

TASTE

The Endless Summer

By Cameron Stracher

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In the beginning, there were three scholastic seasons: football, basketball and baseball. For years each happily owned a three-month segment of the school year, with an occasional -- but unthreatening -- trespass by lesser known deities like hockey, track & field and lacrosse. Ovoids were handed off, laid up and knocked out of the park in a timely and predictable manner. And it was good.

But a new sport arose to challenge the big three: soccer. Here was a game that relied on the feet and gave the hand-eye-challenged something to call their own. For a while, the four sports existed in a kind of lopsided equipoise, but something had to break: Four sports in three seasons made playing them all impossible.

Then someone, somewhere, had the bright idea to play soccer in the spring, the way they do in Europe, while someone else, somewhere else, wondered why kids couldn't play baseball well into the fall, the way it's done in the major leagues. Soon, all hell broke loose, and a parents' nightmare began.

"We have no weekends," complains Jack R., a Connecticut father whose son plays both baseball and soccer in the fall and whose daughter swims and plays soccer. The family shuttles from playing field to playing field, carrying a complicated assortment of Gatorade, Dunkin' Munchkins and changes of clothing. While his children love their games, Jack wonders what happened to the simple pleasures of leisurely Sundays and fallow seasons. As he notes, it's not as if his generation didn't play ball year-round. But their games consisted of stickball or wiffle-ball or even pick-up baseball without the pressure of teams and leagues and coaches.

These days, fall baseball, spring soccer and "travel" teams are the rule. In Westport, Conn., where I live, kids can play three levels of soccer -- recreation, travel and "premier" -- two of them at ages as early as nine years old (premier starts at 12). Fall baseball starts at age eight, and travel begins at 11. Travel teams require kids (and their parents) to visit other towns, often hours away, to play against regional teams from other places. One father I know shuttled his son from Long Island to Cooperstown, N.Y., to play double-headers throughout the spring. Other families have driven to Pennsylvania, Ohio, even Florida, all in the name of fun.

Sports also spill into the summer, with tournament play organized through July and August. "It practically ruined our summer," says Richard S. about his son's baseball schedule. A gifted pitcher, his 11-year-old plays on a suburban travel team in the summer organized by Little League boosters. The team plays in tournaments planned by local stadium complexes like the recently opened Baseball Heaven on Long Island, an \$8.5 million facility with seven fields, synthetic turf, professional dugouts, bullpens, stadium seating and a restaurant. Travel teams often have no official affiliation with any scholastic program and are occasionally run entirely for profit by batting cages or local businesses, but they usually involve many of the same people who participate in Little League and other "sanctioned" programs. And they're tough, as Richard discovered

when he tried to pull his son away for a two-week family vacation. If he couldn't make the commitment, the team didn't want his son.

In some respects, the increased intensity of sports is just one more manifestation of the over-scheduling of childhood. When I was growing up, we didn't play Little League until we were eight. Now kids can start with T-ball as early as four. There are baseball and soccer clinics conducted in the winter, and coaching staffs like Glenn Katz's I.S.T. Baseball Headquarters in Norwalk, Conn., and Mickey Kydes's Soccer Enterprises in Fairfield County, where parents can sign up their children for "personalized training" and "team building and leadership workshops." Mr. Katz explains that baseball has become more competitive at a younger age, and kids need to build their skills, a view echoed by Mr. Kydes, who encourages year-round play to improve proficiency.

But Messrs. Katz and Kydes and others involved in children's sports programs admit that there is a danger of burnout. Mr. Kydes says that he loses a lot of good players who cannot commit themselves to a year-round program. There is also pressure from parents who want their kids to be better athletes, score more goals, win more trophies. In Larchmont, N.Y., this summer, the local Little League sued to stop tournament play because of a dispute over the rules. Apparently winning really is everything. Some parents and kids also feel pressured to devote themselves to a sport early, worried that if they don't play every season they will not be qualified to play at all.

In my town, while baseball tries to accommodate soccer's schedule in the fall and soccer tries to accommodate baseball's in the spring, conflicts inevitably arise that prevent kids from playing both sports at the same time. And while nothing prevents a child from trying out for travel soccer in one season after playing baseball in the other, his skills probably won't keep pace with those of his peers, which makes it less likely that he will make the team. Even Mr. Kydes, who encourages children to "cross-train," admits that as kids get older he expects them to dedicate themselves to soccer for the full year.

High-school teams suffer as well, as travel and premier leagues can draw kids who otherwise might be on varsity squads. While adjustments are sometimes made (in Connecticut, for example, high-schoolers cannot play on premier soccer teams during the fall soccer season), as the prestige of travel teams grows, scholastic sports become "privatized," with the best athletes opting out of the public-school program.

Perhaps all this is inevitable in a world where "amateur athlete" seems like a quaint term. And given the epidemic of childhood obesity, it is odd to complain about too much activity. If kids love baseball, why shouldn't they play it 24/7? The artificial distinction between baseball season and football season and basketball season was never a function of reality, only of resources. Sports can be a terrific teacher of values such as patience, teamwork and hard work, as Mr. Kydes claims. Anyone who has seen Derek Jeter dive head-first into the stands for a ball has learned an important lesson about commitment.

So it seems foolish to wish my son could ride his bike up the street, swing at a tennis ball with a broomstick and play basketball on the blacktop -- almost as foolish as wishing that he could take the SATs without Stanley Kaplan and get into college without a tutor. Instead, he is playing fall ball. He loves the game, and the competition. It's his coach I worry about: me.

Mr. Stracher is the publisher of the New York Law School Law Review.

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