

# Pricing kids off the playing field

Travel teams nurture communities, but can shut out families with low incomes

BY ROBERT CARLE

Fifty years ago, kids played sports with friends, unsupervised by adults.

Today, the sandlot has been replaced by tryout-based, multiseason travel teams for kids as young as 6 years old.

TD Ameritrade estimates that 63 percent of American families whose children play sports spend between \$100 and \$500 per child per month on youth sports. Twenty percent spend more than \$12,000 a year. Two-thirds of parents hope their investments will lead to athletic scholarships.

At their best, travel teams form nurturing communities in which kids hone their skills in supportive environments.

However, travel teams are best suited to small, affluent,

intact families. A survey by i9 Sports, a youth sports league franchise, found that in most households, travel sports cause marital battles and financial strains. Sixty-five percent of moms say their kids' sports schedules interfere with their jobs. Twenty-four percent of moms say they resent their kids' sports commitments.

Travel sports stress players as well. The more miles parents travel, the more money they spend, the more they demand from their kids. Fred Engh, founder of the National Alliance for Youth Sports, writes that parents "behave as if they are watching the Final Four, World Series, and Super Bowl all rolled up into one."

At the ballpark, parents sometimes have engaged in verbal and physical abuse.

There is also a trend of parents suing coaches for benching their children during games, thereby depriving them of the chance to pursue college scholarships. University of Connecticut men's soccer coach Ray Reid said he is appalled by the attitude that "your son is a mutual fund!"

Intensive training has led to a spike in injuries. Today, most Tommy John tendon surgeries in the United States are performed on patients ages 15 to 19. These types of injuries were unheard of a generation ago.

While overuse epidemics plague club sports, lower-income kids are shut out of club sports. Sports participation for youth in households with incomes under \$25,000 is 16 percent. For youth from wealthier homes (\$100,000 plus), it is 30 percent. A 15-year study of travel teams by University of Nebraska researcher David Ogden found that only 4 percent of players on traveling

youth teams are African American.

Isha Hamilton teaches physical education at Edmund W. Miles Middle School in Amityville, where 67 percent of the students are from low-income families and obesity rates run as high as 70 percent. She told me that some of her most talented students are unable to play club sports because of league fees.

Without rigorous physical activity, kids are at heightened risk of diabetes, heart disease, strokes, and depression. By 2030, the combined medical costs for treating obesity-related diseases are expected to be \$66 billion a year, with a loss of productivity of \$580 billion annually.

To widen the range of options for kids to play sports, we need to revitalize local teams that have folded as energy and talent were diverted into travel teams. Community centers, churches, and schools also

need to recreate the sandlot experience by setting aside time for pickup games at fields and gyms.

Community leaders who have adopted the sandlot approach have been delighted with the results. On Tuesday nights in Edmond, Oklahoma, league coaches turn their fields over to "disorganized baseball." They provide equipment and loose supervision, but kids choose teams and play pickup. In Methuen, Massachusetts, the town recreation department recruited players with the catchphrase, "No parents, no coaches, no cost." After Phoenix kept its recreational facilities open until 2 a.m., reports of juvenile crime dropped by 55 percent.



Robert Carle is a professor of theology at The King's College in Manhattan.

## EXPRESSWAY

# The virtues of golf in the winter

BY BERT JABLON

I love the outdoors. I grew up skiing and playing tennis. At age 50, I took up running. But golf was always a mystery. My wife's five brothers grew up caddying. I'd watch them play, but was always on the sidelines.

Then about 25 years ago, when I was about 65, I took a lesson with a brother-in-law who was a golf pro at a course in Fortuna, California. It took some time to learn the basics — take my club back slowly, keep my head still, keep putts lined up to the hole — but in a short time, I was hooked.

Now I play once a week — all year 'round.

As long as the temperatures are above freezing, I enjoy the company of other diehard ball strikers who, like me, are happy to see uncrowded fairways, to enjoy lots of fresh air, and to hit balls at a fairly rapid pace.

Before going out, I don two pairs of pants. The inner pair, like black longjohns, are made of a synthetic fiber that isn't itchy. I put on two long-sleeve



Golfers hone their swings at Eisenhower Park in February.

shirts, a T-shirt and a winter jacket cut to the waist. Woolen gloves with the fingers cut off keep my hands warm and allow club control. On my feet I wear synthetic ankle socks and shoes with small cleats. A warm fleece hat covers my ears.

After a breakfast of Rice Krispies, bran flakes and a banana, I head for the course

around mid-morning. I like Bethpage State Park in the summer, but in the winter, when it's free of snow, I play at Eisenhower Park in East Meadow, usually on the white or blue course. The senior rate for residents is \$15 for nine holes.

In the summer, it's important to make reservations. Otherwise, the wait for a tee time

can be a few hours. But in the winter, weather permitting, the courses open at 6:30 a.m. every day except Christmas. Reservations aren't necessary, and if there's no snow, players can tee off once the frost melts off. Even when there's snow on the ground, it's often still possible to use one of the 60 bays in the driving range — as long as the supply of balls doesn't run out.

A social soul, I like someone to talk to every so often. You never know who you might play with — a doctor, a minister, it could be anybody from any kind of job. They're all very interesting and they all have their own approach to the game. Even more important, it helps when others keep their eyes open for any errant golf shots. I generally prefer yellow balls in any season. At my age, they're easier to see and find in the brush. A winter plus: When the ball bounces on the frozen ground, my drives get a few extra yards of distance.

One thing you can count on in winter golf is that you will do a lot of walking. Riding carts are not allowed because

they can chew up the grass. Courses need time to recover from the crowded, warm months.

My usual score for 18 holes is a little above 100. Golf is a very tough sport, very challenging, but I love the ambience of the game and the camaraderie. Sometimes I don't even keep score.

Will writing about the winter game possibly bring out crowds who read this? Financially, there's no doubt that Nassau County would not turn down those golf dollars. I'm sure officials would say, Keep 'em coming. We're open!



Reader Bert Jablon lives in Syosset.

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