

Kids' own coaches -- a hit or a miss?

As more parents sign them up, some experts see pitfalls of pressure and injuries.

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It was a Wednesday night at Grand Slam USA -- a batting range in Elk Grove -- and Christopher Bannister was working on his hitting.

He had just come from a game with his team, the Reds, still in his uniform and sneakers, his dusty cleats on the floor nearby.

John Misplay, a Cosumnes River College coach, talked to him about taking a short stride, about keeping the bat close in, about snapping his hips, and Christopher was absorbing it all.

At least, absorbing as much as a 9-year-old can.

Far from the major leagues, Triple-A, college or even high school baseball, Christopher was working with a personal hitting coach.

"For a kid who's just turned 9, he's got a great swing," said his father, Stan Bannister, who played baseball into college.

But his parents think Christopher can get better, and they're willing to put up \$140 for six lessons with Misplay.

All around the Sacramento region, and around the country, more Little Leaguers -- and young swimmers, soccer players and hoopsters -- are signing up for extra coaching.

Of the more than 30 million American kids who participate in organized sports, it's impossible to say how many are going in for extra training. It is easy, however, to find them in every sport.

They, or perhaps their parents, are looking for improvement, fine-tuning, an edge -- for opportunities that didn't exist when most of their parents were children.

More than two dozen parents, coaches, kids and youth sports experts interviewed for this story stressed the benefits of extra coaching, but many also acknowledged the pitfalls.

"I think people are trying to get their kids specializing in sports earlier than they ever have before. My red flags go up all over the place," said Dr. Paul Stricker, a La Jolla specialist in pediatric and adolescent sports medicine.

"Is it the child that wants it, or is it them (the parents)? Number one, find out who it's for."

Training advocates point to what kids can learn: goal setting, time management, discipline, teamwork, perseverance -- not to mention basic sports skills.

Mia Mull of Folsom hopes her son Tyler is getting those life lessons from soccer. Tyler, 13, has worked individually with soccer coaches for about two years, and he's the one demanding it, she said.

He talked her into taking him to competitive team tryouts at age 10, watches soccer on TV and emulates the moves. He has asked for a patch of artificial turf outside the house where he can practice.



John Misplay gives hitting tips to Michael Gollaher, 8, at Grand Slam USA in Elk Grove as Michael's mom, Jan Gollaher, watches behind the batting cage.

Sacramento Bee/Bryan Patrick

"He's competitive by nature," she said, explaining that from a young age he'd asked his parents to time how fast he could run from place to place. "He enjoys the training almost as much as the games."

Most coaches and parents interviewed said they see this enthusiasm as the rule, but some experts see exceptions.

"Usually, if a parent says, 'I'm going to have somebody one-on-one for the child,' I say look out, because it's probably for the parent and not for the kid," said Fred Engh, president for the Florida-based National Alliance for Youth Sports, and author of "Why Johnny Hates Sports."

Kids come to hate sports because parents aren't just pushing them to succeed, they're shoving, Engh said.

"Shoving is where the parent has little regard for the child and demands that they spend a number of hours a day at the ice rink at 4 in the morning," he said.

"The parent of today reads these headlines of \$60 million contracts. They'd give their left arm if they could have a child who was the next Tiger Woods."

Unfortunately, coaches said, some parents may have unrealistic expectations of their children.

"We have some parents saying, 'You've got to make my kid an all-star,' " said Darren Boyd, owner of Grand Slam. Most, however, have more modest aspirations, he said.

Coaches report that some parents see extra training as a first link in a chain of successes. They feel it may be necessary to get on competitive teams that will enable their child to play in high school or college.

"With the increasing cost of college education and a limited number of collegiate scholarships ... this is a trend we're going to see more and more of," said Scott Modell, a pole-vault coach and professor of kinesiology at California State University, Sacramento.

Experts say it is not inappropriate to teach young children skills, but that those lessons need to be age-appropriate.

For instance, Misplay came down to Christopher's level to reach him in a way a 9-year-old could appreciate. The coach told him to plant his back foot and then turn it during his swing, as though squashing a tomato. He later changed the image to squashing his sister's head, at her suggestion.

"I would actually like to do it on her whole body," the 9-year-old said.

Kathleen Bannister, his mother, said she is not worried that Christopher is being pushed. "No, the reason I say that is, he wants to play," she said.

Another pitfall for parents to watch for is too much training, which could lead to overuse injuries, some physicians say.

"I think where the problem comes in is when they take 8-to-12-year-old kids, and all of a sudden the volume and intensity of work has doubled and tripled," Stricker said.

A newly popular field of training addresses that: Strength and conditioning coaches say they are doing "pre-hab" - preventing injuries by strengthening young bodies.

Sports Performance, a Sacramento company, works with young athletes in a variety of sports to give them speed, flexibility and strength outside their regular training.

Swimmer Margaret Doolittle, 14, goes to the company for extra conditioning. On top of five or six swim practices a week with her Greenhaven swim team coach, Robert Gutto, she goes to Sports Performance twice a week.

Is it too much?

"I think about it all the time," said her mother, Becky Doolittle, a teacher. "I watch her very closely. So does Robert. I always ask her, 'Hey, do you still love this?'"

Margaret said she does.

"It's a lot of hard work, but I'm into everything," she said. "I keep control on school and everything. I get everything done, with time to spare."

Easy to understand, if she works as fast as she swims. Doolittle has clocked 24.28 seconds on a 50-yard freestyle swim and is a future candidate for Olympic trials, her coach said.

In general, while there are no hard-and-fast rules, experts don't advise a lot of extra training for kids under 10. Aside from the physical stress, there can be esteem problems from too much emphasis on competition at too early an age.

Physically, the child may be ready, Stricker said, but he advises against strongly competitive sports "until you're certain their self-worth is unrelated to the outcome of the sport."

Even coaches who provide extra training say parents need to ask themselves if they're going too far.

"You need to create an environment where kids enjoy it," said Chris Ziemer, a former all-American in soccer and, until recently, head of coaching for the highly successful Santa Rosa United Soccer Club.

"It's a kids' game," Ziemer said, "and should remain a game for kids."