Dispatch Analysis

Children may be vulnerable in $5 billion youth-sports industry

Parents and athletes feel the pressure to compete at all costs

Serious injuries come fast and furious at much younger ages

Lack of regulation has some coaches calling for reform

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By Todd Jones, Mike Wagner and Jill Riepenhoff

Julie Fetty ripped through a laundry basket filled with baseball and softball uniforms at the same time her husband, Brad, donned a coach's shirt and scanned his smoldering cell phone.

The late-afternoon clock was bearing down on the parents, pressing them to get their four kids to four Hilliard locations to play four games - all starting between 6 and 7:45 p.m.

This was the grand finale of nine youth soccer, baseball and softball games for the family in a 20-hour period over two days.

"We are constantly on the run," Brad said. "Half of us at one place, half at another place."

The Fetty children are four faces in the swelling sea of youth sports, which has nearly six times more athletes than high schools and 100 times more than NCAA colleges.

The youth-sports world today is one where a 10-year-old boy travels from state to state to pitch as a hired gun against the best baseball teams across the country.

Where one family will spend $30,000 in six months to help chase their son's soccer dreams.

Where a basketball team of teenagers traveled to China to play.

Where a 16-year-old soccer player has endured so many concussions that she can never again play the sport she loves.

Where a call at home plate turned into a community brawl involving criminal charges.

Where a central Ohio mother arranged to send her 11-year-old son to live with a trainer in Alabama to refine his football skills.

Where Little Leaguers can generate a $30 million national TV contract.

"We're in the business of preparing kids for the next level of life, but parents are in the business of preparing their kids for the next level of sport," said Dan Ross, executive director of the Ohio High School Athletic Association. "This is about kids. This isn't a meat grinder, but sometimes we get caught in a meat grinder."

The many physical, social and psychological benefits of athletics are evident in the popularity of youth sports - with an estimated 40 million children participating. It has provided millions with fond childhood memories, creates friendships that can last a lifetime, and shows kids there is more to life than a video game.

But the current landscape of youth sports - year-round play, specialization and travel - is pocked with physical, emotional and financial minefields for children and families who sometimes pursue sports glory at any cost.

It has mushroomed into an industry of at least $5 billion annually, based on income figures reported by nonprofit sports groups to the IRS.

It is a largely unregulated world in which children are more susceptible than ever to injury, families spend thousands seeking elusive scholarships and adults sometimes mar the experience with volatile or even criminal behavior.

Many families feel pressured by today's youth-sports culture to travel from field to field, town to town and even coast to coast. They are

driven by fear that their children - some still in kindergarten - won't be good enough for a high-school or college team.

At a minimum, some kids are robbed of their childhood. Some are pushed too hard too fast to achieve unreasonable heights, and the cost is their health. Some suffer life-altering injuries. Some see serious strain on their families when mom and dad disagree over how much is too much.

The Dispatch surveyed more than 1,000 central Ohio high-school students and 218 coaches, and Ohio State athletes and coaches, about their experiences with sports teams not affiliated with high schools.

Half of the athletes said they started playing sports as young as 6 and quickly felt the need to press on if they wanted to someday earn a spot on the high-school varsity team or win a college scholarship.

More than 40 percent said their parents pressured them to play, and 10 percent said their parents' behavior during games embarrassed them.

"Too many parents today want to be agents instead of parents," said Dave Klontz, head baseball coach at Heath High School.

Yet it's wrong to lay blame solely on parents who are constantly told by coaches, other athletic officials and even their own children that kids have to play in expensive advanced leagues if they want a chance to play for their varsity team or beyond.

The message many are hearing is this: Without complete, year-round dedication to the sport, their children could fail.

Nearly 80 percent of Ohio State coaches surveyed by The Dispatch last fall said youth-sports venues provide the most fertile recruiting ground. And they coach the predominant youth sports: basketball, ice hockey, lacrosse, soccer, softball and volleyball.

"Many sports clubs or sport academies take advantage of this scenario," said an OSU tennis coach. "And they have turned the dream into a business."

Nearly 90 percent of the high-school coaches in the survey said they fear that youth sports cause burnout, injuries and bad athletic habits.

Their concern is so great that two-thirds of the coaches said that youth sports needs a governing body similar to the Ohio High School Athletic Association or the NCAA.

Some coaches say that even with reforms, youth sports have created a culture of selfishness.

"Club is all about me," said Bloom-Carroll High School soccer coach Robb Ingram. "And high school is all about team."

In Hilliard, the Fetty family has to work as a team to survive the daily grind of their youth-sports schedule.

Nine-year-old Hayden is playing his first year of travel baseball, and the others participate at the recreation level, which carries less physical, emotional and financial stress than more-competitive club sports.

Yet their days are blurs of practices and games, typical of many U.S. families, all stretched by the increasing demands of children playing sports.

The Fettys enjoy youth sports and see value in their children participating year-round in baseball, softball, football, basketball, soccer, gymnastics and cheerleading. They agree with researchers who say that sports generally help children mature physically, grow psychologically and develop social skills.

Still, the pressure from youth sports could be seen as Brad Fetty headed off to one field with his son Ashton, 6, in a GMC Yukon bulging with sports equipment while his wife dropped Hayden at another park, and then took their daughter, Kylie, 7, and son Owen, 10, in her Jeep to two

other Hilliard sites.

At Beacon Elementary School, Julie Fetty sat in one of those nylon folding chairs that sprout like weeds on American athletic fields.

She reached into a sack for a chicken sandwich she bought at a drive-through an hour earlier.

"I have been too busy rushing everyone to the games. Moms are used to cold food."

The travel itinerary of Andy Brim's three hockey-and-lacrosse-loving sons mirrors that of a professional baseball team. Road trips to Baltimore, Detroit, Pittsburgh, Toronto and a host of smaller cities consume nearly half of their weekends each year. Trips from their Dublin home to Cleveland or Cincinnati aren't even considered out of town.

And the boys don't all go to the same city. Beginning early on most Fridays and ending late on Sunday evenings, Andy travels somewhere with one; his wife, Julie, is with another; and Grandpa takes the third somewhere else.

Recently, one of the Brim boys asked why their family wasn't wave-running or snorkeling off the beaches of St. Thomas like one of his buddies' families.

"I just smiled and told him we could afford to take a trip like that if we wanted to, but we spend much of our vacation money on lacrosse and hockey tournaments," said Andy Brim, a Dublin resident. "We make them understand where our money is going."

Hockey and lacrosse are among the most expensive youth sports to play, but the Brim family's sports tab for Ian, Jack and Andrew - 14, 11 and 9 - is more the norm than the extreme.

The Brim family spends more than $12,000 a year for the three boys to play lacrosse, hockey and football. That tab includes entry fees, equipment, hotel rooms, gas, food and some training from professional coaches. And it would be even higher if the Brims didn't share travel costs with other families.

Some families, like the Fettys, choose the local rec leagues or travel teams that play relatively close to their home. But hundreds of thousands of children like the Brims play games across the state and country, and their parents easily can sink $25,000 to $50,000 a year into youth sports.

With that cost, some families sacrifice far more than a beach vacation to keep their kids on the field, court or ice. Some move into smaller homes or learn to live with one car. Others take second or third jobs to keep up.

In youth sports, it's pay to play - at big-league costs.

"We do this because our family loves sports; it's who we are, and it's where our friends are as well," Brim said. "I grew up in Buffalo loving hockey, and I could play my games at a rink 15 miles away. Now, you have to go to Buffalo from here to find the games or ice to play against

similar competition."

In almost any sport, the chances of getting a full-ride athletic scholarship to college are slim.

Nearly 60 percent of Ohio State athletes who responded to the Dispatch survey about their experiences with youth sports said that they received no athletic scholarships or received amounts that covered less than 25 percent of their college expenses.

Yet central Ohio families continue to spend and spend to chase the full-ride. Nearly a third of all students who responded to the survey said they spent more than $1,500 a year on youth sports.

Among those who play soccer exclusively, some of their families shelled out more than $10,000 a year.

Sandy Baum, an economics professor at Skidmore College in Saratoga, N.Y., and an expert on financial aid, said that parents are making the wrong investment.

"Your kid is much better off studying and doing well academically than spending all the time on the soccer field."

In the Wild West, townsfolk brought in hired guns to deal with the bad guys in black hats.

In 2010, baseball teams across the country sign them up to take on tournament foes - at age 10.

"For us, they come in as hired-gun pitchers," said Travis Beck, manager of the Cincy Flames, a Cincinnati-based 10-and-under team.

Kyler Fedko is one such pre-pubescent gunslinger.

Fedko, 10, pitched for the Flames in June when they played in a tournament at Lou Berliner Park on the South Side.

A week later, the Pittsburgh resident was in North Carolina pitching for another team.

Then he was off to Cooperstown, N.Y., to pitch for another team.

In late July, Fedko pitched in Chicago for another team, the Ohio Glaciers of Canfield.

This month, he rejoined the Flames for a tournament in Puerto Rico. Today, he's in Baltimore with the Glaciers.

Have arm, will travel.

"I just want to put him where the competition is best," said his father, John Fedko. "That's why I invest so much time and money into it. I believe in osmosis; if you play with good players, you get better."

The lust for competition is shared by families who trek to as many as 100 games a year with traveling youth teams, which have proliferated in the past decade in baseball, softball and soccer.

"It's just a booming industry," Beck said.

The scents of commerce and competition hung in the June air at Berliner Park as road-warrior parents paced and young athletes in immaculate uniforms toted equipment bags bearing their names, numbers and positions.

The three-day tournament attracted 72 teams (each paying a $525 fee) because it offered qualifying spots in the USSA Elite World Series in Orlando, Fla., a month later.

The Florida Pokers used part of its $50,000 budget to travel 1,100 miles to Columbus for the event.

One player came via Dayton - by cab.

Eric Hernandez and his son, a member of the Pokers, missed a connecting flight in Atlanta the previous night because of bad weather in Fort Lauderdale. They were rerouted, landed after midnight in Dayton and took a $170 taxi ride from there to Columbus.

"When you play competitive sports like this," said Hernandez, "the commitment needed to be a successful team is more than just having stud players. You have to have committed parents."

John Fedko embodies that commitment. For three winter months this year, he drove his son each week from Pittsburgh to Florida to pitch for another team. They'd drive home through the night to make it to school on time on Monday.

Fedko stressed that he is overprotective of his son's arm to prevent injury. Fedko adheres to pitch counts (no more than 70 in a game) and doesn't allow Kyler to throw at all during a three-month period each year, as experts advise for young pitchers.

Critics of travel-team sports say in general that year-round play leads to more injuries for players and more bad behavior by parents. Surveys by the National Association of Sports Officials show that an increasing number of youth-sports referees and umpires are quitting because of spectator misbehavior.

"In the last 10 to 12 years, the parents have become ruder," said Gary Patton, an Orient resident who has umpired and refereed youth sports since 1979. "They're more aggressive. They don't care about sportsmanship and don't care if they're hurting a kid. They just argue."

Even those in the travel-team scene - and who believe in its value - see some problems caused by increased competition at the highest level of youth sports.

"The thing that's changed," said Mike Roberts, 70, who played baseball for Ohio State and founded the Florida Pokers in 1990, "is parents now feel kind of entitled to do this or have that

because they've put up money."

The explosion of events and summer camps that showcase elite youth-sports athletes provide college coaches one-stop shopping for point guards, shortstops or soccer goalkeepers.

Some athletes find themselves amid a tug of war between high-school and youth-sports coaches.

Two-thirds of the high-school students surveyed said that they had been recruited to play on a youth-sports team. A quarter of them felt pressed to play at a higher level of competition.

As a consequence, nearly half of the high-school coaches said some athletes have quit their team to focus on youth sports. A quarter lost more than six kids.

"I am amazed at how many things many youth sports do for their players," said Berne Union softball coach Jon Parker. "Elaborate banquets, highlight videos, expensive uniforms, etc. Many times, athletes and their parents have nothing to look forward to by the time they reach high school."

To understand the business growth of youth sports, consider that Cathy Horton spent $30,000 this year on her teenage son's dream of becoming a professional soccer player.

And for Horton, paying that six-month fee to the IMG Soccer Academy in Bradenton, Fla., is a bargain compared with previous years' training expenses.

"It's cheaper to send him to the academy," said the single mother from South Russell, east of Cleveland in Geauga County.

IMG Academies, which has programs for seven sports on the 400-acre Florida campus, provided Horton with one-stop shopping.

The $30,000 covered room and board, coaching, equipment and attendance for her son, Charlie, at the academy's on-site high school, the Pendleton School.

In previous years, the Hortons drove two hours a day, seven days a week to practices and games in northeastern Ohio. Weekends were spent driving - and sometimes flying - to soccer events throughout the Midwest.

The Hortons put 75,000 miles on their car in two years because of soccer.

"That was crazy," Cathy said. "IMG has totally de-stressed our family. What we were doing was extreme. Now, we have balance."

Charlie lived with other young athletes in a two-bedroom apartment on an IMG campus supervised by adults. He walked to school, trained, practiced and played soccer six days a week.

"Some people would say I'm nuts and way too serious about youth sports," he said. "Some kids

say, 'Why are you wasting your time with soccer? Why are you not going to parties?' Once you get to an age, you have to commit - and really commit, which I've done."

Charlie left home in January to become one of five Ohio kids among the nearly 800 full-time students at IMG. The world's largest multisport, training and education business serves 12,000 junior, collegiate, adult and professional athletes.

IMG alumni include Kobe Bryant, Derek Jeter, Peyton Manning, Andre Agassi and Landon Donovan.

"If you want to play at the highest level, and that's what you really want, then you need to surround yourself with people who want the same thing," said Cathy Horton, CEO of Nutek, a company providing green alternatives to hazardous and harmful chemicals.

Mother and son each cried when they parted in January, but both are happy where youth sports has taken them.

Charlie is now training in Europe. He will return to Ohio this week to attend high school. In December, he will train in Chile.

"That investment in IMG paid off hugely," his mother said.

While Charlie Horton thrives in a high-priced, specialized environment, the uncounted ribbons, trophies and jerseys that Marcella Chavez earned from years of playing soccer are now packed away in her Worthington bedroom.

The almost year-round cycle of games and practices were at times too much for the fifth-grader, but that didn't drive Chavez from the sport she loved at age 11.

No matter how fast Marcella ran or how many goals she scored, her club soccer coach would scream and scream and scream some more. She would deflect the verbal abuse and booming voice just long enough to get in the car or back to her bedroom, where the tears would sometimes flow.

Her parents talked with the coach several times, but he believed his coaching style was appropriate and Marcella was the one with the problem. She wasn't the only girl to hear the screams, but her family believes she was targeted most.

"I tried to ignore it; I wouldn't look at him, but it made me not want to play any more," Chavez said. "It went on for a long time, and I just got burned out."

Marcella said she has no plans to return to soccer and will instead focus on running. She recently placed eighth in the 3,000-meter run at the Junior National Olympics.

"It's sad when kids this young give up something they love," said Marcella's mom, Becky Chavez. "It's our responsibility as adults, parents and coaches to realize that we are pushing our

kids too hard for one reason or another. And that can break their spirit."

When children quit playing youth sports, they often blame it on too many games, too many practices, too many screaming coaches and too little time for themselves.

Burnout is the leading reason kids quit playing youth sports, according to the Dispatch survey.

More than half of the athletes surveyed said they had quit playing at least one sport.

"Parents oftentimes think that if kids are good at something, then they must love it," said Chris Stankovich, a licensed clinical counselor who works with athletes. "What was fun at 8 may not be fun at 10 or 12. It's become a lot more serious earlier."

High-school coaches, however, are most concerned about what youth sports are doing to the bodies of young athletes, especially those encouraged to focus on a single sport.

Doctors see the consequences of specialization: It leads to overuse of muscles, which often is followed by injury.

"Young kids don't admit or recognize that there is an injury, and they constantly want to please their coach," said Dr. Thomas Pommering, chief of sports medicine at Nationwide Children's Hospital. "They will play at all costs and especially play at all costs if that is the message being sent to them."

More than two-thirds of OSU athletes responding to the Dispatch survey said that they didn't specialize in one sport until they reached high school. And of those, nearly half didn't stop playing multiple sports until they reached the OSU campus.

The moon was out and the lights on at the St. Brendan field when the baseball game between 10-year-olds ended, sending families home in the final moments of daylight.

Julie Fetty yawned after pulling into her Hilliard driveway at 9:30 p.m. with three of her four children, each wearing a baseball or softball uniform.

"Sometimes I think: Are we forcing our kids to do this? Do they really like this? Do they want to do this?" said mom, an ICU technician at Riverside Methodist Hospital and fulltime nursing student. "Sometimes, I think, 'Man, we should do a year without sports and have dinners.'"

Her husband, Brad, and son Hayden, tired and dusty, arrived home 10 minutes later toting their post-game meal in fast-food bags.

Owen, still hungry despite eating a burger at his sister's softball game, took a bite of cereal from his bowl and then chomped into his brother's dinner.

"Cereal and fries don't go together," he said.

Dad was already savoring the next night, a rare reprieve from youth sports that had him planning for a steak.

"There are zero games scheduled," he said.

"He's got one," Julie replied, pointing at Owen.

"A make-up game?" Brad asked.

"Yep."

So much for steak.

As the clock approached 10p.m., a sullen Brad Fetty took a bite of cheeseburger.

The Fettys mirror the typical family rather than the extreme in today's youth-sports vortex.

Youth sports have grown organically and without oversight.

Colleges and schools have standardized rules to help avoid injury. Youth sports organizations don't share the same playbook.

Colleges and schools are required to examine the backgrounds of coaches. Many youth-sports leagues aren't.

Colleges and schools require coaches to have training and experience. Almost anyone can coach youth sports, regardless of ability or training.

For too many families, the little leagues come with big costs.

Kids' play, serious pain

Pushed beyond their limits, young athletes face adult-like surgeries and career-ending injuries

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By Mike Wagner, Jill Riepenhoff and Todd Jones

The soccer ball slammed into Lucy Gonzalez's head, blurring her vision and fogging her mind so that she could no longer understand what coaches and teammates were saying.

Later that night, she cried uncontrollably and didn't know why. But she told no one immediately, because she wanted to play in the championship club-soccer game the next day.

The Dublin girl and her family soon would learn that she had suffered a concussion.

Then came a second during a tournament in Chicago a couple of months later.

Then another during a tournament in Las Vegas.

Three serious concussions in about 10 months ended Lucy's soccer career forever this past spring.

She is 16.

"When I lost soccer, I lost my friends. I lost what I loved. I lost the life I worked so hard to get," said Gonzalez, a junior at Dublin Jerome High School. "It's been hard dealing with the injuries, but I don't regret pushing myself like I did. As hard as things have been, nothing is worse than knowing I can't play again."

The exploding number of youths playing sports has led to a rapid increase in the number of injuries, afflicting youths ranging from teens ready for college down to those so young they are still learning to read.

When Nationwide Children's Hospital founded its sports-medicine program nine years ago, its clinics received about 1,200 patient visits each year. Now, with five clinic locations and a staff of about 50, it receives about 8,000 patient visits each year.

Ohio State University's sports-medicine program also has seen its patient visits double to about 3,700 patients since 2004 as the number of sports, organizations, teams and tournaments continues grow.

The year-round rigors and routine of youth sports, or just one sport, leads to the overuse of young muscles and ligaments that aren't designed to handle the constant repetition and pounding, doctors say.

Adding to the problem is that kids often conceal injuries, downplay them or refuse to take time to heal just so they can play in the next game or tournament. Sometimes that pressure to play comes from within; sometimes it comes from parents or coaches.

Parents often are confronted with nearly impossible decisions. If they let their sons or daughters play next week, next season or at all, they risk further injury. If they tell them to sit on the sidelines, they face the potential wrath of their kids and are possibly setting back their athletic progress.

Of more than 1,000 area high-school students who responded to a Dispatch survey on youth sports last fall, more than a third said they had suffered an injury while playing youth sports that required treatment by a doctor.

Parents wrongly assume that youth sports have a safety record similar to that of highly regulated school athletics, said R. Dawn Comstock, an epidemiologist at Children's Hospital and a national expert who tracks injuries among high-school athletes across the country.

"Sports in the high-school setting are much safer than sports in the club, all-star or traveling-team area, because high schools all are playing by the same set of rules," she said.

In youth sports, one football league might require its players to wear approved safety helmets and another might not. One baseball team might limit the number of pitches a child can throw; another might not.

Last year, Comstock began collecting information about high-school athletes who were injured while playing youth sports. She found that injury rates among girls who played youth basketball or softball were double those of their high-school counterparts; rates were triple among boys who played youth baseball and basketball.

"The biggest cause of injuries is that kids are playing year-round sports. That pace is just too much in many cases," said Dr. Thomas Pommering, director of Children's sports-medicine department. "The definition of a break for kids now is a weekend, or maybe a couple weeks in a year. Even if kids took off one season a year from sports, they could reduce their injuries or risk of an injury. They will play at all costs."

Youths often plead with parents to help them play on a high-school, college or Olympic team. Then some coaches, who want to stock their teams with talent, tell parents how good their son or daughter could be if he or she would play in advanced leagues.

Doctors who deal with youth injuries say some parents lose perspective and are swept up in today's manic sports culture, but it's the children's passion that often drives them to play even when injured.

On the other hand, a few youths are so desperate for a break that they show up at local clinics faking an injury. They are burned out but don't want to tell coaches or parents they are tired of playing a game.

"We have started to foster a culture where it is total sports immersion for our kids," said Dr. Kelsey Logan, pediatric sports-medicine specialist at OSU. "His or her identity is this sport. The main motivation for parents is that they want their child to be happy, do well and live out their dreams. It makes it all really hard for everyone."

Pressure from within

Jarrod Gilliam was doing his best to hide a slight grim-ace as he thrust his knees into the air and lunged as far as his injured left hamstring would allow.

Mom was watching this test.

So were his athletic trainers at the Children's sports-medicine clinic. At stake was whether Jarrod would be healthy enough to attend a basketball camp in North Carolina.

Jarrod, 15, of Lewis Center, injured his leg playing lacrosse in the spring and went straight into summer basketball, as well as lifting and conditioning for the upcoming football season.

Korrine Gilliam suggested loudly enough for her son to hear that maybe he should just rest and head to the beach rather than another gym.

"No way, Mom. I am not doing that," Jarrod said, as he shook his sweaty head and raised his voice slightly. "I am playing."

The athletic trainers told her that her son's hamstring wasn't completely healed, but they cleared him to attend his camp as long as he followed their rehab regimen.

Korrine shrugged and acknowledged that this is a common scene around home.

"See what I mean?" she says. "He just can't stop."

Thanks to the rehabilitation program, Jarrod successfully made it through basketball camp.

Whether it's pulled hamstrings, blown-out knees, damaged shoulders or something more serious, such as concussions, some youths find it impossible to give up their sport for a week - even a day.

Thousands of them fill area rehab clinics year-round in hopes of making it back for their next hockey tournament, soccer game or swimming competition.

Kids recovering from a variety of injuries are typically funneled into what's called functional rehabilitation. Not only do they finish rehabbing an injury with exercises, but they simulate the

exact motions, movements and situations they endure in their sport. Typically, it's designed to put kids back on the playing field in a matter of a few days to four weeks.

"Kids want to compete, and if they are injured, they want to be better yesterday," said Kerry Waple, senior athletic trainer in Children's sports-medicine department. "We understand the kids have a sense of urgency to get back to playing right away. But it's important that we are on the same page with kids, parents and coaches, and tell them you might miss a whole season, not just a tournament, if we don't do what's necessary."

The desire to resume playing as soon as possible burns just has hard in those who suffer serious injuries and have to rehab for months.

On March 25, two Dublin sisters were both in surgery to repair the same injury. Elise Jones, 15, heard a pop while playing soccer in November and continued to play in the game despite tearing her left anterior cruciate ligament.

Her sister Emily, 16, was playing basketball in January when her right knee twisted then buckled, leaving her crumpled on the gym floor as her parents ran from the stands. She, too, tore an ACL.

Both have played sports since they were young girls and thrive on competition. Both have tirelessly rehabbed since their surgeries. Elise is already back on the soccer field, and Emily is on schedule to return to the court this fall. Their motivation isn't scholarships or pressure from anyone but themselves. They simply love their respective games.

But that doesn't make it any easier on their parents.

"I'm dreading watching them when they come back," said their mom, Gina Jones.

"We love watching them play, but if they never play sports again, that is OK," said their dad, Chris. "As long as they are doing something they love."

The Jones girls are among a growing number of kids who are willing to fight through serious injuries and put pressure on themselves to return to the games they love as soon as possible.

Dr. Logan said that as the pressure to compete increases, so does the emotional and physical toll on young athletes.

"It's difficult, because the focus is, you can't miss practice; you can't miss games; you can't miss the next tournament," Logan said. "The pressure these kids learn to put on themselves, both emotional and psychological, is not good for them."

Too much, too young

Emma Saunders repeatedly flipped herself into the air with front handsprings, one after another, until she heard the snap on one of the landings.

The agony came instantly for the 12-year-old girl, who ran across the room holding her broken arm during what was only the warm-ups for cheerleading tryouts at Orange Middle School in May.

That was Emma's first attempt at cheerleading, but it wasn't her first serious injury.

The longtime gymnast already had suffered stress fractures in both ankles from the constant pounding of competition since she was 7. She also suffered a concussion when she fell on her head during a meet.

Now, her elbow would require surgery and three pins to hold it together.

"I love competing," Emma said. "Getting hurt is part of playing sports."

The earlier children begin their youth-sports careers, the sooner they suffer injuries - sometimes serious injuries that can linger the rest of their lives and threaten their development.

More than a third of the central Ohio students surveyed by The Dispatch last fall about youth sports said they began playing before age 6.

Medical experts say they now are treating serious injuries in children as young as kindergartners.

"These kids play as much as they can, and there is only so much physical stress their muscle structures can take," Pommering said. "Kids as young as 6 are being treated like amateur athletes with travel, getting on the best teams, constant practices and the pressure to play as much as they can."

Competing as much as she can is exactly what Emma wants to do as she enters the seventh grade. She spent much of this summer rehabbing her elbow at Children's sports-medicine clinic in Westerville.

Her goal was to make it back for another cheerleading tryout and climb back on balance beams for gymnastics meets. With the pins removed and her elbow healed, Emma was recently back at gymnastics practice doing more handsprings.

"How much longer do you let her do this with all these injuries? I don't know," said Kim Saunders, Emma's mother. "You want them to be healthy long term, but you want to help them follow their dreams. Balancing those two things is so tough."

The toughest call

The cornerback - the smallest player on the Gahanna Cowboys team at 4 feet 8 and 90 pounds - met the oncoming challenge with his head up.

Little No. 47 hit the ball-carrier in the chest, wrapped his arms around him and dropped him like a stone.

"Good job, Taylor!" yelled his mother from the sideline.

Taylor Lampert, 12, made a similar tackle three years earlier in a youth-football game and immediately ran to the sideline with his fingers tingling.

Within two weeks, a neurosurgeon diagnosed him with Chiari Malformation - structural defects in the cerebellum, the part of the brain that controls balance.

Taylor underwent five hours of brain surgery in October 2007 to correct the previously undetected birth defect.

Ten months later, doctors cleared him to return to football.

As the injury risk for youths climbs, so do the nearly impossible decisions for parents who have to weigh their kids' passion against their long-term health.

Even if their son or daughter is cleared by doctors to play, it's ultimately the parents' call on whether children return to the field or court.

If parents refuse to let their kids play after an injury, they face resentment. But if they allow them to return, they risk much more.

More than a quarter of injured athletes responding to the Dispatch survey said their injuries were serious enough that they affected their ability to play sports.

That was the case with Kristin Lanpe, 16, who suffered a second concussion less than four months after being hit in the head by a lacrosse ball earlier this year.

Lanpe battled constant dizzy spells and side effects. On prom night, she could be found sitting in a quiet area of the conservatory because she couldn't endure the loud music.

"Your first thought as a parent, and it was mine, is this is just not worth it," said Elizabeth Cooksey, Kristin's mother. "Protecting their minds and bodies should come before anything, but it's not always so easy. You have to trust in your doctors, follow their treatment plan and then hope for the best when they start playing again."

Kristin, who attends Columbus Academy, hopes to continue playing lacrosse next spring.

For Taylor's parents, the decision to let him begin making tackles again was gut-wrenching. Some thought his parents were crazy.

"We had a lot of people say that," Eric Lampert said. "Quite frankly, I've had people in my family tell me that. As long as he's physically fit and medically cleared, we're fine. If the doctors had come back and said it was a health risk, we weren't going to let him play."

A clear-plastic box on a bedroom shelf holds a reminder, one signed by his coaches and teammates.

It is Taylor's helmet, the one he was wearing the day he made the tackle three years ago and felt his fingers tingle.

Lingering effects

The girl staggered off the soccer field after being head-butted while going for a ball, but she pleaded with her coach to send her back into the game.

"Sit down, and go talk to Lucy," the coach told her.

Lucy Gonzalez, who was watching some former teammates play, told the girl about the dizzy spells, the crying fits, how she lost 20 pounds and how three concussions recently had ended her soccer career for life. The speech worked, and the injured girl sat down quietly.

It wasn't just a speech for Lucy - it's her reality. Nearly every day, she battles some form of depression, memory loss, emotional highs or lows, attention-deficit disorder and the fear of not knowing how long it will take to recover from the concussions. Lucy, a patient of Dr. Logan, now sees a speech therapist to deal with memory loss.

Still vibrant and engaging, Lucy carries a 4.0 grade-point average into her junior year. But her injuries were serious enough that they even forced a change in her class schedule. She can't take advanced physics or honors calculus. Her head just hurts too much.

"That was the old Lucy," she told her mom, Beth.

The new Lucy has found a life beyond year-round soccer. There is cross-country running, sailing and even time for concerts. But her newest passion is making sure that other athletes don't ignore what their minds or bodies are telling them when they get hurt playing sports.

"Soccer did not put me in this situation," Lucy said. "Thinking I could play no matter how much I hurt is what did."

Supplements target teens, pose dangers and are virtually unregulated

Sunday, August 29, 2010 10:33 AM

By Jill Riepenhoff

The Columbus Dispatch

When it comes to what young athletes should drink, experts agree that milk is best.

Ohio high-school athletic officials promote chocolate milk, a product with years of science confirming its benefits.

Ohio State University promotes Muscle Milk, a dietary supplement that includes no milk. Some independent tests have shown that some varieties contained banned substances and metals.

"Cripes," said Bill Jones, an assistant athletic director who serves as a liaison with OSU's marketing company, IMG. "I don't think our idea is to put questionable supplements up in lights."

Muscle Milk is part of a $2.7 billion sports-supplement industry that operates with virtually no oversight by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

The pills, powders and drinks that promise better health, more stamina or bigger muscles can be found in supermarkets, big-box stores, vitamin shops, pharmacies and on the Internet.

"Muscle Milk products ... are generally not marketed to young children," the manufacturer, CytoSport, said in a written statement to The Dispatch. The company also said that NSF International, an independent, nonprofit product-certification organization, has tested some Muscle Milk varieties and determined that they passed "standards for contaminants."

Greg Pickett, founder of parent company CytoSport in Benicia, Calif., says on the Muscle Milk website that "Dietary supplements in general are not regarded as harmful and the benefits provided by high quality, well-manufactured dietary supplements, such as protein supplements and sport drinks for sport performance are clear.

"Our products contain exactly what is stated on the label ... End of story," Pickett said.

Dietary supplements go to market without clinical trials and must be proved unsafe to be removed from store shelves.

Even when a product is deemed unsafe, federal regulators are slow to act. It took the FDA about seven years to ban the supplement ephedra, an herbal stimulant that contributed to the deaths of

former Ohio State and Minnesota Vikings football player Korey Stringer and Baltimore Orioles pitcher Steve Belcher.

"People assume that something on the shelf is safe," said Jackie Buell, director of sports nutrition at OSU Sports Medicine. "The question is, what's your risk tolerance?"

Between 2006 and 2008, Ohio's three poison-control centers fielded nearly 3,200 calls about children and teenagers who knowingly or accidentally ingested supplements. Six of those children suffered life-threatening consequences.

Supplement makers aren't required to list side effects, and only recently has the FDA required them to disclose product ingredients.

Even so, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency found undisclosed anabolic steroids in nearly a fifth of 240 supplements tested, a deputy DEA administrator told a Senate committee last September.

Those warnings largely have escaped consumers.

One in five central Ohio high-school students surveyed by The Dispatch said that they used supplements to enhance performance.

"Kids shouldn't be taking any supplement products," said Frank Uryasz, president of Drug Free Sport, the agency that performs drug testing for the NCAA and the Big Ten Conference. "What little testing that has been done has not been done on kids."

Yet kids are drawn to the promises.

"Some of the best marketing people in the world work for the supplement industry," said sports counselor Chris Stankovich, a Columbus psychologist. "It looks like muscle candy."

In 1998, the Associated Press reported that St. Louis Cardinals' home-run king Mark McGwire took a substance called "andro" that helped him stay strong.

"The next day, andro was sold out because all the 13-year-old boys bought it," said Mike Perko, a professor at the University of North Carolina in Greensboro and author of the book, Taking One for the Team - Coaches, Athletes and Dietary Supplements.

Androstenedione now is banned because it is an anabolic steroid.

"You can ban kids from buying cigarettes and alcohol, but what do you do about this? How do you prevent a kid from buying something legal?" Stankovich said.

Muscle Milk comes in kid-friendly flavors such as cookies-n-creme. "We encourage parents to carefully consider all aspects of their children's nutrition and exercise, including any potential

vitamins or nutritional products, to work toward a balanced, healthy life," the CytoSport statement to The Dispatch said.

In 2007, some varieties of Muscle Milk contained bovine colostrums, a source of hormones banned by the NCAA and the World Anti-Doping Agency, said Eric Patterson, of Drug Free Sport.

In response, Muscle Milk created the collegiate formula to meet NCAA guidelines. It has not been tested or endorsed by the NCAA.

Today, more than two dozen colleges endorse the collegiate product. The agreement with Ohio State was brokered in January by IMG, the university's new marketing agency.

"We are excited about our new partnership with Muscle Milk and the ability to assist in showcasing their products to the Ohio State community in Columbus and around the state," Andrew Kossoff, general manager of Ohio State Sports Marketing/IMG College, said in a news release.

As part of the relationship, OSU promotes the product at its sports venues and Muscle Milk provides its products to IMG, which gives it to Ohio State's athletic department.

Consumer Reports magazine reported in July that it found dangerous levels of cadmium and lead in some Muscle Milk varieties, as well as detectable levels of arsenic and mercury.

CytoSport said in a written statement that the product is safe and that plenty of food sources contain metal, such as fish, fruits and vegetables.

For young athletes, the best place to look for help is inside the refrigerator, Patterson said.

"Chocolate milk is a great post-workout drink."

Bad actors spoil games

Some parents are out of control, and a lack of required background checks means almost anyone can coach youth sports

Tuesday, August 31, 2010 02:12 AM

By Mike Wagner and Jill Riepenhoff

The fist smashed into the left side of his face, leaving the Canton Little League president unconscious on the baseball diamond and 9-year-old players crying in the dugout.

Coaches screamed, parents threatened one another in the bleachers and umpires were challenged to fights in the parking lot. The scene quickly slid into chaos after a collision at home plate.

Officials called off the game because it was no longer safe for anyone at the Massillon baseball field in northeastern Ohio.

The punch broke Shawn Thomas' teeth and gave him a concussion.

It was thrown by one of his own coaches after Thomas agreed that the game should be canceled despite a tie score in extra innings this past April.

The coach was a man Thomas himself had appointed to lead the team, a man Thomas had supported in the past, a man Thomas knew had a criminal record and a man who was convicted last month of assaulting his own league commissioner.

"It was the worst scene I have ever seen at a youth-sports event," Thomas said. "I got hit in the face, but I'm not the victim. The real victims were the kids who had to see that happen. The real victims are any kid that has to see adults act like that."

The majority of youth-sports events are void of violence and controversy. Most parents, coaches and umpires act appropriately at these non-school events. But the melee in Massillon illustrates what can go wrong in youth sports.

In the past decade in Ohio, more than a dozen youth-sports coaches, parents and/or players have been involved in assaulting someone at a game. At least three dozen others have been arrested on sex-related charges.

Experts say those figures, derived from news stories about the events, grossly under-represent the extent of the problem because no one tracks inappropriate behavior involving youth sports.

While some leagues have their own rules, there are no across-the-board mandates for background checks, vetting of qualifications or required training for coaches.

Across the country, bad behavior at youth-sports events continues to spoil the fun.

Examples so far this year include: 23 coaches, parents and players brawled after a New York basketball game; a New Jersey man became enraged and tackled a coach after his son lost a wrestling match; a Connecticut woman was charged with twisting a Little League coach's arm in anger over her son's playing position.

In Ohio in the past year, a Mentor police officer hurled insults at his son's baseball coach throughout the game, then head-butted him afterward; a Crestline youth football coach assaulted his son and another boy during a practice; and a Geauga County dad filed a lawsuit against a coach because his son was hit by a pitch.

Those represent a sliver of the bad behavior that mars youth-sports events.

"Why doesn't somebody mandate and say, 'This shouldn't go on?'" asked Fred Engh, founder and executive director of the National Alliance for Youth Sports, a Florida-based nonprofit that pushes for standards in youth sports. "We've been preaching this for 30 years."

That sermon on sportsmanship was forgotten in Massillon.

Karim Carter, the coach convicted of assaulting Thomas, told The Dispatch that the melee wasn't his fault and there was no punch.

Carter, who faced a felony charge and as many as eight years in prison, accepted a deal from prosecutors in late July and pleaded guilty to misdemeanor assault. He was sentenced to 30 days in jail for an incident that received national attention.

The coach, now banned from Little League for life, says he left the argument at home plate to stop Thomas from verbally assaulting a mom who wanted the game to continue.

"I reached to his shoulder and pulled him away from the mother; he stepped into my personal space and pulled his hand back in a striking motion," Carter said. "He then fell down, and that was the end of it. Next thing I know, all these people are coming at me like they want to lynch me. I'm a black man in America; whether people want to hear that, it's a part of it."

Lou Copeland, president of Massillon Little League, said he could see the punch from Carter coming long before that day. Copeland said Canton and Massillon's long-standing community rivalry in any sport played a role in the incident.

Copeland realized the intensity involved in youth sports has grown into something that sometimes harms kids.

"People don't get it. It's little kids playing baseball or soccer or something they are supposed to enjoy," said Copeland, who canceled all scheduled games against teams from Canton this summer following the incident. "The intensity and competition comes far more from parents who think their kid is going to be a college or pro athlete. Winning has taken over; fewer and fewer lessons are being taught."

Getting worse

Police escorted soccer parents to their cars after they verbally abused one another and the referees.

A peewee football coach smacked a player in the helmet. Parents gasped in horror. The coach was fired.

A soccer dad, enraged with a referee, tackled him. Spectators jumped in to stop the scuffle.

A father upset about his son's mistakes during a basketball game forced the boy to walk home nearly 3 miles in the bitter cold of winter. Other families offered the boy a ride, but he was too afraid of his father to accept. Someone reported the incident to children services.

All of these conflicts happened during youth-sports events in central Ohio during the past year.

Bad behavior doesn't always result in courtroom appearances or newspaper headlines but has become familiar on fields and courts, even in communities where organizers stress sportsmanship.

"It just takes one bad apple to ruin a game for everyone," said Karyn Hendricks, who recently concluded her tenure as president of the Worthington Youth Boosters, which serves about 5,000 kids.

"Parents get so wrapped up in the game or competition and they lose their minds. They want their kids to win at all costs. A lot has to do with the money parents are spending on training, coaches, travel fees and other things because they want that scholarship for their kids."

Officials from across the country agree that the behavior of adults at youth-sports events is getting worse.

A poll released by Reuters/Ipsos in April found that 60 percent of U.S. residents have witnessed a parent become physically or verbally abusive toward a coach or official at a youth-sports event.

More than 30 percent of the high-school students surveyed by The Dispatch last fall said that their parents embarrassed them at youth-sports events or put too much pressure on winning.

Nearly a third gave their youth-sports coaches neutral or negative ratings because the coaches cared only about winning, yelled at players or didn't have the skills to make athletes better.

When asked about their worst youth-sports experiences, here's what some of those students had to say:

"Parents being able to influence coaches, yelling and making kids cry on the field, parents calling coaches on a cell phone (during games) to ask why a play wasn't made," wrote a Franklin County senior.

"My youth football coach yelled in our faces and had the smell of alcohol on his breath. All he did was scream at us," wrote a Delaware County junior.

"My worst experience was my softball coach. He yelled and cussed out the parents and the kids on my team. The money that we gave him to spend on trophies, he used for himself," wrote a Licking County student.

When bad behavior from parents or coaches breaks out at a youth-sports event, the umpires, referees or officials often are the targets of the abuse.

"It's harder and harder to get people to cool down at the ballpark," said Kenny Vaughn, 62, a baseball umpire and basketball official in central Ohio for nearly 30years. "Parents and fans in general need to understand they are embarrassing their own kids when they don't act respectful."

Vaughn recalled one recent game in which a dad was sitting near the outfield foul line and complaining about nearly every ball and strike call Vaughn made for two innings. The dad's son was the catcher, who twice went over to his dad and begged him to stop yelling.

The 10-year-old's plea didn't work, so Vaughn decided to take a seat next to the dad in the third inning. To the shock of the dad, Vaughn then yelled "Play ball!" while seated in left field, where he planned to call balls and strikes.

"I told the dad since he had a better view out there, I was going to work the game there," Vaughn said. "He said 'OK, Blue, I got your point.' He never said another word, and he apologized to his son."

Digging deeper

Karim Carter's criminal history didn't appear on the background check required by Little League International when he wanted to coach in Canton. But Shawn Thomas did his own records check at the local courthouse and discovered Carter's past:

Two assaults.

Domestic violence.

Disorderly conduct by intoxication.

Carrying a firearm in a motor vehicle.

He had no felony convictions and no crimes against children.

Carter was considered a good coach, and because volunteers are hard to find, Thomas allowed him to manage a team anyway.

That decision ultimately came back to haunt Thomas, who now regrets dismissing the coach's past.

"I stuck up for him," Thomas said. "I helped him be a coach. Why would he do this to me? I don't know. My trust level has gone to zero on everyone."

Carter, 41, doesn't deny his criminal record, but he said that mistakes he made in the past shouldn't prevent him from coaching kids.

"I've never hurt a child, and I never would," Carter said. "I have done a lot of good for kids. That is forgotten in all this."

Little League International requires background checks but only automatically disqualifies volunteers who are sex offenders or have committed crimes against children.

Little League officials said they encourage their members to conduct more-thorough background checks and are making plans to mandate broader checks of volunteers in the next few years.

Little League has promoted the importance of background checks and pays for thousands of them on behalf of its local charters.

But even with more-thorough background checks, volunteers with a record such as Carter's could still coach unless Little League raises its threshold.

"I wouldn't want that guy (Carter) coaching my children, either," said Stephen Keener, president of Little League International.

"We are always reviewing our standards and trying to make things better," Keener said. "But do you disqualify a dad from coaching when he's 40 because he had a DUI or petty theft when he was 19? It's tough to find balance with those standards."

Whether coaches undergo background checks in many youth-sports leagues depends on rules for each team, the league or the association. There is no standard or overarching regulation.

The Upper Arlington Athletic Association, for example, doesn't require its softball coaches to undergo checks; the Hilliard softball program does.

Ten years ago, Ohio lawmakers rejected a bill requiring background checks for all coaches.

"I really thought it was a slam dunk," said the bill's sponsor, former Sen. Bruce Johnson, a Republican from Columbus. "I was surprised by all the opposition."

Youth-sports groups opposed the measure because of the costs. Leagues said they couldn't afford to absorb the costs themselves, and volunteers wouldn't step forward if they had to pay for checks out of their own wallets.

Johnson still supports mandated checks.

"We can't always prevent ... people from preying on kids, but we sure should try," Johnson said.

In the past decade, the climate has changed and many youth organizations today require background checks.

The Hilliard Girls Softball Association joined the National Alliance for Youth Sports this year as a way to gain access to inexpensive background checks and, ultimately, liability insurance to protect the league if a coach harms a child.

More than 300 recreation departments and leagues in Ohio have joined NAYS.

"We're doing it to make it safe for the children," said league president Ric Cherry.

Background checks, however, aren't a fail-safe.

Former youth coaches Marc LeDuc and Robert H. Erwin both had clean criminal histories but now are in prison. Both declined requests for interviews.

LeDuc, 47, former coach of a Fremont youth hockey team, was sent to prison last year for six years after he was convicted of sending pornographic images to an undercover police officer posing as a teenage boy.

Erwin molested at least a dozen boys who played on the Gallipolis baseball team he coached. Some of the incidents date back to the 1980s. The 68-year-old is serving 15 years.

Lasting effects

The fallout from verbal abuse or worse at youth-sports events doesn't end when the games end.

For the two men in Canton, the frustration and sorrow of what was far more than a bad day at the ballpark lingers today.

Carter is still angry that he was painted as the villain and says his family continues to suffer from that day. His two sons are ridiculed, and he can't fill up his car with gas without a stranger giving him a nasty glare. He also couldn't watch his youngest son play ball this summer because of his lifetime ban.

"People look at me like I'm a murderer," Carter said.

Thomas, who suffers from occasional blurred vision in his left eye, is unsure whether he will continue to volunteer in youth sports. The incident stained his league's reputation, and he is still bothered by the memory of young boys crying on the field.

"I hope everyone learned a lesson from that day," Thomas said. "The kids don't deserve anything like that."

Training doesn't teach umps to deal with ignorant fans

Tuesday, August 31, 2010 01:43 AM

By Todd Jones

The Columbus Dispatch

Corey Jeffers, a 17-year-old from London, Ohio, is in his second season of working central Ohio youth baseball games as an umpire licensed by the Ohio High School Athletic Association. He began umpiring recreation games six years ago as a seventh-grader.

Jeffers is learning to deal with adults whose tempers constantly threaten to boil over, and sometimes do, because they're so emotionally invested in children's games.

He talked to Dispatch reporter Todd Jones about about umpiring and recounted his experiences from a June day in which he earned $240 by working six tournament games in 12 hours at Lou Berliner Park.

Morning begins hot for Corey Jeffers, and it has nothing to do with the June weather.

It's not the sun; it's the humanity bearing down on the teenage umpire after he rules that a pitch hit a batter at Lou Berliner Park.

"You got to call that (expletive) both ways," an adult fan yells at him from behind the backstop. "That's terrible! You're ridiculous! Unbelievable!"

This is the first inning of an 8 a.m. game - the first of six games Jeffers will umpire today - between two teams made up of players 13 or younger.

Jeffers, 17, ejects the fan from field No. 9 at the sprawling sports complex south of Downtown, where 300 youth baseball teams are competing over four days in the Nations Baseball Ohio State Championships.

The London teenager will earn $240 on this long, hot day and gain valuable experience in his second season as an umpire licensed by the Ohio High School Athletic Association to work youth baseball.

"In the beginning, we were a little rough on him," says Steve Deemer, coach of the Ohio Stixx, from the northeastern Ohio city of Wadsworth, after winning the first game. "I thought he was a little inconsistent with his calls. He was trying to take control of the game. After he settled in, he called a great game."

Jeffers is learning to deal with adults whose tempers constantly threaten to boil over, and sometimes do, because they're so emotionally invested in children's games.

At game's end, he is given a bottle of water and words of advice from Gary Patton, the umpire-in-chief who assigns games to the 300-plus certified umps in central Ohio.

"In a tournament, you've got to be a little more lenient," Patton says to Jeffers. "They pay big money to play in it, and they're excited. You should say, 'Coach, your responsibility is the fans. If I hear another curse word, they're gone.' "

An adult lingers nearby. Tim Kniple had returned to apologize to the young umpire who tossed him from the game.

"You couldn't pay me enough to do that job," Kniple says. "I don't envy him. It's a tough job."

Jeffers arrived at Berliner Park already weathered by the occupational hazards he has encountered since first umpiring recreation-league games six years ago as a seventh-grader.

He has had adults call him a crybaby, say he's power-hungry and tell him he must think he's God. He has been physically threatened by a coach. He's been cursed out.

"Somebody is always grouching," says Jeffers, who will attend Bowling Green State University this fall as a freshman ROTC student. "Parents are the No. 1 problem."

Two years ago, the Ohio High School Athletic Association surveyed its umpires and basketball and football officials and asked: What's the worst part of your job?

Poor fan behavior was the most frequent answer.

To his surprise, Jeffers found that OHSAA didn't teach how to deal with abusive fans when he took the certification class and test two years ago so he could work high-school and travel youth games, as well as recreational games.

"That's the biggest part of baseball when you umpire: how to handle ignorance," he says. "I've seen some umpires quit because they can't handle the parents. No parent or coach can drive me out of the game."

The teenager's spunk shows during the June tournament when a coach questions his strike call.

"I don't want to hear your mouth again," Jeffers says.

"I'm the coach. I can say things," the coach responds.

"You can say things to your players," Jeffers says. "I don't want to hear about calling it both ways."

Jeffers admits that "fans get to me the most," and he knows his skin must thicken when adults bluster about his calls.

"He can't be so quick with the temper," Patton says. "He's a young umpire, and he has a lot to learn still. But he's willing to learn and that's what matters."

Jeffers escapes the occasional chirping from coaches and fans about his big strike zone by finding some shade near his pick-up truck for a rest after his third game of the day.

"When I played, I hated umpires," he says. "I argued every call, every one. Now that I am an umpire, I got a lot more respect for them."

Evening beckons as Jeffers strips off his equipment and uniform top at the conclusion of his fifth game.

His red T-shirt is soaked with sweat, a testament to how his hustle and enthusiasm haven't waned throughout his first five games behind the plate and working the bases.

His heels hurt from standing for 10 hours. Two foul balls have jarred his face mask. Another dinged his shoulder.

Still, it has been enjoyable work, keeping Jeffers connected to a game he has loved since first playing it at age 5 and continuing through his years at Madison-Plains High School.

And for the most part, his day at Berliner has been "tame," in the words of Greg Scheck, a 20-year veteran umpire and the teenager's partner this day.

No more ejections followed the first game. Few decisions were disputed, although a balk Scheck called in the second game caused Jeffers to phone Patton for a ruling.

Peace continues through his sixth and final game, with only a smidgen of grumbling greeting the third strike he calls to end his work day at 8:25 p.m.

"Where was that last pitch?" the losing coach asks Jeffers.

"Outside corner," the ump replies.

The two shake hands and part.

Jeffers, shirttail out and cap tipped back, is almost home free.

But the adult coach mutters a parting shot.

"It looked wide."

Chasing a myth

Blinded by dreams, young athletes pursue long-shot scholarships

Wednesday, September 1, 2010 02:52 AM

By Todd Jones, Mike Wagner and Jill Riepenhoff

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

His lower back ached, but the words painted on the red wall nearby encouraged the child to push on with his workout.

"Pain is weakness leaving the body," says the slogan at D1 Columbus, a sports-training center on the Far North Side.

Alonzo Booth, 11, wiped sweat from his head, pursed his lips and hoisted a 45-pound weight-training bar as the sun set on an April school night.

"I like training here. It's fun," he said. "It's helped my speed and my arms."

His goal is to play in the National Football League.

A college scholarship is part of the dream, too.

"If I can get anything (for Alonzo), it would be a free education, either by academics or sports," said Latonia Booth, his single mother who works as a customer-service representative at Verizon Wireless **.**

The Canal Winchester family is like many in central Ohio. A *Dispatch* survey of more than 1,000 area high-school students last fall showed that earning a college scholarship was among the top two motivating forces for playing youth sports outside of school.

Parents and children are tempted to mine for some of the nearly $2 billion in scholarship money available in men's and women's collegiate athletics. But for most, it's fool's gold.

The NCAA says that less than 4 percent of the 7.5 million participants in high-school sports in the U.S. will receive full or partial athletic scholarships to college.

"It's like buying a lottery ticket," said Sandy Baum, an economics professor at Skidmore College in Saratoga, N.Y., and an expert on financial aid.

With athletic scholarships few and far between, Alonzo trains year-round, six days a week, either with a personal trainer or in practice for playing football, soccer and basketball.

"It takes sacrifice," said his mother. "It's not like 20 years ago and you could just get by on talent. There's a lot of talent out there. You got to work that talent and mature it."

She's ready to make a parental sacrifice to support her son's football dream.

Latonia began planning months ago to have Alonzo move to Mobile, Ala., to live with a personal trainer for the last six months of this year.

"It's my son's decision," Latonia said. "It's what he wants. I'm going for it."

* * *

Hundreds of families spent a gorgeous May day hunkered down inside a vast Columbus Convention Center hall filled with volleyball games raging on 48 temporary courts.

The Ohio Valley Region USA 2010 Girls Volleyball Championships was the type of tournament that OSU coaches had in mind when nearly 80 percent of them said in the *Dispatch* survey of athletes and coaches that youth-sports events provide the most fertile recruiting ground.

Amid the cheers and whistles, Steve Julian and his wife, Christine, smiled as their middle daughter, Abby, 13, launched a serve.

The Lewis Center couple enjoy and support their four kids' participation in sports, emphasizing the need to have fun while striving to reach potential.

The Julians aren't playing with the goal of earning an athletic scholarship to college.

"It would be a complete bonus," said Steve Julian, an accountant. "When you go to some of these tournaments and look around, you realize they'd have to be one of the best kids."

For girls, an athletic scholarship is most elusive in volleyball, according to a *Dispatch* analysis of data from the NCAA and National Federation of State High School Associations.

About 115,500 high-school senior girls played volleyball in the U.S. during the 2008-09 school year, and there were about 4,700 full or partial athletic scholarships available in that sport.

"Most parents don't have a clue of the odds of kids playing past high school," said Chris Stankovich, a licensed clinical counselor who works with athletes. "If people knew, they would put sports back into the context of a balanced life."

Instead, many families travel the country, enrolling their children in camps and tournaments with the hope of being spotted by college recruiters.

The Julians faced decisions about increasing time and money commitments, especially now that their three daughters have advanced from recreation-league volleyball to club level.

They have ruled out national travel for now. Regional volleyball events are enough.

"Some people do (youth sports) just for the social reasons," said Christine, a Franklin County assistant prosecutor. "Some are very intense. We try to be realistic about it."

* * *

Latonia Booth's phone nearly explodes with calls and texts from about 20 local youth-football coaches trying to recruit her son Alonzo.

They ask to meet him, to talk to him.

"I say, 'Dude, he's 11!'" Latonia said. "You feel good that everybody wants him to play for them. On the other hand, he's like prey. You think, 'Man, is it that serious?'"

Nearly three-quarters of Ohio State coaches who responded to the *Dispatch* survey said they don't start following athletes until they are 15 or 16 years old. The other quarter take notice of kids between the ages of 11 and 14.

USC football coach Lane Kiffin offered a scholarship this spring to a 13-year-old quarterback from the state of Delaware. The boy said yes in a nonbinding commitment.

Families see no time to waste in pursuit of scholarships when college scouting services begin ranking players at the sixth-grade level.

So the Booth family packed up in late June to drive their sixth-grader to Pensacola, Fla., for his third consecutive year in the Offense-Defense Football Camps.

At the end of that four-day national camp, the family planned to drop off Alonzo in Mobile, Ala., where he'd live until December with personal trainer Andrew Thomas and his wife and two kids.

"The football will be harder and better than Ohio's," Alonzo said. "I'll have to work harder. I want a better chance to go to the NFL or make it. It'll give me a better chance to get a scholarship."

Latonia met Thomas through out-of-state camps and both said they consider each other like family. Alonzo has grown close to Thomas' 12-year-old son, and they planned to play on the same youth-football team this fall.

Thomas owns and runs Development and Preparation Sports, which trains kids and educates families on how to academically qualify for college. He trains about 85 kids in Mobile and others elsewhere in Alabama, and in Georgia and Tennessee.

Alonzo would be the fourth child to live and train with Thomas, who said that last year he trained 22 high-school seniors and 18 of them received college scholarships.

Last year, Latonia paid for Thomas to fly from Alabama to Columbus to train Alonzo for a weekend. She also paid $200 for his hotel and paid him a $475 fee.

"Sometimes, we have to do something normal people don't do - or do something that is outside the box - to benefit our kids," Thomas said.

Still, Latonia briefly welled with tears minutes before heading south in June.

The youngest of her four children soon would be living more than 800 miles away for six months.

"He's my baby, so it's going to be hard," she said. "I'm doing it for him."

* * *

Michael Arp is grateful that he received scholarship money to play baseball, and he said that if it weren't for his athletic aid, he probably wouldn't have been able to attend Ohio State.

But he can attest to how the money a family invests in youth sports doesn't necessarily lead to financial freedom in college.

Arp's family spent about $18,000 for him to play nine years of travel youth baseball, up through his graduation from Reynoldsburg.

Ohio State gave Arp a scholarship, but it was worth only about 20 percent of his tuition during each of his five years because the team divided a total of 11.5 full scholarships among 35 to 40 players.

"I had rent, groceries and the rest of school (books and fees) to pay for," said Arp, a 2010 OSU graduate and starter his final two seasons. "I've got $50,000 to $60,000 in student loans to pay back."

The vast majority of athletes recruited to play college sports will not receive a full-ride grant-in-aid, which typically would pay the full cost of tuition, room, board and books only at Division I schools.

And for boys, nearly two-thirds of all college athletic scholarships - year-to-year contracts that can be ended by the school at any time, for any reason - are awarded to football and basketball players.

"In many other (sports), if you're among the lucky few who receive some (scholarship) money, there are still going to be some financial requirements on the parents," said NCAA vice president Kevin Lennon.

About 80 percent of all athletes during the 2008-09 school year received only partial scholarships that could have ranged from a few hundred to several thousand dollars, according to analysis of NCAA data.

In the *Dispatch* survey, 58 percent of OSU's athletes who responded said they receive scholarships that cover less than 25 percent of their college expenses.

Still, Arp is amazed at how many families have misconceptions about an athletic scholarship being a golden ticket to a free education.

"A lot of parents are getting ahead of themselves and only looking at the big picture and not the process," he said.

* * *

Shortly before Alonzo Booth's planned trip to Alabama, his mom saw something that bothered her.

It hit her while her family watched Alonzo participate in the Offense-Defense Football Camps at Pensacola, Fla., in late June.

"It was an awful camp," Latonia said. "Half the coaches didn't know what they were doing. The coaches were just there for the money. They didn't care about the kids."

She had paid $760 for Alonzo to take part in the four-day camp, and her family had spent another $445 on a hotel room.

Latonia left Florida with that weighing on her mind.

So when she got to Alabama, she didn't stop.

A mother's instinct had won over a child's exuberance. She would not send her 11-year-old son to live with another family so far from home.

She decided it was best for Alonzo to remain with his family in Canal Winchester.

"It was OK that I didn't go," Alonzo said.

"It's like playing a board game - do I send him here or there?" Latonia said. "You got to make the right move. You're always thinking, 'Where does he go from here? Does he need to do this? Is this benefiting him?' "

She now wonders what to do next to best support her son's goal of earning a scholarship and playing in the NFL.In the past year, she spent about $5,000 on Alonzo for national football camps, an all-star-game trip to Myrtle Beach, S.C., fees for three sports, training at D1 Columbus and athletic merchandise.

"There's a lot of financial stress," said Latonia, who works as many as 60 hours a week. "You want him to have every opportunity available to him, but that's where the pressure is."

The cost of such love and support is felt by many families dreaming of athletic scholarships. A third of high-school students surveyed by *T he Dispatch* said that their parents spent more than $1,500 a year on youth sports.

"He's worth all the money. Anything he wants to do to get better is fine with me," Latonia said.

For now, she has her son with her, and she is grateful. The sixth-grader at Canal Winchester Middle School is playing with friends in a local youth-football league.

And he's wearing new cleats and a new helmet that cost a total of $405.

Lax oversight leaves nonprofits vulnerable

Wednesday, September 1, 2010 02:51 AM

By Jill Riepenhoff

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

NEWARK, Ohio - The bright sunshine was no match for the howling winds. Hundreds of young ballplayers and their families looked for anything that offered warmth on opening day of the Mound City Little League.

At the concession stand, league director Charlie Baker sat for hours dispensing hot chocolate with a huge grin on his face. Cha-ching! Cha-ching! Each cup sold that day - and there were hundreds - brought the league a little closer to meeting its annual $75,000 budget.

That concession stand at the S. Second Street field near downtown has been manned by Baker and his family for more than three decades. Its profits pay for nearly 800 boys and girls in Licking County to play baseball and softball free of charge.

"I've coached plenty of guys who played here," said Dave Klontz, head baseball coach at Heath High School. "We're grateful to have something as enduring and as important as Mound City. Our program (at Heath) would not be what it was if not for this program."

Among approximately 1,200 nonprofit youth-sports organizations in Ohio, Mound City is an anomaly in that there are no player fees. It is fully funded - including uniforms and some equipment - by the profits from the concession stand, an annual fundraiser and the generosity of local businesses that sponsor teams.

Most youth-sports teams and leagues in Ohio are nonprofits that operate with money generated by a pay-to-play system.

Across the state, those organizations annually collect at least $60 million, mostly from the pockets of parents.

The amount of money pouring into youth-sports organizations in Ohio has more than doubled since 2000 when adjusted for inflation, according a *Dispatch* analysis of federal tax returns. During that time, about 250 new leagues were formed.

A true financial accounting, though, is impossible because more than half of the organizations aren't required to file tax forms with the Internal Revenue Service because their revenues are less than $25,000.

In those cases, parents are afforded no government-required accounting of how their fees are spent.

Ohio law requires nonprofits to file financial documents with the attorney general's office annually if they are required to file federal tax forms. But nearly two-thirds of the 1,200 youth-sports organizations have not complied, a *Dispatch* analysis of 2010 data from the attorney general's office found.

"We want these organizations to register, not only because it's the law but (also because) it allows people to have more transparency about them," Attorney General Richard Cordray said.

He acknowledges that the office's charitable-law section has been lax in enforcement because of the antiquated way it has handled registrations for decades. By late fall, registrations will be handled online. Then the office will have current information about which organizations are not complying.

Most leagues are established by well-intentioned volunteers who quickly find themselves overwhelmed with the day-to-day duties of orchestrating dozens, if not hundreds, of sporting events.

Some are unaware of the consequences for dropping the ball on their fiduciary obligations.

The largest nonprofit youth-sports league in the state found itself on the brink of losing its tax-free status this year because it had not filed a return since 2004.

With a $2 million budget, the Olentangy Youth Athletic Association is run by three paid employees who administer the league's events for about 8,000 kids. Executive Director Tim Stegner admitted that financial paperwork didn't seem a priority when so many other duties needed attention.

The league has since filed three years' worth of tax returns, filed an extension on its 2009 paperwork and vowed better accountability.

Mound City, in Newark, operates under the watchful eye of Baker, an accountant, and a board of commissioners that must approve any purchase over $50.

Baker, who has been involved with the league for more than 50 years, is a stickler for accountability. The league is registered with the secretary of state, the attorney general and the IRS, all required by law.

He knows how unwieldy and overwhelming the management of the league could become without diligence on the details. He spends every summer day, except Sundays, at the baseball complex.

He devotes his summer to the league because he says every child deserves a chance to swing a bat, steal third and shag a fly ball.

But without proper oversight, some leagues find themselves victims of theft and, in some cases, broke.

In the past 10 years, people have embezzled at least $428,000 from youth-sports groups in Ohio, according to news accounts.

Those adults were trusted to care for the checkbooks but instead siphoned money for themselves.

Parents with a small Cardington youth-baseball league learned it was broke when one received a bank notice that the account had a zero balance in 2008.

Parents called police, who determined that the league's treasurer had drained $7,500 through 28 ATM withdrawals and kept cash from fundraisers.

Despite regular meetings and financial updates, board members had no idea what was happening because the treasurer provided them with phony financial statements. The treasurer eventually was convicted for felony theft.

Two years ago in Mansfield, the board of the Johnny Appleseed Youth Soccer Association settled a lawsuit against its former president for about $5,000. The league accused her of misspending about $6,000.

"The checks and balances that most businesses run by just aren't there" with many nonprofits, said Jeffrey Kramer, the league's attorney. "If you're a league director, you have a fiduciary duty to be a good steward of the resources."

The largest known embezzlement of youth-sports funds in Ohio to date cost the Mentor Youth Football League more than $50,000.

A trusted local lawyer and accountant bled the league dry over four years. He spent money on meals, dry cleaning, gasoline, flowers and vacations. "He was using our funds for his recreational needs," said David Baranski, the group's president.

The lawyer was sentenced to four months in jail for felony theft.

League officials estimate the total cost of the theft exceeds $100,000 because of cash that never made it to the bank after big fundraising events. Police documented $50,000 stolen through credit-card transactions.

When the theft came to light, the league was $40,000 in debt and had only $2,000 in the bank. If not for the generosity of local businesses who donated money and creditors who took rain checks, the league may have collapsed.

It had to make cuts to keep afloat and raised the pay-to-play fee by $5 to $95. Before the theft, the league thought it was so financially sound that it was going to allow kids to play free.

Today, the league has regained its financial stability.

But "we don't have trust anymore," Baranski said. At least two people oversee all financial duties: counting cash, writing checks and making deposits.

"It's amazing how much money we can generate when no one's stealing from us," Baranski said.

At Mound City this summer, Baker felt the sting for his own league. Someone had paid for a soda with a counterfeit $20 bill. Baker didn't know about the fraud until he went to make a bank deposit.

Despite the nominal amount stolen, Baker shook his head in disbelief and thought to himself, "I don't know how someone can steal from kids."

OHSAA offers youth-sports oversight

Sunday, September 5, 2010 03:01 AM

By Jill Riepenhoff, Todd Jones and Mike Wagner

The governing body for Ohio high-school athletics is so concerned about the physical, emotional and financial toll in youth sports that it offered last week to provide uniform regulation to protect hundreds of thousands of children involved in nonschool programs.

Ohio High School Athletic Association officials sketched out uniform standards for youth sports in reaction to a five-day series by *The Dispatch* that examined the virtually unregulated $5 billion industry.

"There's a willingness. There's a template in place," said Dan Ross, executive director of the high-school association. "It would be better for the kids. It needs to be under somebody's umbrella; we have a system that works pretty well."

But to take on such a massive responsibility, the association would need more money, staff and power from Ohio lawmakers.

Gov. Ted Strickland and some of the state's high-ranking athletic officials agree that it's time to explore the regulation of youth sports.

The leader of the nation's largest collegiate athletics department said that the federal government, the NCAA and the National Federation of State High School Associations also should help in the effort.

"We have done a disservice to our children and their families, because we have allowed the structure to grow into what it is," said Ohio State University athletic director Gene Smith. "We have had all these cottage industries pop up and convince families they have to fly to Connecticut or go to Vegas to compete against the best. I think it's a flawed system."

The *Dispatch* series "Little Leagues, Big Costs" found that youth sports are fraught with dangers because they lack uniform standards and oversight. Children are more susceptible than ever to injury, families spend thousands of dollars chasing elusive scholarships, and adults sometimes mar the experience with unruly and even criminal behavior.

The current landscape of youth sports in the U.S. - year-round play, specialization and travel - is pocked with physical, emotional and financial minefields for the estimated 40 million young athletes and their families.

Ohio has as many as 2 million children who are eligible to play youth sports, and many young athletes feel pressured to play year-round if they want to play their sport in high school or earn a college scholarship.

Patient loads have tripled at sports-medicine clinics that treat young athletes.

The amount of money pouring into youth-sports organizations has doubled in the past decade in Ohio to about $60 million, a sign of both the increasing number of participants and higher player fees.

Strickland said state leaders should examine how they can make the system better.

"When too great of an emphasis is placed on excelling and winning - whether to be competitive for a scholarship or a professional career - there can be serious consequences, including permanent injury or too much stress for a young person to handle," Strickland said in a written statement to *The Dispatch*.

"As leaders, we need to ask ourselves if there are any common-sense changes that should be made to ensure the right set of priorities are in place in youth sports."

The Ohio High School Athletic Association is a nonprofit organization founded in the early 1900s to help unify rules and improve athletes' safety. It governs athletics at more than 1,600 public and private high schools and in seventh and eighth grades.

Some central Ohio youth-sports organizations are willing to listen and meet with the OHSAA to hear ideas about how it could govern children's sports not affiliated with schools.

"It's a good idea because they've got structure," said Jim Link, athletic director for Dublin Youth Athletics, an organization he has been with for 28 years. "It's something I would listen to, see what they've got in mind, and see if it makes sense.

"I don't want to repeat mistakes (made by the OHSAA), but it makes sense if they want to step up and provide some leadership. That would be terrific," Link said.

Youth sports are currently run by cities, nonprofit organizations, for-profit companies and individuals. Some youth-sports leaders require criminal-background checks and training for their coaches and referees. Some don't.

Most have the children's best interests at heart. Some put limits on practices, games and behavior. Some don't.

Some create all-star teams to travel coast to coast with children barely out of first grade.

"All of this grew from the loss of funding in K-12 (kindergarten through 12th grade) for athletic programs," Smith said. "It created the cottage industry we have today. In my view, you go back to the educators" at high-school athletic associations.

Smith said that today's youth-sports culture makes it easier and cheaper for college coaches to recruit talent. It provides one-stop shopping at large youth-sports events.

"I'm coming from the position of a person who has been in athletics for 25 years," said Smith, a father of four and grandfather of two. "If I was talking as the athletics director, I'd say, 'leave it alone.'"

Some involved with youth sports would echo that thought.

The president of the Mid-Ohio Select Soccer League - under the national governing umbrella of USA Soccer - said an organization that oversees all of youth sports is not economically feasible.

"I don't see an overarching need for that," Jim Sturm said. "That very well may be a proverbial solution in search of a problem."

With proper funding, the state high-school athletic association said it could certify and train coaches, perform background checks, suspend rogue teams or leagues, enforce standardized game rules, establish financial guidelines and develop a training program to help prevent injuries.

Doing more to protect children from injuries should be high on any potential list of reforms, according to the doctors and athletic trainers who have seen the injury rates in youth sports skyrocket.

Those in the medical community agree that the first step is to increase awareness and education about injury risk to individual leagues, coaches and parents.

"We didn't grow up like this with kids pushing themselves year-round and their bodies past their limits," said Dr. Thomas Pommering, chief of sports medicine at Nationwide Children's Hospital. "It's vital that families and coaches have the important information on what to look for with injuries and how to handle them if they occur."

Mandating some type of injury-recognition training for all of youth sports, with a specific focus on concussions, is another regulatory step that could be taken.

"Everyone should know what a concussion is; it's one of the most dangerous injuries in sports," said Dr. Kelsey Logan, pediatric sports-medicine specialist at OSU. "The training doesn't have to be hours and hours. It can be done through video or podcast or something. If it's a broken arm, I can cast it. But I can't do anything to make a brain heal."

Experts also agree that they need a system to track injuries in youth sports similar to the one that tracks injuries to high-school athletes. A national injury surveillance program could be operated for about $150,000 annually, said R. Dawn Comstock, the epidemiologist who runs the system from Children's Hospital.

With more injury data and prevention at the youth-sports level, colleges might see less-damaged athletes when they arrive on campus. OSU's Smith said the university spent $113,000 to repair the shoulder of just one junior female athlete, and that doesn't account for the medical bills paid by her family.

"We get so many people here with pre-existing injuries," Smith said. "Sometimes it flares up the second they get here."

Ross said that a first step would be to require leagues and teams to adopt OHSAA's mission of promoting academics, the safety of participants and good citizenship.

"Our focus is about students," Ross said. "Our focus isn't creating the next level of NBA players."

Former NBA player Bob Bigelow agrees that youth sports need a watchdog, because too many teams are coached by well-meaning but ill-qualified parents.

"I always ask, 'How many people took English in high schools and now think they can teach it?'" said Bigelow, who wrote the book *Just Let The Kids Play*.

Dan Gould, director of the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports at Michigan State University, said that government agencies could lessen the financial burden on local youth-sports groups by providing coach training and background checks.

"The flip side is, maybe the government is not the group to do it because they screw up everything," he said.

Gould said changes should start at the local level.

"The people of Columbus could form a youth-sports commission," he said. "People could come and start by talking about common problems. Some people won't want to come, and some would be horses' rear-ends like you have in city government. But if you got half of the groups in Columbus talking, you'd have 50 percent more talking than are talking now."

In April, representatives from Dublin Youth Athletics, the Olentangy Youth Athletic Association and the Worthington Youth Boosters met to discuss common issues and problems among their leagues.

"It was really beneficial. Each of us is dealing with the same things but with different policies and procedures," said Tim Stegner, executive director of the Olentangy Youth Athletic Association, the largest non-profit youth group in central Ohio. "Each of us out there has our own organization. We have a pretty decent hierarchy internally, but it kind of ends here. We are on our own; there is no national group or state group."

Link and Stegner hope that more discussions, such as the April meeting, occur between more leaders of youth-sports groups and others who share an interest.

"We all have the same basic objectives," Link said. "How we get there may be in different ways. But we're all trying to make our sports programs better so that the kids have a positive experience.

"You've got to start someplace. I think this is a good time" to meet, he said. "There is no bad time. What are we waiting for? Some tragedy to occur?"