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Parents paying top dollar to have professionals train kids

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Michael Ferraro has a major-league swing in a tee-ball-size body, pounding one pitch after another into the back net of the batting cage. He's 7 years old and works out with two former professional baseball players as many as five times a month. "He's a good little listener, and he takes what you tell him and puts it into play," says Billy Horton, a former minor-league player who now runs Cactus Athletic Camps, which offers clinics and private instruction, in Phoenix.

In the past decade, the number of parents hiring professional trainers for their grade-school athletes has exploded, experts say. No one tracks the figures nationwide, but coaches say their business has doubled or tripled in that time.

Parents shell out \$50 to \$100 an hour for individual coaching in baseball, soccer, basketball and hockey. And they send their youngsters to camps, clinics and places such as Tempe's Arizona World of Baseball, where children work with former pros. Even city parks and recreation departments are hiring former pros to give lessons at batting cages.

"This has become big business," says Gregg Heinzmann, director of the Youth Sports Research Council at Rutgers University. Some experts worry that too much professional coaching and kids specializing in one sport could put too much pressure on young athletes and take the fun out of playing.

Although there are parents who hire personal coaches to improve their child's chances of earning a college scholarship, if not a pro career, many say they want to help their kids improve at the games they love. "I don't push him," says Michael's dad, Mike Ferraro, as he and Horton watch the youth in the batting cage. "I just say, 'Do you want to get a lesson?' If he doesn't feel like it, we don't do it. "I just want him to enjoy himself. I'd rather he be the best he can be."

Coaches and parents cite good reasons for professional training: Kids may get little individual training on teams of 10 or 20 players, depending on the sport. And volunteer coaches often don't have the technical expertise of professionals. Few sports are fun if a young athlete is experiencing little success.

When Sean Whyte, a former pro hockey player, began coaching at Ozzie Ice in Phoenix in 2001, he worked with hundreds of kids. This year, he's on track to coach more than 1,000 youngsters. Like most coaches, his business comes from referrals. "I tell parents, 'If your child truly loves it, give them every opportunity you can afford to help your child reach their full potential,' " Whyte says. He cautions parents that private lessons will not make their child an instant star. The goal should be to improve basic skills that lead to proficiency and a lifelong love of the game.

Professional coaching is not a must, Horton and Whyte agree, but it can help. They work with kids as young as 4 and up through college age. It's only natural that parents want to help their young athletes improve, Horton says. In his youth, his mother would scrape together \$10 in quarters so he could practice at the batting cages at Golf N' Stuff in Phoenix.

Some parents bring their kids in for a few lessons at the start of the season; others come regularly all year. But like Whyte, Horton also cautions parents, "I'm not trying to build this child into a professional athlete. I'm trying to build confidence in this child."

1-sport pitfalls

Despite the growing numbers of private coaches, Heinzmann of Rutgers University finds the trend troubling. He has conducted clinics on youth sports for 20,000 parents and coaches, most recently in Glendale. "We see it exploding in recent years from the standpoint of not only parents hiring privatized instruction, but children focusing on one sport to the exclusion of all others and at younger and younger ages," he says.

A generation ago, the ideal was to earn varsity letters in three sports in high school, Heinzmann says. Now that children are pursuing one sport, they're suffering more overuse injuries and burning out sooner. He wonders if it's worth it.

About 70 percent of kids involved in sports drop out before they turn 13, according to a recent study by Richard Stratton of Virginia Tech's Department of Health and Physical Education. Just 2 percent of high-school athletes earn scholarships and play in college, Heinzmann says. And the chances of anyone making it to the pros are 0.1 percent -- that's one in 1,000.

Parents put too much pressure on their kids by investing in professional coaching, says Chad Thibodeaux, a longtime coach and host of Kids and Sports radio show on KGME-AM (910). On the air, parents often compare a professional coach with a math tutor, a comparison Thibodeaux says misses the mark. A child needs to know math, he points out. A child does not need to know how to throw a fastball. A fairer comparison would be music or drama lessons. Odds are as low that a child who takes piano lessons from a professional will wind up with a scholarship or playing to crowded concert halls.

"There's this underlying societal pressure to keep up with the Joneses, not just in sports but also in academia and the arts," Heinzmann says. Professional coaching may be right for a child intent on making a club team or a high-school student in the running for a scholarship, Heinzmann says.

But he doesn't think younger kids need such training on a regular basis.

Thibodeaux says to wait until a child is at least 12 and even then only if the child wants to do it and parents can afford it. Prior to turning 12, kids should be in recreational leagues where they can have fun while they work on fundamental skills, Thibodeaux says. Little kids should be going out for pizza with their teammates, he says, not worrying about their stats.

First up in Horton's batting cage is 14-year-old Jeff Clasen, who plays for the Scottsdale Storm and plans to try out next year at Brophy College Preparatory in Phoenix. "Remember, knob to the ball, not knob up," Horton says, and Jeff nails the ball.

Jeff's dad, Steve Clasen of Paradise Valley, says he brought his son to Horton for help during a hitting slump about a year ago. Jeff has no aspirations to play baseball beyond high school; he simply enjoys the game. But he enjoys it more when he's hitting well -- thus, the regular lessons with Horton. His 5-year-old son, John, is too young for lessons, Clasen says. He's having fun on his tee-ball team.

Bart Shillingburg of Scottsdale says his sons, 9-year-old Kyle and 7-year-old Alec, seem to take instruction better from someone else. He played ball in high school, but he says, "I don't have all the techniques that Billy (Horton) or these other guys have." This is Kyle's second lesson with Horton and Alec's first. The boys play basketball and football in the off-season, which puts them at a disadvantage come tryouts for Little League. They compete for spots on teams with boys who play baseball year-round.

Like little Michael Ferraro with his major-league swing. He started playing baseball at age 3 1/2. Right now, he plays with 9- and 10-year-olds, some twice his size. Michael also trains with Dax Jones, formerly of the San Francisco Giants.

In Horton's batting cage, the coach pitches a fastball right by Michael. "He's throwing gas at you, son!" his dad says, laughing. Michael grins. "Who's the best hitter in Arizona?" Horton asks. "Me!" Michael says and sends the next fastball flying.

Tips for sports parents

- * Practice with your child at home, even if it's just tossing the ball around the backyard and your knowledge doesn't extend beyond "Watch the ball hit the bat!" The time spent together builds your child's confidence and skills.
- * Playing more than one sport can help children excel in their chosen sport by making them more well-rounded athletes, building different muscles as well as strength and stamina.
- * If your child plays one sport year-round, watch for burnout. Coaches advise parents to give their children time off if they need a break, be it a week, a month or a summer.
- * Expect to pay about \$50 for a session for professional training. At Cactus Athletic Camps and Ozzie Ice, a five-lesson package is \$225. Details: cactuscamps.com and ozzieice.com.
- * Children are ready for coaching at different ages. Some 8-year-olds are good listeners and take instruction well; others should wait until they're older.
- * Professional coaches also can act as consultants, providing information about training camps,

scholarships and contacts.

* Teenage athletes can make good mentors and coaches for younger players, and at a much lower cost.

* Parents who sit in on lessons with professional coaches can reinforce those skills by practicing with their kids at home.

Sources: Billy Horton of Cactus Athletic Camps in Phoenix; Sean Whyte of Ozzie Ice in Phoenix; Gregg Heinzmann of Youth Sports Research Council at Rutgers University; Chad Thibodeaux of Kids and Sports radio show on KGME-AM (910).

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