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SPENDING

## A New Competitive Sport: Grooming the Child Athlete

By JENNIFER ALSEVER

THE parents of Beau Fraser have spent \$30,000 to help him become a better athlete.

From the time Beau was 10, his parents, Gayle and Brian Fraser of Aptos, Calif., have paid for professional coaches, private trainers, athletic testing, baseball camps, tournaments and travel with elite teams — not to mention travel costs for the entire family to watch him play.

The extra help may or may not transform Beau into a professional baseball player, but, at 16, he is a starting catcher on his high school team. "Every little bit helps," he said.

As the nation's love of sports grows, more children are focusing on one sport at an early age — sometimes as young as 4 — and practicing it year-round. To keep up, parents spend thousands of dollars for team memberships, personal training and even private sports schools in the hope of turning their children into high-caliber athletes or landing college scholarships for them.

Often, though, the investments may do nothing more than help children make the team. "We're a sign of the times," Ms. Fraser said. "If they're not on a traveling team, then chances are your son or daughter isn't going to make the high school team in many areas."

Gary Mayes, like some parents, is not entirely comfortable with all this competitiveness, but he has still opened his wallet to help ensure that his son, Kyle, 17, gets a chance to play the sports he loves.

"It's generally out of hand," said Mr. Mayes, a high school baseball coach in Huntsville, Ala. "Parents that have the money are going to afford their kids every opportunity, and often there is no limit."

Some parents pay \$200 to \$400 for new baseball bats, he said, and pay \$60 an hour for private trainers to make their children more athletically fit. The players who do not get extra help tend to fall behind, he said.

Mr. Mayes has paid \$2,000 to \$4,000 a year for eight years so his son could play on a traveling ice hockey team. The costs are for equipment, tournaments and gasoline, as well as hotel accommodations and airfare for the family. Mr. Mayes has often turned the sports travel into family vacations.

"It's not just investing in your kids' opportunity," he said. "You're also spending time with your kids. You can't measure that."

Sports camps, private sports schools and other businesses are springing up to meet the demand, which has blossomed in the last five years.

Velocity Sports Performance, based in Alpharetta, Ga., operates 65 sports training facilities nationwide that work with accomplished athletes in many fields, like Jeremy Bloom, the skier, and Charlie Villanueva of the [Toronto Raptors](#) basketball team. But increasingly, the centers are also catering to children.

As many as 130,000 youngsters come to Velocity centers each year, paying \$15 to \$45 for a one-hour to 90-minute session, two to three times a week. They receive general coaching on strength, speed and agility. Velocity's sales are growing by 30 percent a year, and 35 more franchised centers will open this year, said David B. Walmsley, a co-founder and chief executive.

And Sparq Training, in Portland, Ore., has built a business selling computerized athletic testing equipment and other products, like cones and medicine balls, to coaches, training centers and sports camps. Many students know the company for its Sparq Rating test, which analyzes their abilities in specific sports and gives them goals.

The company is scheduled to test 245,000 students this year at clinics, camps and schools. The tests are often free, but the company expects to sell more than \$10 million worth of the equipment needed to conduct the tests to training centers, coaches and sports camps, said Andy Bark, a founder of Sparq.

The spending on young athletes has also trickled down to individual trainers like Andy McCloy, who calls himself a performance enhancement specialist. He works with about 60 student athletes a week in Huntsville, charging \$30 to \$150 an hour for sessions to improve their strength and speed. He also holds six-week sports camps that cost students \$250 to \$450 each.

The latest training tactics, Mr. McCloy said, can help less athletic children compete better. "Demand is increasing more and more, and it's not something I see letting up," he said. "Parents are competitive, and they don't want their kids to be left out."

Parents of serious athletes may take another route, spending up to \$40,000 a year to send them to private sports-oriented schools with professional coaches and world-class trainers.

At IMG Academies in Bradenton, Fla., more than 700 students ages 10 to 18 train throughout the traditional school year in tennis, golf, soccer, baseball and basketball. The Pendleton Academy, on the IMG campus, handles the students' academic schooling. More than half of the students live on a 300-acre campus and may train in their sport several hours a day, depending on the program. More than 85 percent of graduates receive college scholarships, the school says. Some 12,000 additional students attend programs on a weekly basis each year.

To help his son, Alex, win a scholarship, Stephen Pettee of Newhall, Calif., enrolled him in a public high school, William S. Hart in Santa Clarita, Calif., known for producing football stars like Kyle Boller of the [Baltimore Ravens](#). Mr. Pettee also hired National Scouting Report, a company in

Alabaster, Ala., that promises to market Alex's football talents to colleges.

National Scouting Report created a highlight video of Alex's performance on the field and a personal Web site with his photos, biography and news clippings. A representative regularly contacts colleges about Alex. The cost for it all is \$2,300.

Letters from colleges expressing interest "have definitely picked up since we did this," said Mr. Pettee, who has invested in baseball, basketball and football training, camps and personal coaching over the years. "He doesn't need a scholarship, but it's fun," Mr. Pettee added. "College is definitely an expensive proposition."

As tuition costs rise, more parents than ever are seeking college scholarships for their children, according to National Scouting Report, which will help 4,000 students this year in that quest.

Yet it is relatively rare for students to receive substantial athletic scholarships, said Dave Galehouse, a co-author of "The Making of a Student Athlete," a guide to selecting a college, being recruited and playing college sports. At many colleges, he said, only a few exceptional players in sports other than the big attractions of football and basketball get full scholarships. Much more common are partial scholarships of as little as \$1,000.

"You have parents who are spending thousands and thousands of dollars," he said. "I think a lot of people overestimate how much money they're going to get."

The financial outlays and the focus on youth sports elicit criticism from some experts on children's athletics and child psychiatry, who worry that it may be another sign that American parents have become overzealous about sports and put too much pressure on children. The results, they say, can include overscheduling, discouragement and injuries.

"Parenting has become the most competitive sport in America," said Alvin Rosenfeld, a child psychiatrist and a co-author of "The Over-Scheduled Child: Avoiding the Hyper-Parenting Trap" (St. Martin's, 2001). "It robs children of their childhood."

STEVE SPINNER created Sports Potential, a company in Menlo Park, Calif., that aims to keep such concerns in mind — for example, by guiding parents to enroll their children only in sports for which they are ready. He started the company with the help of [Bill Bradley](#), the basketball star turned politician.

Sports Potential sells a \$135 test called Smart, which analyzes the cognitive and physical skills of children ages 8 to 12 to determine potential in 38 sports. As part of the results, children and parents each get a personal Web site, where they can learn sports terms and drills and track their progress.

The company will start testing thousands of students this summer through local parks and recreation departments, and at sports camps in Dallas, Boston and San Francisco, Mr. Spinner said. Next year, the company plans to expand to 10 more cities.

"Research proves that not every child is right for every sport at the same age," he said.

**"Participating in the wrong sport regardless of the athleticism can lead to frustration, burnout and loss of enthusiasm for all sports. We're about helping parents be better parents."**

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