

Train Like a Pro, Even if You're 12

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BRACE yourselves, parents. Besides shuttling the kids to cello lessons, algebra tutoring, soccer matches and basketball practice, there's one more activity emerging to give prepubescent go-getters a leg up these days: sports performance training.



Douglas Healey for The New York Times

WORK IT Alex Armellini, 17, at BlueStreak in Stamford, Conn.



Douglas Healey for The New York Times

HIGHER, FASTER, BETTER Heidi Halvorsen, 12, at BlueStreak Sports Training in Stamford, Conn.

Because many team coaches don't have the time or the expertise in exercise science to make their troops faster and stronger, specialty programs — part gym, part pro-training camp — have stepped in to fill the need. For roughly \$35 a session, they provide rigorous conditioning for any aspiring child, regardless of ability, using the kinds of practices that have set apart athletes like [Tiger Woods](#) and the Williams sisters.

Sports performance training is becoming de rigueur for ambitious stars in the making or unfit youngsters whose parents want to shore up their confidence. Great athletes aren't born, they're made — or so goes a slogan for Velocity Sports Performance, one of the leading centers that aim to treat Jack or Kate like Steve Nash or Jackie Joyner-Kersey.

Velocity, at more than 75 locations, had almost 47,000 children participate in 2006, four times the enrollment in 2004. Athletic Republic, until recently known as Frappier Acceleration Sports Training, worked with roughly 36,000 children last year, up from 27,000 in 2005. CATZ, a chain in four states, trained 6,500 youngsters for the year ending June 2007, up 150 percent from the same period in 2006.

Although some as young as 8 participate, 12- to 15-year-olds make up the bulk of participants at national chains like Velocity and CATZ (Competitive Athlete Training Zone).

Sports performance centers resemble a pro-training camp — except there are no five o'clock shadows or tattoos. Clusters of children (some knobby-kneed, others ripped) alternatively warm up, hoist weights and do plyometrics or speed work supervised by coaches.

Some of the agility drills resemble amped-up neighborhood games: participants, for instance, jump diagonally over lines on the ground. Hopscotch anyone?

Other tasks are more grueling. Running while dragging a weight is not for the fainthearted, nor are the super-fast treadmills at Athletic Republic. Faces clench as the machines force legs to go quicker than they could on their own. One result is that eventually children “are able to generate those same velocities by themselves,” said John Frappier, the founder of Athletic Republic, who has a master’s in exercise physiology.

Fitness matters more than ever, since talent alone is no longer enough to make varsity or win a Division I scholarship.

Which is not lost on today’s athletes. “You can’t get by with sitting around anymore,” said Jordy Christian, 18, a hockey player who is the oldest of three children who have all worked out at Frappier in Fargo, N.D. “Once you settle into a sport, you make it your life.”

Parents, too, realize that preparation is key. “I’m not the only dad watching the N.F.L. draft,” said Troy Medley, chief executive of Velocity. Players “are constantly talking about how they train.”

John Maiolo from Monroe, Conn., said he saw what Velocity could offer his daughter, Marissa, who plays three sports but likes soccer best: “The way I see it, if they can get the kids in there young enough, and get them to understand how to run, how to pivot, how to turn, how to jump, how to excel at all these basic movements, it becomes second nature when they are on the field.”

Sports performance training teaches athletic fundamentals during the “skill hungry” years of neuromuscular growth. It also helps single-sport players avoid injuries by broadening their abilities, advocates say.

This world attracts its fair share of hard-charging mothers and fathers. “I had a parent introduce her daughter to me as the next [Mia Hamm](#),” said Jim Liston, the president of CATZ. “That’s not a lot of parents. That’s just a few.”

Although sports performance outlets strive to be chummy and supportive, parental pressure coupled with the ethos of continual improvement wears down some tender-age athletes.

“It’s really easy to see the difference between kids that handle the pressure, and kids that aren’t able to,” said Melanie Michaud, a former Velocity coach who now works for CATZ in Needham, Mass. “The ones who can’t handle it, when they reach junior year of high school, they’ll be tired of playing.”

Parents who say “we are not going to give Billy or Mary a chance not to do this” need to reassess, said Fred Engh, the president of the National Alliance for Youth Sports and author of “Why Johnny Hates Sports.”

Jim Schultz, of Waldwick, N.J., encourages his daughters, Renee, a Velocity year-rounder, and Lauren, who goes twice a month, to think of their sessions as a job. “If you go there and you fool around, you won’t last long,” he said. “These people aren’t there to joke around. Renee is serious about it. That’s what’s good.”

Renee, 14, who plays soccer for her school, her town and a competitive travel team, said signing up for Velocity was her dad’s idea. “At first I didn’t have a choice whether I wanted to go,” said Renee, who is also a basketball guard. “After a while, I really liked going there.” What won her over? The emphasis is on fun, and people in the sports performance field downplay the grit the work demands of the young. (“What we really sell are smiles,” Mr. Medley of Velocity says.)

This is not every child’s idea of fun. The coaches I observed at three centers, including a new Athletic Republic at Chelsea Piers, offered guidance and didn’t yell. Still, how can workouts be lighthearted when the point is to make quantifiable strides? Kids are

videotaped sprinting and their flaws critiqued. Benchmarks — distance for a medicine ball throw — are tracked, too.

Mr. Maiolo, a controller for a venture capitalist firm, had to overcome his reservations. After all, Marissa had a full plate as the captain of Everton, a premier club soccer team. She also played basketball, soccer and softball for her middle school.

Wasn't she in adequate shape? "In the beginning you think to yourself, am I one of those parents who must have their daughter be perfect, and have all the opportunities possible?" said Mr. Maiolo, who swam in his heyday. "Am I going overboard? Am I trying to be the athlete I never was? You second-guess yourself, and that's good."

Ultimately, the Maiolos went for it, and Marissa has no regrets. "If I didn't go to Velocity I'd still be what I was before," she said. "I needed to go there. It's not like I was horrible. It made me better."

So good that after three years of Velocity training, Marissa, now 14, says she'd like to be a professional soccer player one day.

Do trainees improve? "The answer is a qualified yes," said Avery Faigenbaum, an associate professor of exercise science at the College of New Jersey. "If we put a 10-, 14-, 15-year-old in a sensibly prescribed program, the child will get faster, jump higher, she's stronger and she's faster on the court." But gains should be taken with a grain of salt, he advised, since children naturally improve with age. As Dr. Faigenbaum puts it: How to improve the vertical jump of an 8-year-old? Do nothing. "She'll jump higher at 12," he said, barring drastic changes in body composition.

Overtraining is a concern, since parents often don't realize the importance of recovery between hard workouts.

"They need to look at the total stress being placed on their kids," Dr. Faigenbaum said. "If you believe the only way to make gains is if it hurts," then "you're getting set up for an overuse injury."

At the other end of the spectrum, some participants only break a sweat at performance centers. Suzanne Holder, from Pasadena, Calif., said that it took signing up for CATZ to awaken her 11-year-old daughter Maddy's interest in activity. "In sports, you may be the

one who the goal got past, or who didn't catch the fly ball," Ms. Holder said. "But at CATZ your only goal going is to have fun, and suddenly you realize you've accomplished 20 push-ups you couldn't before."

As word of mouth spreads from parent to parent, it may only be a matter of time until performance training is as widespread as SAT prep. Mr. Schultz, the parent from Waldwick, N.J., hopes not.

"Hate to say this, because I'm a competitive person and I don't want everybody to get a competitive advantage," he said, "but you can send your kids to all the camps in the world — if you put them in this program, you know they'll improve."