

The kids are alright

Youth athletes themselves couldn't be happier. But do they know what's best?

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*Images*Everyone's convinced that the youth sports arms race is ruining our kids (and our country).

TYLER WARD'S ENTIRE life can be summed up in one word: soccer. At the age of 2, his mother enrolled him in a toddler soccer class that was affiliated with one of the better clubs in Manhattan, because that's what mothers of 2-year-olds in New York City do. At the age of 3, Tyler started playing for real -- or at least as real as soccer in Pull-Ups can be. Two years later, having already shown some proclivity for the beautiful game, young Tyler was identified as one of the 15 best players on the 6-and-under team (U6, for the unindoctrinated) and was selected for his club's pre-travel program. Yes, there really is such a thing.

At age 7, Tyler got his first taste of travel soccer. He was advanced enough that he was able to play with and against mostly 8-year-olds as part of his club's U8 travel team. "That's when it started to get serious," says his father, Kevin Ward, an Ivy League grad who works in the finance sector. (*Ed. note: Kevin and Tyler Ward are aliases, as both father and son wished to remain anonymous for this story.*) Following Tyler's U9 year, Kevin moved his son to a different soccer club that's generally perceived as one of the most elite groups on the East Coast. Ever since the switch, Tyler, who's now 11, has continued to flourish on the field. He's a standout among standouts, one of the best players on the U11-A team (there are four U11 teams; A is the highest level, D the lowest). Last year, he nearly made it into the U.S. Youth Soccer Olympic Development Program, advancing all the way to the fourth and final tryout phase before getting cut.

During the fall and spring seasons, Tyler's team practices on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. They play games on Sundays, and when there's a tournament of some consequence, which there frequently is, the team also practices on Fridays. This past fall, Tyler made his travel league's select squad, an additional commitment that required him to commute to New Jersey -- an hour and a half each way -- for practice every other Monday evening. If you're keeping score at home, Tyler reports to the pitch as many as six days a week, or about as frequently as most adults report to work. Unlike grown-ups, though, Tyler and his teammates don't get sick

days. Miss one single practice, and they're expected make it up on a different day. Miss too many, and they're likely to get demoted to one of the lower-level teams.

In the winter, when the A-team scales down to just two practices a week and a handful of tournaments, Kevin supplements his son's soccer intake by having him play futsal -- a modified version of indoor soccer -- one day a week, and also in a recreational league with a bunch of school friends another day (Kevin is the coach). During the summer, Kevin takes his son to Europe, where he's enrolled in soccer camp for two weeks. Italy, France, the Netherlands -- soccer, soccer, soccer. For Tyler Ward, the offseason is a myth. Futbol is a full-time job.

Of the approximately 40 million children who play youth sports in America, many are like Tyler Ward. And to some observers, these highly programmed, highly specialized athletes are in danger, both physically and mentally -- cautionary tales just waiting to happen. To others, these youngsters are well on their way to superstardom -- success stories in the making. But what do the kids themselves think?

This past spring, ESPN The Magazine commissioned a University of Florida research group, led by professor Michael Sagas, to design a groundbreaking study of elite youth athletes, asking them to tell us exactly how they feel about their sports. Judging by the results of the survey, which was administered to 1,250 high-level athletes (i.e., travel, club, select) ages 10 to 18, across nine different sports in 11 states, the kids are all right. They're more than all right, actually. They are positively giddy. To be exact, 96 percent of them said they really enjoy their sports. Some of them play team games (baseball, basketball, lacrosse, soccer, softball, volleyball), while others go the individual route (archery, swimming, tennis). Some were multisport athletes, others specialists. But the common thread is that, for the most part, they're all loving life. And why wouldn't they? After all, they're experiencing sports almost like the pros do.

"I like going to the hotel and seeing hot chicks and eating free food," wrote one of the survey's respondents, a 14-year-old baseball player from Florida, when asked what he liked most about playing travel sports. "I like staying in hotels and going shopping in different places," a 10-year-old swimmer from in Pennsylvania wrote.

"You get to go away from your parents and have fun," a 14-year-old softball player from Texas wrote. "It's amazing to play at this level," Tyler Ward says. Although he wasn't among the 1,250 kids in the Florida study, he's highly representative of the survey group. He recalls playing in a rec league where they didn't even keep score. "It's frustrating when you're trying your hardest and the other kids on your team are making bad passes and not taking it seriously. In travel soccer, it's more intense -- everybody wants to win."

Then there are the fringe benefits. Like playing in a tourney at South Jersey's Tuckahoe Turf Farm (which Tyler and the A-team did recently), where the grass is so lush that seven MLB teams have purchased it for use in their stadiums. Or wearing uniforms that feature better, thicker socks, an Adidas logo, and the letters W-A-R-D in block letters. Says Tyler: "It's awesome to have your name printed on the back of your jersey. It feels more professional."

Therein lies the twist: From psychologists to orthopedists, educators to parents, the experts claim that the professionalization of youth sports -- the year-round schedule, the private training, the early specialization -- is ruining our nation's youth. Meanwhile, the kids themselves say in no uncertain terms that the professionalization of youth sports is precisely why they love doing what they do. The million-dollar question is: Who are the real experts?



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*Courtesy of Soccer Without Borders*Ninety-six percent of kids surveyed said they really enjoy playing their sport.

The million-dollar answer is, it depends. In the case of Chase Bly, you could make a very strong case for the child as expert. A 19-year-old high school senior from Sewickley, Pa. (12 miles north of Pittsburgh), Chase played baseball and soccer during his elementary school years. Around the time he got to middle school, he caught the lacrosse bug, and during the summer after eighth grade, he attended a lacrosse camp at Princeton, where he noticed that all the best players were wearing the same green-and-white shorts. That's because they all played for Greene Turtle, a club team based out of Baltimore, the unofficial lacrosse capital of the world. "They were all crazy-good," Chase says, "and I wanted to be at that elite level." He wanted it so badly that the following winter, without consulting his parents, he emailed Greene Turtle's coach and arranged for a tryout in Baltimore (a Pittsburgh-area coach who Chase had been training with drove him down). Lo and behold, the kid from Western Pa. ended up making the team.

After explaining to his folks just how much the game meant to him (by that point, he'd already decided that playing Division I lacrosse was one of his goals in life), Chase spent the next three summers -- the club lax season typically runs from mid-June through July -- commuting from Pittsburgh to Baltimore on a regular basis. Every Tuesday and Thursday, he and his mother, Laurie, would hop in her 2005 GMC Denali and make the four-and-a-half-hour trek southeast to Charm City for 6 p.m. practice. Following Greene Turtle's typical two-and-a-half-hour workout, they'd pile back into the Denali and schlep all the way back to Pittsburgh. On the way down, Chase usually slept. On the return trip, he'd either talk to his mom or catch up on his summer reading. They were lucky if they got back home by 2 a.m.

Through it all, like a savvy diner at an all-you-can-eat restaurant, Chase made a concerted effort to sample as many offerings as he could from the sports menu. Freshman year, he made his high school's varsity basketball team. Sophomore year, it was cross country. Junior year, he played squash. None of them held a candle to lacrosse. "It's the fastest game on two feet," says Chase, a 6'2", 190-pound defender who fulfilled his goal this past September when he verbally committed to play at Richmond. "You can be physical, but you need finesse. I also love that it's a team sport -- you have to work together."

During the spring high school season, when winning or losing one game can make or break the team, Chase plays for the thrill of competition: "I want to be holding a trophy in my hand." During the summer club season, it's more about the camaraderie: "I love talking to my friends at halftime and hanging out with them after the game." Regardless of the reason, the bottom line is that Chase Bly loves lacrosse. And as far as he's concerned, that passion is key when it comes to youth sports. "If you truly love the sport, then you won't get burned out." The problem is, not all love is created equal.

"Just because the kids are loving it doesn't mean it's what's best for them," says Kristen Dieffenbach, a sport psychology consultant at West Virginia University. "If you put them in the kitchen and tell them they can have whatever they want, they'd eat nothing but pizza, chicken wings, burgers and hot dogs."

Of course, most parents don't let their children run amok in the kitchen. But unfortunately, where there are sports, there are dollars -- in the form of college scholarships and pro contracts. And where there are dollars, there are parents willing to look the other way, regardless of whether they're doing a disservice to their children. "As the adults in charge," Dieffenbach says, "we have a responsibility to ask ourselves this: In the interest of our kids' long-term development, are we doing all we can do?"

For Chase Bly, who played anything and everything before ultimately settling on a sport of his own choosing at a developmentally appropriate age, the answer is yes. As for other, less well-rounded youth athletes, the answer is probably not.

"I feel so bad for kids like that," says Bob Bigelow, a former NBA player and author of the book *Just Let The Kids Play*. "They've had their childhood robbed of them so their parents can create another athletic Frankenstein. By the time they get to high school, those kids will be skateboarding and smoking pot." While Bigelow may be sensationalizing, the data seems to support his burnout theory: In the Florida study, 96.7 percent of athletes ages 10-15 reported loving their sport, compared with only 93.2 percent of those ages 16-18. While not a huge drop-off, the numbers do suggest that the longer these young athletes ply their trade, the less they tend to enjoy it. In fact, the oldest athletes in the study (18 years) reported a survey-low 85 percent approval rating.

Burnout is just one of the reasons that Bigelow, who's spent the last two decades as a youth sports advocate, is a devout proponent of the Long-Term Athletic Development model (LTAD). Developed by Canadian sport science expert Istvan Balyi, LTAD preaches that when it comes to all team sports and even certain individual ones (tennis, track, cycling), generalizing at the younger ages -- playing a variety of different sports in low-pressure environments -- is the healthiest and best way for kids to grow. According to Balyi, early specialization should be strictly reserved for sports like figure skating, gymnastics and diving, anomalous disciplines in which lower center of gravity, shorter levers (legs and trunk), and lower muscle mass -- not to mention a lack of fear -- are advantageous. "In the early specialization sports," says Balyi, "if you don't start young, you don't stand a chance." Not so for the late-specialization sports. Despite not playing basketball until the ninth grade, Bigelow still managed to make it to the NBA. Not surprisingly, he maintains that prepubescent athletic ability is meaningless when it comes to postpubescent athletic success. "Your little soccer star might have played 3,000 soccer games by the time he's 10 years old, but he's still only 4-foot-9 and 85 pounds." In other words, he contends, puberty is the great equalizer, and there's no telling what will happen to kids (or more importantly, to their peers) once the hormones kick in.

But according to U.S. Youth Soccer, which invests precious resources into an Olympic Development Program that starts weeding kids out as early as age 11, there's value in early tactical development, especially in a sport where size isn't everything. "Speed and power may not come into play until after puberty, but agility, balance and coordination do," says Sam Snow, director of coaching education for U.S. Youth Soccer. "Our technical approach is the same as what the national team works on. It's intended to be part of the ladder of getting to the highest level."

That highest level is the pot of gold that has so many of today's parents allowing, and in some cases pushing, their youngsters to specialize at such an early age. Nearly 40 percent of our survey respondents were already one-trick ponies. For that, we can thank Tiger, Malcolm and the Joneses.

In 1997, at the tender age of 21, Tiger Woods collected a \$486,000 paycheck when he won the Masters, his first major golf championship. The following week, TV screens across the country showed the same video clip over and over: Two-year-old Tiger whacking a golf ball in front of Mike Douglas and Bob Hope. In a country where college scholarships can amount to hundreds of thousands of dollars and pro contracts are worth hundreds of millions, parents started doing the math. "That right there," says Bigelow, "was the death knell of LTAD in America."

Eleven years later, Malcolm Gladwell penned *Outliers*, the best-selling book, which popularized the theory that it takes 10,000 hours of practice to master a given activity. Parents continued doing the math. More than anything though, what seems to be driving youth sports over the edge is an undeniable need to keep up with the Joneses.

"Nowadays, if you want to play a sport at the highest level, you're expected to play it year-round," says Kevin Ward, who was told that very thing when Tyler started playing for his soccer club's A-team. As a result of that all-in mentality, there seems to be this universal fear among parents that if their kids don't start training like pros in elementary school, then by the time high school tryouts come around, they won't even be able to make the cut -- passed over in favor of cohorts who've been specializing for years.

"At 13 or 14, it's too late," says Gary Pinkney, director of AAU basketball program Maryland's Finest. In 2012, Pinkney's second-grade squad won the U8 national championship (again, there is such a thing), and last season it finished second with a roster that featured three second-graders who play basketball, and only basketball, 12 months a year. "Seven or 8 years old is where it starts," Pinkney says. "If you don't start putting in the work then, you're not doing what you need to do to succeed these in sports these days."

It's that very perception that continues to feed the specialization craze, which in turn fuels the ever-expanding youth sports industry. And yes, it is an industry. "These people are incentivized to make money year-round," says one New York sports dad, an attorney who prefers not to have his name used for this story because he is still active in the youth sports community. "The private lessons are out of control." The attorney's 11-year-old son plays elite baseball and used to frequent a training center where one of the instructors, a former professional pitcher who appeared in exactly two major leagues games, charged an eye-popping \$300 for each one-hour private session. Youth sports has become such big business that parents are even willing to shell out dough for private training that has no connection to any particular sport. In 2005, when Bill Parisi started franchising his speed and agility clinics, he had four locations. Eight-plus years later, the Parisi Speed School has grown to 76 shops nationwide and generates between \$10 to \$20 million in annual revenue. "Parents are bringing their kids in to give them the best opportunity to achieve their potential," says Parisi, who estimates that 65 percent of his business is comprised of 8-to-12 year olds.

It's gotten to the point where parents are investing so much time and money that they're even taking out insurance on their stars. Harvard orthopedist Lyle Micheli, who in April 2013 founded the Micheli Center for Sports Injury Prevention, says that his new clinic sees 30 young athletes a week. Their parents pay \$250 for a two-and-a-half-hour session in which their children are put through a series of diagnostic tests, then receive preventative maintenance tips based on the results. As surreal as the idea seems, it's born out of a very real and growing problem: overuse injuries in elite youth athletes.

Last April, Tyler Ward and his soccer club were playing in a Sunday league game out on Long Island. Several of the A-teamers were either late arriving or didn't show, and as a result Tyler barely came off the field. Midway through the game, he felt a sharp pain in his right knee. The next day, Kevin Ward and his son sat in an office at Manhattan's Hospital for Special Surgery and listened as an orthopedist told them that Tyler, who was just 10 years old at the time, was suffering from patellar tendinitis. That week, Tyler didn't practice. The following Sunday he played without discomfort, but in June, during a weekend tournament in which he played four games in two days, the pain returned. The Wards made another visit to the Hospital for Special Surgery. There were X-rays, and this time, the diagnosis was more specific: The pain in Tyler's knee was a result of Sinding-Larsen-Johansson Syndrome -- essentially, pediatric patellar tendinitis -- which is inflammation of the tendon that connects the tibia to the kneecap. It is most common in activities that involve heavy doses of running and jumping -- sports like tennis, volleyball, basketball and, of course, soccer. It's a textbook overuse injury.

Make no mistake: Tyler Ward loves soccer. He wasn't one of the 1,250 elite youth athletes we surveyed, but if he were, he would've no doubt been among the 96 percent who told us that they really enjoy playing their sport. His goal in life is to become a professional soccer player. His favorite player is the famous Spanish midfielder,

Xavi. He spends what little free time he has in the basement gym of his family's Upper West Side apartment perfecting his juggling skills (his personal best is 1,288 touches without the ball hitting the ground). He's crazy for the game and he'll tell you straight to your face. "As far back as I can remember, I've always loved playing soccer."

Of course, he doesn't remember when he was 2 years old. He doesn't remember when his mother unilaterally decided that toddler soccer class would be a fine activity for her first-born child. So what if he was still in diapers? He doesn't remember when his father dropped in on one of those early sessions and, after watching his son shine, went home and told his wife, "Sweetie, we may have something here."

All of this is not to say that Tyler Ward wouldn't have eventually stumbled upon soccer on his own, or that if and when he did, he wouldn't have excelled. He very well might have. But who's to say that he wouldn't have been even better at hockey or tennis or swimming? Or chess or piano, for that matter?

Unfortunately, when it comes to youth sports these days, balance is a four-letter word, scoffed at by uber-motivated parents who recite the same lines over and over, literally verbatim -- words fed to them by travel club and even high school coaches. If you want your child to play at the next level, goes the refrain, this is what you need to do. Oddly enough, if you talk to those at the highest level, you get a different story. "In our minds," Pittsburgh Pirates general manager Neal Huntington says via email, "it's a HUGE positive for a high school player to be a multisport athlete. They tend to be more athletic, better leaders and better teammates. Single-sport athletes tend to have a higher burnout rate and/or appear to have lost some of the passion for the game because it was all they knew before it became their profession."

Adds Toronto Raptors GM Masai Ujiri, the reigning NBA executive of the year: "Playing multiple sports is better." Like many kids in Africa, where resources are scarce, Ujiri grew up playing soccer because all you need is some land and a ball. "Youth here are blessed to have such amazing facilities and to not be limited to certain sports. They should test their skill at different things." Talk to those at the next-to-highest level, and you'll hear more of the same.

"We don't want the kid who's pasteurized and geared for one thing," says UNC women's soccer coach Anson Dorrance, the seven-time national coach of the year whose Lady Tar Heels have won 21 of the 32 NCAA women's soccer championships. "We want the kid that wants to beat you in everything -- even freaking tiddlywinks." UCLA head baseball coach John Savage, whose Bruins won the College World Series last year, agrees. "We like 'em cross-trained," Savage says. "Stick with multiple sports as long as you possibly can, and people are going to see your tools." Stick with one sport long enough, and people are going to see your scars. According to Washington University orthopedist Matthew Matava, the same set of factors that makes a child like Tyler Ward susceptible to patellar tendinitis are often at the root of ruptured ACLs. "When you do the same activity year-round with no rest, that leads to muscle fatigue, which puts the entire joint at more risk for injury," Matava says. Harvard's Lyle Micheli says that back in the 1990s, he used to see maybe 20 ACLs a year in patients under 14. Today, he sees five times that amount. Says Micheli: "Most of them are travel kids."

After his son was diagnosed with Sinding-Larsen-Johansson Syndrome in June, Kevin Ward hit the brakes. The annual summer trip to Europe? Canceled. Instead, Tyler spent those two weeks (plus six more) making regular visits to the physical therapist. The winter futsal game and the school rec league? Canceled and canceled. Everything else is still a go: Tyler is still on the A-team. He still has designs on making the Olympic development program. And he still wants to be the next Xavi. Even though he's done with therapy (for now), he devotes 30 minutes every day to a stretching routine, per doctor's orders. He is 11 going on 80. But still, the boy loves playing soccer.

And what if he didn't? Love playing, that is. What if, all the sudden, Tyler Ward came home and told his father that instead of soccer, he wanted to play basketball, which he's giving a whirl this winter (albeit in a very casual

rec league, and only because a soccer buddy talked him into it). What if Tyler all the sudden got hooked on hoops and decided he was ready to trade in his size 5 cleats for high-tops?

"We'd have to sit down after the soccer season and talk about it," Kevin says. "I would think he's making a mistake."

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