evaluated by a physician.

>> Keeping perspective. Be positive and supportive, let the coach do the critiquing, and try to ask "Did you have fun?" more often than "Did you win?"



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“Everyone in sports medicine will tell you we’re seeing more young kids, and as many injuries from overuse as from acute trauma,” says Dr. Stricker. “They’re coming in with tendinitis, plantar fasciitis, cartilage injuries, shoulder problems, ACL tears—injuries we used to see only in adults. I’m treating a seven-year-old runner with a stress fracture. We’ve seen runners with premature closure of the growth plates in their legs caused by repetitive-impact injury. As a result, their legs will be shorter than nature intended.” Sokolove notes that virtually all the injured athletes he met while researching his book had one thing in common: They played one sport exclusively, beginning at age ten or younger.

issue #4 Getting real

An increasing number of pediatricians, sports-medicine doctors, athletes, and even sportswriters are speaking up about the dangers of “too often, too much, too soon” and putting pressure for change on the youth-sports system. Here and there are signs of improvement. The Little League has imposed strict restrictions on its young pitchers. And the Minnesota-based group Balance4Success, which calls itself a “grassroots initiative of parents,” is urging families to reclaim their Sundays as “a sports-free day.”

But true change will require parents to do some serious rethinking about what we want for our kids. A good start is being realistic, says Mark Hyman, author of *Until It Hurts*, whose own son, a pitcher, suffered an overuse injury. “The truth is, only a tiny percentage of athletic kids will win scholarships or go pro. Why not focus on what’s attainable and in your child’s long-term interest instead: gaining self-confidence, making friends, being active and competitive.”

“Your job as a parent,” adds Gould, “isn’t to produce another Derek Jeter or Michael Phelps—it’s to make sure your kids fall in love with activity in a lasting way so they become healthy adults.” And if a child falls passionately in love with a sport and has a real talent for it, he or she will excel anyway, without the insanity of early training and competition.

Also important: Avoid early specialization. Encourage your kid “to try a variety of sports to build up a base of motor skills and see what he or she really enjoys playing,” says Gould. Those kids “who participate in a variety of sports and specialize only after reaching the age of puberty tend to be more consistent performers, have fewer injuries, and adhere to sports play longer than those who specialize early,” the AAP has emphasized in two position papers.

We need to listen to our children as well—and to our own instincts. When a child’s play starts deteriorating or we can see he’s limping or favoring an arm, he’s not okay; he’s hurt and needs a break. If a young player “starts making excuses to miss practice or claims to have repeated injuries even though the doctor can’t find anything specific wrong,” says Dr. Stricker, “it may be a red flag that although he’s afraid to say so, he really wants out.”

Most of all, we need to remember that we have the right to turn away. When Kwan’s third daughter asked to join a travel softball team in the fifth grade, her parents refused. The girl, now in high school, swims, plays tennis, and is in the marching band. “A lot of people are overwhelmed by what’s going on with kids’ sports and don’t like it but feel there’s no alternative,” she says. “You need the confidence to just say no.” ■

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