

HANS FAHRMEYER



Raising a Champion

Want Your Son to Become the Next Tiger Woods or John Elway? Here's How to Pull It Off

by grant glickson

Last year, my 18-month-old son would throw dozens of various sized balls, with either hand, directly to me from 30-feet away. As a life-long baseball fan, I, of course, kept encouraging him to toss with his left hand every object not locked away in the china closet. After all, southpaws are in huge demand in the majors.

Just three months later, my dream of becoming a parent of a millionaire professional athlete appeared to have suffered a major setback. Young Kyle seemed to have lost his control at an especially early age, deciding it was much more fun to throw the ball over his head than to me. Did this mean that his once-promising athletic career was washed up before he even began potty training?

I decided it was time to consult with some professionals in the field to ask questions about the behavior of my son as those patterns pertain to sports or his future as an athlete.

Dr. Jim Loehr, president of a high performance training center in Orlando, Fla., was the first to assure me that the direction the ball traveled was far less important than

whether the toddler had a smile on his face once it landed, and was not necessarily indicative of the path my son is heading regarding a future in sports.

"What we're learning is that the most important thing is to get kids playing and having fun," said Dr. Loehr, president & CEO of LGE Performance Systems, an organization that helps everyone from young phenoms to professional athletes to FBI investigators perform to their potential. "Don't worry so much about doing obsessive work with form and technique. That ruins their interest and the whole thing is lost anyway."

The Road to the Pros

While Dr. Loehr and other experts in the field claim that it's all about generating interest in physical activity, every seri-

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ous sports fan knows it takes a lot of work from the time kids are old enough to walk, plus natural ability, to help your child become a professional athlete. The sports pages are filled with success stories about the various training methods used by

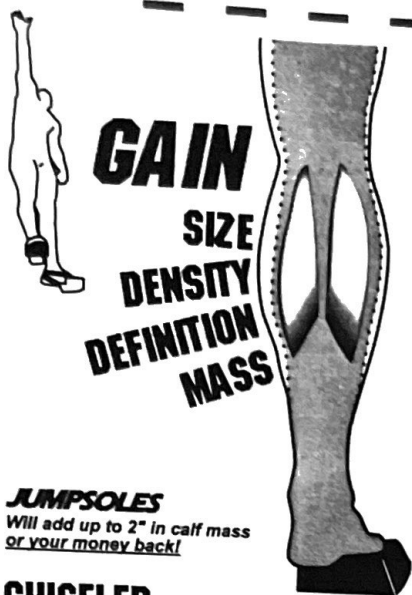
parents of teen-age prodigies like Wayne Gretzky (hockey), Monica Seles (tennis) and Tiger Woods (golf).

"The real genius of the parents of these great athletes is that they didn't put much pressure on them," Dr. Loehr said. "They found ways to make a game out of everything they did."

Finding a happy medium between teaching a child to enjoy sports and training him or her to become a well-paid professional athlete has stumped parents for decades. For every Tiger Woods story, there are thousands of players who succumb to family pressure and great expectations and burn out before their professional careers even get underway.

"The mistake that most parents make is that they push too hard and burn their kids out," said Dean Brittenham, the director of athletics for the Shiley Sports Elite Center at Scripps Hospital in La Jolla, Calif., which concentrates on improving the athleticism of clients ranging in age from three to 80. "What we try to do is make it fun, but it is hard work."

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If we see that these kids are getting tired off it, we tell the parents to give them some time off. Take them to a movie and have fun away from sports."

That seems to be hard advice for parents to take with so much information available to help a child gain a competitive edge, and with the American dream of sports megabucks virtually dangling in front of their children. And money is no object.

For instance, Dr. Loehr says that parents of a junior circuit tennis player spend on average \$25,000 a year on equipment (shoes, racquets, etc), lessons, court time, and travel (airlines, hotel and

car rental for parents). That figure nearly doubles when sleep-away camps, such as the Bollettieri Sports Academy in Bradenton, Fla., are brought into the mix.

These days, the reference journals, like the American Medical Association Journal, American College of Sports Medicine and the National Strength and Conditioning Association, indicate that an athletic career can start even before a child's first birthday. Through various sources of stimulation, parents are encouraging their children to perform athletic feats in infancy: rolling over, standing, climbing, crawling and walking

Finding the Right Sport for Junior

When it comes to choosing sports for children, you'll find at least two schools of thought. One is predestination, revealed by such comments as, "I know my boy is going to be a hockey player like I was." Another approach recognizes that children differ, that their interests shift over the years, and that there's more than one "right" sport for each child. Remember: Siblings usually are not of equal athletic talent.

Asking the following questions can help you separate your child's needs from your own interests and goals.

- **Is my child interested in sports?** "I think the first question to ask is, does your son or daughter really want to play?" says David C. Agerter, M.D., a family practice physician at Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minn. Although this step seems obvious, it's easy to skip. "If you have a child who really does not want to play a sport right now, that's OK."

- **Does my child have time for sports?** For many children, sports are one element in a constellation of activities. Consider your child's current schedule.

- **How many sports would interest my child?** Your community might offer a wide range of intramural sports. If so, allow your children to sample several activities. Younger children can benefit from exploring several options before settling on one or two.

- **What are the characteristics of each sport?** Consider how sports differ, including: emphasis on individual skill; emphasis on team performance; size of teams; amount of physical contact; equipment needed and its cost. All factors can influence your choice.

- **What are the risks of injury?** Each sport has potential benefits and risks. In general, injuries tend to increase when contact between players increases.

- **What sports match my child's physical maturity?** Children who attend the same grade in school can differ markedly in height, weight, strength and coordination. If your child is shorter than his or her classmates, consider an activity where smallness can be an asset.

- **What sports match my child's psychological maturity?** Consider your child's ability to focus attention and accept coaching. Both are essential for team sports.

- **What kind of attitudes do I want my child to learn from sports?** When parents and coaches adopt an attitude of "win at any cost" and "play through the pain," they increase the risk of sports injury. Instead, you can focus on fun as much as competition.

- **How will I respond if my child wants to quit?** Children's interest in sports goes through cycles. Your children might even come to you during the first game with an announcement: "This is no fun. I quit." If your child wants to throw in the towel, dig deeper. Ask for the reasons and listen. Perhaps your child is intimidated by older players, afraid of the coach, or setting expectations that are too high.

- **Am I ready to let my child take part in sports?** Think about your own reactions. How well will you accept your child's victories and defeats? Ask whether you're ready to turn your child over to a coach for several hours each week. Allowing your child to participate in sports is an exercise in letting go—a skill that parents practice for a lifetime.

—The Mayo Clinic Health Oasis

as fast as possible. Tumbling, running and jumping are important movement patterns that help a child develop full-capacity for motor coordination, balance and athletic ability.

At six months of age, Tiger Woods stood with perfect balance in the palm of his father's hand, as the elder Woods walked about. Five months later, Tiger picked up his first sawed-off golf club and drove a ball into a nylon net across his garage. He shot a 48 for nine holes when he was only three years old.

"Tiger Woods's dad decided early on that he was going to try and produce the greatest golfer who ever lived," said Dr. Loehr. "That was his number one goal, and he started with Tiger from the day that he was born."

Coordinating Efforts

The process of developing eye-hand and eye-foot coordination, according to published reports, can begin as soon as a child can walk, by simply rolling or tossing a ball back and forth, or encouraging the youngster to deposit it into a basket.

Through this activity, a child learns about spacial awareness and how to position himself in relationship to a ball.

Eventually, the child will graduate to intercepting a ball in space, which improves movement skills.

Experts agree that between the ages of three to six, a parent should allow a child to basically learn by trial-and-error. Put a kid on ice skates, fully-padded, and give him or her very little instruction. Clue them in on stopping and starting and let them figure the rest out themselves. Be there for them if they have a question.

When a child is ready to follow directions, usually from six to 10 years of age, the time has come to introduce them to the basics of playing various sports. For example, in tennis, Dr. Paul Roetert, a Sports Science Administrator for the United States Tennis Association, suggests that a youngster begin by tapping a ball back and forth on a half-court with a modified racquet. He says not to worry so much about the boundaries, especially in the six to seven age group. In baseball, a child should start by hitting an oversized ball off a tee.

"You have to find ways to give children success early on," Dr. Roetert said.

"As long as they are having fun, they'll want to continue."

The best-known method of capturing a young child's interest is involving him with other kids.

"Younger kids enjoy team sports," Dr. Roetert said. "That is why camps work best, because kids are doing activities together."

As for training my son to be the next great left-hander, Brittenham instructed me to encourage him to continue hurling the ball with both hands. He pointed out that the greatest athletes of all time,

Muhammad Ali, Michael Jordan and Willie Mays, were ambidextrous.

"What scientists and educators are saying is that you need to encourage kids to establish a greater communication between the left and right sides of the brain," said Brittenham, who actually trains people of all ages how to become ambidextrous by juggling and performing cup-stacking speed-drills. "We believe that the utilization of both sides of your brain is the only way to develop a greater percentage of potential, both mentally and physically." ■ ■

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