

As Team Sports Conflict, Some Parents Rebel

November 12, 2003 By BILL PENNINGTON

More than 40 million children participate in organized sports in the United States, a cultural phenomenon known as much for its excesses as its successes.

Tales of overburdened children playing sports out of season, of demands to specialize in a single sport as early as grade school, of competitive pressures that lead to national championships for 9-year-olds - even in something like power lifting - are so ingrained that they have bred a counterrevolution.

Increasingly, coaches and parents are doing something more than simply protesting the extremes or longing wistfully for days of sandlot pickup games.

In Montclair, N.J., a group of parents fed up with clashing schedules every spring for traveling baseball and traveling soccer teams persuaded local baseball officials to sponsor a fall-only soccer team, so their children could play each sport at a high level at different times of the year.

At La Jolla Country Day School in San Diego, officials who were dismayed about pressures on athletes as young as 11 years old to specialize in one sport decided to require the school's athletes to play at least two sports. The school also designed an unusual dual-sport participation contract, which requires high school and travel team coaches to put in writing how they plan to resolve all scheduling conflicts to avoid overtaxing the athlete.

In Connecticut, the high school sports governing board prohibits athletes from playing on traveling club teams in the same season they play the sport in high school. Other states have enacted similar rules, sometimes leading to lawsuits challenging the rules. So far the high schools have prevailed, although many school officials fear this clash will ultimately be won by travel teams - when they replace high school sports altogether.

"The shame of it is you see how hardened these 14-year-olds are by the time they get to high school," said Bruce Ward, director of physical education and athletics in San Diego's public schools. "They're talented, terrific players, but I don't see the joy. They look tired. They've played so much year-round, they are like little professionals."

Why did we fight the cold war, some critics are saying half in jest, if we planned to adopt the East German sports model?

These are the tensions of the moment in youth sports, and the playing field battlegrounds are apparent in countless communities, most of them suburban, around the country.

Contributing to the charged atmosphere are other voices, who are not apologizing for the new look of sports for America's children. They are

defending it.

These parents and coaches see the well-documented excesses of travel and club teams as aberrations the news media seize upon because they are compelling stories. The defenders point to many studies that characterize adolescents involved in athletics as less likely to drink, smoke or use drugs and more likely to be good students. They say the ultraorganized modern model of sports teams for children is simply a sign of changing times; it is a valuable way, they say, to teach fundamental principles and competencies like teamwork, accountability, self-reliance and dealing with adversity.

Dave Dane is a longtime coach in the neighboring Massachusetts towns of Acton and Boxboro, where together nearly 4,000 children play ice hockey, baseball, basketball and soccer.

"There is this nostalgia over how we all used to play in the sandlot," Dane said. "Well, it isn't 1953 anymore. Everything in life is a little more complicated, the numbers are far bigger and it takes some adult organization to help the kids play. Yes, we've all see bad things happen: coaches or parents who have taken things too seriously and damaged their kids' enjoyment of the game.

"But the vast majority of families grow positively from it. When was the last time you heard about a kid kicked off his travel team who turned around and murdered somebody in high school? That wasn't the story of Columbine. Those kids didn't do anything after school."

The Stars of Massachusetts, an elite all-girl traveling soccer team of 13- and 14-year-olds, practices in Acton. At the end of a practice in September, team members discussed their harried schedules as they juggle schoolwork and the demands of playing on two, or even three, club teams.

"It helps if you give up sleep," Lydia Rodman, about to begin a 20-minute ride home to Newton, Mass., said in the dim light of another full day not yet done. "You get more done that way."

But Rodman and her teammates blanched at the suggestion that their extensive obligations to soccer could have unintended, detrimental consequences.

"You can't learn everything in school," said Molly Blumberg, who is 13 and from Lexington, Mass. "I've learned from getting involved out here. I'm a stronger person. I've learned social skills and self-esteem. I got that from this team. And it's my choice. I had to convince my mom to do this."

Critics, though, see youth sports as the product of ultracompetitive parents with unrealistic expectations who now have the time and financial wherewithal to administer and structure all so-called play. Even if it is a minority pushing too hard, they say, the majority worries about falling behind. These parents feel pressure to buy into a system of year-round competition on travel teams, expensive private coaches and instruction at summer sports camps - a level of commitment

routine at the upper echelons of youth competition these days.

To many people, this is yet another example of the modern American compulsion to overdo everything. It is a cross between a 1950's keeping-up-with-the-Joneses sensibility and a 1990's chase for the very best of everything.

#### Breaking the Bonds of Soccer

Montclair is a hotbed of youth soccer, and the town's soccer leaders wanted no part of a proposal for a fall-only travel team of 11-year-olds who preferred to play a different sport in the spring. They rejected the idea, keeping with the accepted notion in most locales that soccer at the travel level is a 10-month-a-year sport, played in the fall, winter and spring.

Some dissatisfied parents, in a novel bit of alternative thinking, turned to the Montclair Baseball Club for help. The parents hired their own professional soccer coach, paid for insurance and joined a travel soccer league in northern New Jersey. Asked to list their official town soccer sponsor, the parent organizers wrote MBBC, for Montclair Baseball Club.

"As a family, we just wanted to stop changing uniforms in the car as we literally ran from one place to another every weekend," said Joe Campeas, whose 11-year-old son, Sam, joined the soccer team under the auspices of the baseball club. "We wanted to play two sports in their seasons, and only in their seasons."

Ashley Hammond is the president and co-owner of Montclair's year-round indoor complex, the Soccer Domain, where he supervises 20 professional coaches. Of the fall-only soccer club for boys who want to play only baseball in the spring, he said: "They're not wrong to try, but the mothers of those kids have told me they want their kids to play both sports in high school. The reality is you cannot do that if you play soccer for just one season a year. Not in this town anyway.

"The baseball people will never accept that soccer is a year-round sport, but it is, whether they like it or not."

An outgrowth of local recreational leagues, travel teams have become common wherever sports are played. These teams are like a collection of all-star players who journey to surrounding towns, or beyond, for competition. The next level is select or elite teams, which often represent a state or an entire region. In nearly all cases, the commitment level increases the farther one travels up the youth sports ladder.

Not surprisingly, year-round travel team schedules lead to conflict. Jerry Citro, the coach of a prominent 12-and-under travel baseball team in Montclair, has cut players from his team because they missed too many practices to attend spring soccer games or practices.

"That didn't sit too well with some soccer parents, but this is a team game and it's unfair to the rest of the team if you don't come to our

baseball practices," said Citro, who also coaches his daughter on a soccer team and coaches the Montclair High School girls' basketball team. "I don't blindly accept some of these trends. The choice should be: what sport am I going to play this season?"

Caught in the middle, at least last spring, were the players.

"I definitely felt under pressure," said Avery Attinson, 11, who is playing on the fall-only travel soccer team and hopes to play baseball for Citro in the spring. "You don't want to let anyone down, and you don't want to give up playing any of the sports. But there are conflicts, and you feel like you're supposed to choose one. I'm glad I don't have to right now."

But when Attinson and his soccer teammates were asked if they expected to have to specialize in one sport eventually, each 11-year-old agreed he would. Asked when, Attinson said by his freshman year in high school.

"No, by eighth grade," responded his teammate Robert Chiles, a sixth grader.

Starting Young, and Younger

Nancy Lazenby Blaser was a newcomer in the town of Morgan Hill, Calif., just south of San Jose, when she took her 5-year-old daughter, Alexandra, to the local playground. By happenstance, Alexandra became involved in an informal game of softball with a group of other kindergartners.

"One of the other mothers was watching Alexandra and said: 'Hey, she's pretty good. What team does she play on?'" Lazenby Blaser said. "And I said: 'She doesn't play on any team. She's 5 years old.' And the other mother looked at me with this serious expression and said, 'If she doesn't start to play organized ball now, she won't be able to play in high school.'"

"And I laughed and said, 'Do you know what I do for a living?' "

Lazenby Blaser is the commissioner of athletics for the central-coast section of the California Interscholastic Federation.

"The pressure to start that early, and most of it is peer pressure, gets to most people," she said. "You start second-guessing yourself, saying, 'Geez, am I selling my daughter short?'" "

Lazenby Blaser's initial visit to the playground was four years ago. Since then, she has had another disquieting thought. "My daughter is 9, and you know what? They may have been right about her," she said. "I'm afraid she may not be able to play in high school. Her skill level may be below those that have been playing year-round since they were really young."

Four hundred miles to the south in the San Diego area, where favorable

weather makes year-round play possible in any sport, there are more than 125 baseball teams for children 10 and under playing as many as 80 games a year. Some teams have two two-hour practices a week and play games on the weekends, which are also sometimes devoted to attending tournaments.

When Bill McClurg, the head coach of the San Diego Buccaneers baseball club - a team of mostly 9-year-olds - was asked to describe the length of his team's season, he answered, "Labor Day to Labor Day."

"The kids do it because they enjoy it," McClurg said. "Maybe it's not for everyone, but I see a lot of smiling faces. And there is no doubt their skills improve from all the training and game situations."

But across town at the private La Jolla Country Day School, the sports counterreformation is in full swing. Some of the students are top college recruits, but school officials still require every athlete to try at least two sports as a freshman or sophomore.

"I don't want some 14-year-old walking through the door telling me he doesn't have time for other sports because he's a soccer player," Jeff Hutzler, La Jolla Country Day's athletic director, said. "How does he know?"

At the same time, the school tries to prevent athletes from practicing for hours each day with both a high school team and a club team in the same season. School officials created a dual-sport participation contract after Candice Wiggins, a student who is among the top three female high school basketball recruits in the nation, tore knee ligaments last year at a club volleyball practice she attended one evening after practicing with the high school basketball team in the afternoon.

"Unbeknownst to us, Candice was practicing three hours a day with her volleyball team after practicing two hours with us on the basketball court," Hutzler said. "That same year, we had a cross-country runner pass out facedown at the finish line of a state championship race. We found out she had played in a club soccer game that morning."

#### High School Athletics Affected

High school teams may have the most to lose from the explosion of travel and elite teams, many school athletic officials say. While youth sports were originally intended to be feeder programs for high schools, they could end up devouring the sports programs they were created to serve.

"In the next 10 to 15 years," said Bob Kanaby, executive director of the National Federation of State High School Associations, "as we continue to cut educational budgets, it is inevitable that some school official will say: 'We've already got these clubs running the sports in town; why not let them take over our teams? We can save on equipment, coaching salaries and insurance. We can even make money renting the high school gyms and fields to them.'"

"It has already been discussed in places. That is the Euro-Asian model. Local clubs run the sports in town for high school-age athletes."

Travel teams have many enticements for young athletes. They play in regional tournaments that routinely attract college recruiters, who know they can see the best players from several states in one setting.

But the club model is highly controversial for a variety of reasons, most notably for a lack of academic or behavioral standards, or precautionary safety regulations.

"Unless you're in jail that night, you can play for your club team," Daniel Ninestine, president of the Florida athletic directors' association, said. "It doesn't matter if you are failing every subject in school. And if you want to pitch 100 innings in a three-week period because you've got three big tournaments in a row? Go ahead. Who is going to stop you?"

Since club teams are expensive, the possibility that they will replace high school teams may also establish a hefty pay-for-play agenda and highlight an existing financial reality: most travel teams outspend high school programs.

"By the time these kids get to high school, their club teams have flown them all over the world," Paul Maskery, a coach or athletic director for 37 years who now presides over the Connecticut athletic administrators' organization. "They've played with new uniforms every year. We can't compete with that. At the high school, we hand them a four-year-old uniform and put them on a bumpy yellow school bus for the next game. We have a lot to offer, but it is more the learned values over four years."

Some coaches and administrators are convinced that, for now, the popularity of high school football is saving high school athletics.

"A lot of the top kids in other sports already don't bother with their high school team," Rick Francis, president of the California Athletic Directors Association, said. "We had two girls who were future Division I college basketball players who didn't even talk to their high school coaches. If football were a club sport, linked to a big national association for teenage players like the other sports, we'd be in big trouble."

#### The Culture of Competition

To many people, the intensity of travel and club teams represents nothing more than Americans doing what Americans tend to do instinctively: compete zealously.

"We want our kids to go to the best preschool, even the best pre-preschool," Kanaby said. "We want them to be the best reader in pre-preschool. We're bringing the same attitude to youth sports."

Hammond, the English-born soccer guru in Montclair, sees no turning back.

"It is too embedded in what is a highly competitive culture," he said. "The baby boomer parents generally have been very motivated, very successful people in life, and they transfer all that to their kids. People talk about youth sports and say, 'This is only for fun.' If you talk to parents, they might say that, but they don't mean it. They want their kid to get ahead.

"It's the same as a parent of a talented piano-playing child. They want their child to practice the piano every day to reach the elite level. It's the way Americans are and you're not going to stop it."

Fred Engh, the most veteran voice in the booming chorus of critics, disagrees. In 1981 he created the National Alliance for Youth Sports, a nonprofit organization that touts a training and education program aimed at reclaiming sports for boys and girls.

"I believe the pendulum of excess in youth sports is finally beginning to swing the other way," Engh said.

Yet many of those most actively involved tend to reject the calls for change. They insist that a new model for children's sports has been created, one that filled a cultural gap left by suburban sprawl. And they say that, by and large, the model serves the country's youngsters well.

"What is the alternative?" Dave Scheuer, executive director of Acton-Boxboro Youth Soccer, said. "Do we abolish all the teams, remove all the competition? I don't think that would make the kids happy. Many would be devastated. We have something our kids are engaged in and feel passionate about. Kept in balance, it is good for their bodies and minds. Why would you want to steer them to something else?"

Behind Scheuer, cavorting across five practice fields, were hundreds of boys and girls, ages 5 to 14. After 90 minutes, like a shift change at a factory, one mass of rosy-cheeked players jogged off to be replaced by a second gaggle sprinting to the fields in shorts, spikes and T-shirts.

"I see the excesses and they concern me," Scheuer said. "But I see the benefits. Do you eliminate one to eliminate the other?"

Across town an hour later, the last members of the Stars of Massachusetts were sifting through the darkness, heading toward a convoy of parents in S.U.V.'s and minivans.

"This isn't for everyone," Lydia Rodman, 13, said. "It does get pretty hectic. But this is still the best part of my day."

Anna Konopacz, a 13-year-old teammate of Rodman's from Sudbury, Mass., nodded in agreement. "I took a break and gave this up for two years," Konopacz said. "I missed it. I wanted to come back. I figure I can

relax when I get older."

She smiled and added, "You're only young once."

<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/11/12/sports/12TRAV.html?ex=1069669999&ei=1&en=b2eb8804fd294ed3>