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Ten-year-old Kevin Scott of Saratoga uses a tee last month to practice his swing during a session with former major leaguer Jason Hardtke at Hardtke World of Baseball in Campbell. Kevin visits the training center as often as three times a week in his bid to play for Stanford University and then in the majors.

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Posted on Sun, Apr. 10, 2005

Scholarship pressure changes youth sports

Amid new stresses, adults wonder: What's best for kids?

By Mark Emmons

Mercury News

Kevin Scott looks like any other 10-year-old as he strolls around a Campbell Little League diamond, wearing a faded New York Yankees cap and an easy grin that reveals his braces. But when he steps into the batter's box, his eyes narrow and he turns to business, staring at former major leaguer Jason Hardtke on the pitcher's mound.

He has a goal: Play baseball at Stanford.

"Dreams are important," said Tim Scott, who stands in the outfield explaining how his son began playing on a travel team at age 9 and gets private lessons. "The odds might be slim, but I'm not about to tell him he can't."

The Scotts, like thousands of other Silicon Valley families, are struggling to find balance in the increasingly competitive and confusing world of youth sports, a world that has been profoundly altered by the quest for a college athletic scholarship and its cousin, the pro contract. Once carefree, youth sports today have become so stressful that many well-meaning parents have no idea whether they're doing what's best for their children.

In nearly 100 interviews, athletes, parents, coaches, administrators and experts expressed concern that the pursuit of scholarships has created a pressure-filled landscape that emphasizes the grooming of top performers over the egalitarian idea that all kids should play and have fun.

Despite data that shows as few as 1 percent of high school seniors who are athletes actually earn a scholarship, the chase has created:

- Explosive growth in the number of club programs and select teams, which are reaching down into younger and younger age groups. These teams, made up of an area's best athletes who wear uniforms worthy of the pros, can devour families' weekends and bank accounts. Though no one keeps firm numbers, baseball illustrates the phenomenon: Not even 10 years ago, there were perhaps 50 travel teams in Northern California. Today, there are about 2,000, by one estimate.
- A decline in the number of multisport athletes as kids specialize in one sport to maximize their scholarship chances.
- An increase in overuse injuries, such as tendinitis and stress fractures, in kids as young as 10, who are playing the same sport year-round.
- A widened divide between haves and have-nots because the cost of private instruction and club teams can price out less-affluent families.
- A sharp decrease in kids' participation as they get older, in part because they are overscheduled and burned out.

These changes are creating a youth sports world far different from that of even a generation ago, leaving parents wondering: Are they too focused on what many call a "keeping up with the Joneses" mentality, pushing their kids too hard into competitive sports? Or are they not pushing hard enough and risking that their kids will be left behind those scholarship-driven Joneses?

There's a palpable sense that youth sports are running amok. Reports of violence -- usually between adults -- at kids' events have become routine. That can't all be laid at the scholarship doorstep, but the quest has contributed greatly to the ramped-up tensions as youth sports increasingly become a focal point of American life.

"The scholarship absolutely has become the goal in youth sports," said Santa Clara University women's soccer coach Jerry Smith. "That's why we receive thousands of inquiries each year. I tell those people: 'Don't get your hopes up. Just do the math.'"

Bob Bigelow, one of the authors of "Just Let the Kids Play," believes the odds of winning a scholarship are even more remote than many other experts say, estimating that just 1 in 300 high school senior athletes will get a fabled "full ride." (The NCAA

doesn't track the percentage of student-athletes who get scholarships.)

But that doesn't stop parents -- who anxiously note the spiraling cost of higher education -- from spending enormous amounts of time, energy and money molding their kids into top athletes.

``The whole thing has gotten out of hand," sports sociologist Harry Edwards said. ``But I don't know how you can correct it because you can't tell parents not to give their kids every support they can and you can't tell kids to not dream."

As they dream, a youth sports industry has emerged; California, with good weather and facilities, is a trendsetter. Leading the way are the private teams that have encroached on the domain of high school programs. Former athletes and coaches such as Hardtke have carved out niches as consultants who promise to improve batting swings, volleyball serves or football passes.

Families like the Scotts -- who don't focus on scholarships and seem most interested in a healthy sports experience -- remain in the majority. But a small number of scholarship-obsessed parents, and the coaches and administrators who cater to them, have tremendous influence in the way youth sports are structured.

``I do wish for the good ol' days when baseball was just riding your bike down to the park with a bunch of other kids and just playing for the love of the game," said Chuck Buffum, president of the private Santa Clara-based City Beach Volleyball Club. ``Unfortunately that idea died in Mayberry. It's a different world now. We don't have to like it, but it is what it is."

Pyramid games

• Many students play, but few will win

Think of the sports world as a pyramid. At the base, according to one survey, are 41 million kids playing organized sports. Moving up the pyramid, there were 6.9 million high school varsity athletes last year.

At the top are the 360,000 athletes in the National Collegiate Athletic Association's divisions I, II and III. Just 126,000 of them receive athletic scholarship aid -- worth about \$1 billion, compared with the \$22 billion available for academic scholarships.

``But it's an article of faith that my child is that one," said Edwards, the sociologist. ``The statistics don't matter. You aren't going to convince poor families and families that are just in love with athletics about the myth of the athletic scholarship."

Said Roger Blake, a California Interscholastic Federation executive: ``My suggestion to parents is asking their children every once in a while: `Have you done your homework yet?' The money available for academic scholarships far exceeds athletic scholarships."

So how did we get to the point where a relatively small number of scholarships has so greatly affected all of youth sports? Simply put, in our sports-mad culture, the cachet and allure of a scholarship has never been greater.

At the grass-roots level, kids still start at the same place in beginner leagues, where parents are thrilled just to see a baseball hit off a tee or a soccer ball kicked toward the correct goal. What's changed is that athletes, at much younger ages, now can quickly advance to teams where the level of competitiveness, intensity and cost jumps.

What they're called varies by the sport. In baseball, they're known as traveling teams. In volleyball and soccer, they're called club teams. They can be Amateur Athletic Union or summer teams in basketball.

The goal is common: attracting the best athletes by placing a greater emphasis on winning and skill development than on making sure every kid plays. These teams have boomed because they're seen as the best path to playing in college.

Scholarships long have been mythologized as the golden ticket, either out of poverty or as the ultimate sign of sports success. But the number of people who view a scholarship as a realistic possibility has grown as sports such as soccer increasingly share

the spotlight with basketball and football.

Meanwhile, Title IX, the federal gender-equity legislation passed in 1972, has made the scholarship hunt an equal-opportunity endeavor. Women's sports are the reason, the NCAA says, that on average there are 41 more athletes at each school than in 1981-82.

Of course, parents like to see their kids do well at sports, too, and studies have shown active youths are less likely to get into trouble or succumb to the growing problem of childhood obesity.

So if a youth displays a passion and talent for a sport -- just as for a musical instrument or ballet dancing -- what parent in success-oriented Silicon Valley wouldn't want to nurture it?

Buffum's daughter, Jessica, a Lynbrook High School volleyball star, has played seven years for City Beach at a cost of \$30,000 to \$40,000 in dues. The payoff: a full athletic scholarship to Georgetown University.

“With the cost of a private college, I am getting a 4-to-1 payback for a Georgetown scholarship compared to my investment in City Beach,” said Buffum, a Silicon Valley start-up executive. “Unfortunately not everyone gets that.”

But even for those who don't earn scholarships, playing on select teams can give them an advantage in a college admissions process that also has become ultra-competitive. For instance, Buffum's older daughter used volleyball to help get into Princeton, which doesn't offer athletic scholarships.

Those trying to bring balance back to youth sports say there is nothing inherently wrong with select teams, private coaching or even the goal of a scholarship -- as long as it's all kept in perspective and tempered with reality. The problem is that many parents do neither.

“Scholarships equal money, and money is the root of all evil,” said Doug Abrams, a member of the Center For Sports Parenting's expert panel. “When you look at a young kid on the field and start thinking about dollar signs, the end result for most kids is not going to be pretty.”

But some say it's more than money -- it's ego.

“People say that parents live vicariously through their children,” sports psychologist Richard Lustberg said. “But the deeper explanation is that it's really parents saying, ‘Look at what I produced. Look at what a good parent I've been.’ A scholarship is a reflection of that.”

The Scotts, though, don't seem to be that kind of family.

Starting young

• More opportunities -- and problems

Ask Kevin what he would do if he could no longer play baseball and his answer is quick.

“I'd probably run to my room and never come out,” said Kevin, a fourth-grader at Saratoga's Foothill Elementary School.

Kevin excels in the classroom and is active in student council. But he *loves* baseball. When his dad gave him his old catcher's mitt, Kevin started soaking up everything he could about the game and daydreaming of a future that includes pro ball.

His goals might be typical of a young boy, but his focus is not. Last year he played Little League *and* more than 50 games on a travel team. He is receiving training from the Hardtke World of Baseball training center in Campbell as many as three times a week getting various lessons that can cost as much as \$150 a week.

“Kevin's doing it because he wants to, and that's different from a lot of other kids I see where parents are pushing them every step of the way,” said Tim Scott, an accountant who has two other kids, including a daughter who plays soccer. “But these days you almost have to play travel ball and get coaching from people like Jason.”

He and his wife don't believe Kevin overemphasizes baseball -- he gets all of his schoolwork done. But dad also wouldn't be heartbroken if son wanted to quit baseball and try something else.

Hardtke doesn't think that will happen. When Hardtke, 33, looks at Kevin -- nicknamed “The Animal” because of his intense passion for the game -- he sees himself. He was a nuts-about-baseball kid who starred at Leland High School and was offered scholarships by Stanford and Arizona State universities but chose pro baseball instead, playing portions of three seasons as a major league infielder.

“What's different now, the thing that Kevin is head-over-heels about, is travel ball,” Hardtke said. “Year-round ball is new. A facility like ours didn't exist, either. What I had was my dad coaching me and putting up a batting cage in our back yard.”

His dad, Terry Hardtke, started the highly regarded training center six years ago. It now has 15 to 20 employees and last year moved into a 15,000-square-foot facility that has eight batting cages. Terry Hardtke said about 6,000 kids take lessons or are in their camp system.

“The philosophy is easy: The more games you play, the better you get,” Terry Hardtke said. “And it works. But it also burns out a lot of kids in baseball, swimming, basketball, volleyball and soccer.”

The results are discouraging. Abrams, the Center for Sports Parenting panelist, said 70 percent of kids drop out of sports by age 13, and the main reason is pressure from parents and coaches. And the kids who do keep playing focus on a single sport and become more susceptible to injuries.

“I'm seeing three and four times the overuse injuries I saw in the past,” said Dr. Eric Small, author of “Kids & Sports.” “When I started practicing, there hardly were any overuse injuries because they were playing different sports each season. But people no longer see the big picture. Nobody ever uses the word ‘scholarship,’ but it's implied.”

Morgan Hill's Nancy Lazenby Blaser has never pushed her two daughters, Alex and Britta. Once, a parent whom Lazenby Blaser knew said Alex needed to get on a softball team immediately or she would never play in high school.

She was 5.

“I said, ‘That is the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. Do you know what I do for a living?’ ”

Lazenby Blaser is commissioner for the Central Coast Section -- in charge of high school athletics in this area.

Despite feeling pressure from other parents who “get swept up in this tide,” she hasn't allowed her daughters to play for travel teams -- eschewing “meat market” tryouts and weekends spent at tournaments. Instead her kids play multiple sports in mostly recreational leagues.

Lazenby Blaser said parents sometimes are so caught up in sports that they can't see that they've put their kids at risk. As CCS commissioner, she has read heartbreaking stories of kids who, when required to explain why they want to change schools, say coaches have abused them emotionally or physically.

“I want to ask parents, ‘What in the world were you thinking?’ ” she said. “It's almost like prostituting your children for the family benefit of getting a scholarship. How could volleyball or soccer be so important that you put your kid in a situation like that?”

Alex, 13, is now an eighth-grader. Her mom still has moments of doubt.

"I realize she might not make the team in a very competitive high school where girls have been playing nothing but volleyball or basketball for the last five years," she said. "But you try to do the best you can and hope you've made some good decisions."

Decisions await

• Young athletes weigh sacrifices

Young athletes face decisions, too. Ashley Guerra, 17, is a junior star in Archbishop Mitty High School's powerhouse girls basketball program. She might have been just as good a softball player.

But in seventh grade, she concluded that playing two sports at such a high level had become too demanding. After discussions with her parents about which sport might take her to college, she chose basketball.

"I think my mom is a little sad I still don't play softball, but we were all over the place every weekend," Ashley said. "It took a major toll on family life."

Even one sport is hectic. Ashley plays about 60 games a year between Mitty and her AAU team. She can't remember a true family vacation since she was in fifth or sixth grade, and wonders whether a household centered around her busy schedule has been unfair to her younger sister.

"I've spent one whole month of my life in this specific hotel in Oregon where we stay every summer for a tournament," said Ashley, who decided to try throwing the discus in track this spring. "It's worth it, but there are trade-offs and huge sacrifices."

Kevin isn't facing that yet. He's 10 and having a great time with his friends. Back on the Little League diamond, he talks about his dreams as he casually swings a bat.

"I'm still little now, but I'll start thinking more seriously about college when I'm older, like when I'm 13 or 14," he said.

Then he heads back to the batter's box and begins slapping Jason Hardtke's pitches into the outfield.

His stroke looks perfect.

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