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Narrowing the field

Elite athletes now dominate many high school teams. As other sports opportunities shrink, average kids lose out.

By Shari Roan
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THE long, sweaty summer practices are over. The pep rallies have begun. Fall sports are underway around the nation.

Cory Harkey, 16, is part of the action. The 6-foot-5, 220-pound junior at Chino Hills High School is symbolic of the elite athlete who has come to dominate interscholastic high school sports. He practices to the point of exhaustion almost daily and plays on private club teams to maintain his star status in several sports. He dreams of a college scholarship in basketball or football, and college scouts undoubtedly will scrutinize his potential during the coming year.

Sara Nael, 17, is not part of any team. A senior at the same school, she won't go near a volleyball game this fall, having failed to make the team as a freshman. She considered trying out for something else but eventually concluded that playing in high school sports "doesn't look fun."

The two students represent what is both positive — and distressing — about the state of youth sports today. High school athletes are fitter, more skilled and better trained than ever before. But these top-notch athletes, say many health and fitness experts, have become the singular focus of the youth sports system — while teenagers of average or low ability no longer warrant attention.

"What is happening at the high school level is, we're principally satisfying kids who are elite athletes — the best, the most skilled, the most developed in their particular sport," says Bruce Svare, a critic of the nation's youth sports system and director of the National Institute for Sports Reform, based in Selkirk, N.Y. But, Svare adds, "we're forgetting everyone else in terms of their health and fitness needs."

Although more than 7 million adolescents — almost half, nationwide — participate in high school athletic activities, according to the National Federation of State High School Assns., researchers such as Svare say the statistics belie the truth about youth sports.

For starters, a growing student population is pushing up overall participation numbers. And the national figures include activities such as recreational bowling and cheerleading that traditionally have not been considered competitive sports. Plus, researchers add, the participation rate is inflated by small and private schools where participation is typically high.

In large urban high schools, such as those in Southern California, the interscholastic sports participation rate is thought to be much lower, 20% to 30%, says Svare, a professor of psychology and neuroscience at State University of New York at Albany.

The face of those urban teams has changed dramatically in recent years. Scores of students today — including average teenagers who have played recreational sports for years before high school — are losing out to athletes who often specialize in one sport, play on private club teams and have personal coaches or trainers.

"The level of fitness and ability that kids have to have now is so much greater than it used to be," says Mike West, athletic director of 2,800-student Chino Hills High School and a certified trainer with the National Athletic Trainers' Assn. "When students come in as freshmen, they want to be part of a team. If they don't make it, it's very disappointing. What do they turn to? Some very focused kids will find another activity. But others — they go a different way."

The reasons for the declining opportunities have long been in the making. Gradual funding cuts have slashed the number of teams offered at many high schools; teachers, whether simply uninterested or overburdened, are less likely today to volunteer to coach freshmen teams or intramural sports; and the emergence of club sports has forced those of average ability or limited financial means to the sidelines. Moreover, say critics, teams are too often formed with the goal of entertaining the public, not providing an educational experience to students.

But with soaring rates of obesity and plummeting fitness scores among adolescents, some educators and health experts are pushing for changes in the way schools run athletic programs.

"High school sports has the obligation to be educational," says Daniel R. Gould, director of the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports at Michigan State University. "That doesn't mean coaches can't cut kids. But they need to be just as concerned about getting all kids to develop a lifelong love of activity as they do about winning."

Fewer teams

Adults may remember the days when high schools provided freshman-sophomore teams, "B" teams and intramural sports programs in addition to the varsity and junior varsity squads. The array of teams provided opportunities for kids of various levels of skill and dedication.

Schools today, however, have too few financial resources to support a broad menu of sports opportunities. Moreover, many community-run

recreational leagues, which take all comers regardless of ability, do not offer programs for kids older than 14, expecting that students will advance to their high school teams. One 1997 report published in the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports Research Digest, however, estimated that restrictions on team membership in high school reduced the total number of participants by 50% from the pre-high school level.

"Typically, most schools have a varsity and JV team," West says. "In certain sports, there will be a third level. But you used to see three to five levels of teams in many sports. We would love to provide that. What restricts us the most are facilities. We don't have the number of fields necessary to have four soccer teams for boys and four for girls."

The disappearance of freshman-sophomore teams in many schools has contributed to fervent competition for the few open slots on JV or varsity teams, Svare says.

Intramural sports are also relics of another era. These programs — designed to attract less athletic students — give kids an informal workout while fostering enthusiasm for sports. But they're highly dependent on teacher volunteerism, noted a recent American Heart Assn. report on schools and kids' fitness.

"The whole pie has shrunk, and the part that has been discarded is the intramural sports," says Jim Thompson, executive director of the Positive Coaching Alliance, a national nonprofit organization based at Stanford University. The organization offers workshops to train coaches, sports leaders and parents who work with kids.

Traditional PE classes — which also have been cut from many high schools — are not enough to address the declining fitness levels of American youth, he adds. The 2005 national Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey showed that only about half of high school students attended PE classes one or more days a week.

"In PE you learn things useful to you," Thompson says. "But I've never known too many people to get passionate about PE class. The love and passion comes from competing in sports."

In a study from Cornell University, published in the August issue of the journal Education Next, researchers found that PE classes didn't help kids lose weight and even led some high school girls to exercise less outside school. Other studies also have found PE is often inadequate to raise fitness levels. A 1999 government study found only 19% of students were getting the recommended level of physical activity in PE classes.

However, ample studies show that kids in organized sports are more likely to maintain a healthy body weight, develop strong bones and achieve normal to superior scores in aerobic capacity, strength and flexibility.

Further, participants learn leadership skills, self-discipline, respect for authority and teamwork, says Thompson. Athletes tend to stay in school, get better grades and have fewer disciplinary issues, according to data cited by the National Federation of State High School Assns.

Cory Harkey can think of a handful of reasons why he eats, drinks and sleeps sports.

"It really pays off," he says. "You're in great shape. It's fun and it keeps you busy. People who just sit on the couch are bored."

The life lessons that emerge from sports participation have the potential to benefit everyone — not just those born with athletic talent, says Thompson. He notes that many leaders in government and the corporate world credit youth sports experiences for teaching them perseverance, cooperation and responsibility — however klutzy they were as athletes.

"We think the playing field is the perfect place to teach character and other positive life lessons," he says. "If you buy that, then why is it that only the elite athletes get the benefit of that classroom?"

Sports specialists

Enthusiasm alone is no longer a ticket into high school sports. Nowadays, say athletic directors, many of the teens who make high school teams pay for private lessons, join private teams that play nearly year-round and specialize in one sport to hone their skills to a fine degree.

"Kids are required to be more serious than ever," says Dave Czesniuk, director of operations for the Center for the Study of Sport in Society at Northeastern University in Boston. The center, which studies how sports can promote social change, has in recent years focused on balancing academics and education.

Over the years, says West, he has seen a growing chasm between the serious and casual high school athlete.

"Where has the recreational athlete gone?" he says. "A lot of athletes coming into high school have a lot of experience. On our [Chino Hills High School] softball team, if you haven't played travel ball for a good length of time, you're not going to make the team.

"In years past, everyone was more on the same fitness level. But now you're finding more fit people on one end of the spectrum and more unfit people on the other end."

To be sure, some high school sports programs are far more exclusive than others. The coaches of some teams, such as football and track, sometimes have to beg kids to try out. But at many large urban schools, the rosters for the most popular sports — basketball, baseball, softball, soccer and volleyball — are filled by kids who have been long groomed for their positions.

Typically, only the most talented kids make private club or travel teams. These teams operate privately with funding from parents or, occasionally, corporate sponsors and use tryouts to cull the superior athletes from the average. By the time high school tryouts roll around, kids with that

experience are the most likely to make the team.

"We used to criticize the East German sports model, which emphasized the elite athlete," Thompson says. "To a certain extent, I think the United States has adopted that model."

But making travel or club team experience a prerequisite for joining a high school team is a form of economic discrimination, some say. Such private teams can cost several thousand dollars in fees, equipment and travel expenses — an unaffordable luxury for many families.

Savvy kids often see the handwriting on the wall. An estimated 70% of youths drop out of sports by middle school, often because they realize they're not good enough or because they're burned out by games, coaches or parents.

Sara Nael, the Chino Hills High senior, played recreational sports as a child, including nine years of soccer, and entered high school eager to join the volleyball team. Although kids often like to try different sports as they grow and develop, Nael, like others, soon learned that it's best to commit to one sport while young and become highly skilled at it.

She soon saw the odds of making the volleyball team. "There were 60 girls trying out for 10 positions," she says. When her name wasn't on the list posted after tryouts, Nael wasn't surprised. "I was a little upset, but I kind of figured. I saw so many people better than me."

She considered trying out for soccer instead. But after watching some practices and games, she concluded that high school sports were over-the-top. "It seemed too competitive," she says. "I don't like the stress. I don't like to be punished for doing something wrong. It didn't seem fun."

A deep commitment is required of young athletes today, says Svare of the National Institute for Sports Reform, a nonprofit coalition of educators and fitness professionals that studies youth sports. "Increasingly, the message is, unless you're willing to devote all of your waking hours in this sport, your opportunities are going to be relatively limited," he says.

But research, including a 1995 study of Soviet athletes, shows that devotion and training in a sport at a young age don't predict success, says Michigan State's Gould.

"A 10-year-old kid who can't walk and chew gum at the same time may be the best athlete in their community at age 15," says Svare. "But we're culling out kids at ages 8 or 10 and saying he's got skills and favoring his development, and we're telling other kids you've got no potential and you had better look for something else. It flies in the face of what medical experts and psychologists know about human development."

Nor is it necessarily what kids want. In years past, teenagers often tried a sport for the first time in high school — their interest ignited by a growth spurt, friends or newfound confidence.

"Kids are just beginning to explore their choices and options and what they want to do" at ages 13 or 14, Czesniuk says. "To say by then their options are limited is really sad."

Entertainment culture

Educators and child development experts often maintain that interscholastic sports programs should be instructional, developmental and serve a broad range of children.

But the real goal of youth sports, even in public high schools, has shifted from an educational endeavor to public entertainment, says Thompson.

"I think what has happened is because there is 24-hour coverage of sports now, the entertainment culture of pro sports has been dropping down to lower and lower ages," he says. "But even though the rules, the playing surface, the equipment, the strategy are very similar with professional and youth sports, fundamentally they should be very different enterprises."

The current focus on elite high school players is part of a sports-crazed culture that has also brought performance-enhancing drugs, financial improprieties, a declining emphasis on sportsmanship and more player and fan violence to almost all levels of sport, say researchers who have studied youth sports.

"We're really concerned about what we call the professionalism of youth sports; this idea that everything is the Super Bowl," says Gould.

High school teams today are nationally ranked by USA Today and emerging stars are profiled by Sports Illustrated magazine — often before they've even earned driver's licenses.

In Texas, some school districts have sold corporate naming rights for their football stadiums to raise money and broaden their fan base. Little League baseball championships are broadcast on national television where improper behavior is occasionally on full display. Note August's nationally telecast Little League World Series game in which a prepubescent player screamed an obscenity from the dugout, prompting his manager to slap him.

"Some of what is going on is very sad," says Karen Brown, director of the Maine Center for Sport and Coaching at the University of Maine, which recently conducted a study of youth sports.

The organization provides training for coaches and guides the implementation of Sports Done Right, a program for reforming youth sports that was launched last year in Maine.

Critics of this seemingly out-of-control system blame overzealous coaches, small groups of parents who dream of stardom for their children and

school administrators who won't stand up to the coaches and parents.

"That really is what drives a lot of decision-making in schools — parents thinking their kids are going to get a scholarship or be professional athletes," Svare says.

Many coaches are also too caught up in winning, the Heart Assn. report charges. Like other major health organizations, such as the American Academy of Pediatrics and the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Heart Assn. has urged a return to the basics of physical fitness in high school sports.

But coaches at both large and small schools often feel pressure to field winning teams, says Todd Flournoy, an assistant director of the California Interscholastic Federation, which governs the state's high school sports competitions.

Winning not only brings prestige to a community, but it can also raise revenue through ticket and merchandise sales and invigorate parent-run booster clubs.

"A lot of high school athletic departments are completely self-sufficient now," receiving little or no money from their school district offices, says Flournoy. "Winning has a large impact on the success of a booster club and its ability to raise money."

But numerous surveys show that winning is not why most kids play sports. One survey of 10,000 students found that winning ranked eighth among the reasons boys gave for playing and 12th among girls.

Having fun, being with friends, developing a feeling of physical competence and staying in shape were ranked as more important.

When asked why he plays sports, not once did Cory Harkey mention winning. Nor did Jeffrey Mackay, a Chino Hills senior who is on the cross-country team.

"There is such a spirit on our team," says Mackay. "Cross-country isn't for the fans or for popularity. It's something to enjoy. We can run for four miles or 14 miles and when we finish, we have the biggest smiles on our faces."

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(INFOBOX BELOW)

BY THE NUMBERS

33.6%

Teenagers nationwide found to have poor cardiovascular fitness.

27%

Ninth-grade students in California who achieved fitness standards in six core areas.

5.8%

High schools nationwide that provide daily PE classes for the entire school year to all grades.

30.9%

American kids, 12 to 19, who are overweight or at risk of being overweight.

Sources: National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, JAMA, 2005; California Department of Education, 2005; School Health Policies and Programs Study, 2000; Circulation, Aug. 19, 2006.