

OBSSESSED WITH THE GAME

IN BALTIMORE AND BEYOND, MORE KIDS ARE SPECIALIZING
IN ONE SPORT AT EARLIER AGES—WHAT ARE THE PROS AND CONS?

BY CHRISTINE GRILLO

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GREG DOHLER

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ome days I find myself praying to all that's holy for rain—because rain is what gets my kid's soccer practice cancelled, or that cross-country meet called off. On some of those rainy days my kids are relieved, too, because there's a point in every season when the sports schedule really feels like a tyrant.

For some student athletes, the sports life is the best thing that ever happened to them. Others find themselves overscheduled and under pressure. In almost all cases, though, student athletes have to navigate any number of pitfalls, including their own stress, their parents' over-involvement, unrealistic expectations about scholarships, overuse injuries and maintaining a balance between academics and sports.

William Henderson, a high school senior at Baltimore Polytechnic Institute (known in town affectionately as Poly), has enjoyed nearly every minute of his life as a track and field athlete.

"I absolutely love track," he says. "I never

felt overscheduled. My schedule is a lovable schedule."

A sprinter, hurdler and jumper, Henderson is going to Penn State in the fall to study kinesiology and be part of the track team. He is one of those rare birds who got a 90-percent partial scholarship for track and field.

Gabe McCarthy also played sports at Poly—three years of baseball and four years of soccer—but did not go on to play in college. Currently a senior at the College of Wooster in Ohio, McCarthy said he had to make a judgment call about whether to try out for the college teams and decided that he didn't want to put that kind of pressure on himself with so many adjustments on the horizon.

"I enjoyed all four years I played in high school, those feelings of growing and working hard," he says, "but it was a lot of work. Those Saturday-morning baseball practices in the early spring, I'd be standing [on the field] motionless and freezing and wonder-

ing if it was worth it."

"I knew some kids who were burned out on sports," says Liza Blue, who played lacrosse and field hockey at Garrison Forest School and University of Virginia, where she earned a combined bachelors and masters degree of education in 2015. "I knew so many girls who played in high school and then went off to college and quit. They realized there was more to do in life than playing sports every day; they found other interests; they didn't have their parents pushing them."

But Blue professes nothing but joy for the student athlete life. "I just loved it so much. I never felt burned out."

All in all, Henderson's, McCarthy's and Blue's stories are happy ones. But there are some kids who get in too deep. Some coaches refer to a phenomenon known as "the six-season athlete"—for student athletes whose families can afford it, "playing" sports becomes a year-round, double-time endeavor. In addition to playing on school



Poly senior William Henderson burns up the track.



Garrison Forest alum Liza Blue works out with Traci Davis, the GF5 athletic director.

teams, athletes might also play on club teams and work with trainers. Consider the kid who plays fall soccer for school, practicing every day, *and* on a club team that practices a couple times a week in the evenings. She has school games during the week, as well as tournaments on the weekends, and she has to squeeze in time with her personal trainer. Her soccer season probably overlaps with her basketball season, and she likely feels compelled to spend her summers going to sports camp. Add to that an over-use injury, let's say shin splints, because she never gets any down time, and you've got one wrung-out kid.

McCarthy credits his high school sports life with feelings of accomplishment and satisfaction, and he loved being part of a team. He avoided playing club sports outside of school, though, because the school teams took up enough time. "I tried to grow outside of the school season," he says, explaining his decisions to play indoor soccer during his off-season, and baseball during

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the summer.

"I had a deep sense of obligation to my [baseball] coach," he says, "so I was willing to sacrifice my summer for summer league, when I could have been working as a counselor at my summer camp."

Coaches do their best to help their athletes manage the myriad challenges they face—and on top of that, they sometimes find themselves caught in the middle between parents and kids.

"For good and bad, athletics have grown exponentially," says Traci Davis, the athletic director at Garrison Forest School—and the president of the Interscholastic Athletic Association of Maryland. Young female athletes are stronger, fitter and faster

than ever before, and there are more opportunities for them to play. But the pressure to "succeed" in sports, whatever that means, appears to be an equal-opportunity menace. Davis, like many coaches, misses some features of the old days.

"To stay in shape, we used to just go out and run," says Davis. "Now many kids have personal trainers hired by their parents."

Tim Holley, the athletic director at The Gilman School, lists the activities that come along with playing a sport today, in addition to practices and games: skills-training sessions, conditioning sessions, off-season workouts, maybe even sessions with a nutritionist.

"All this makes playing sports an occupa-

tion more than a pastime for some kids,” he says. “Family vacations and summer projects get squeezed in between workouts, which are supposed to be *optional*—but there is a perceived expectation that they are not optional.”

Going back 30 years, when I ran track and cross-country in high school, I preferred that my parents *not* come to the meets. These days, however, parents are engaged, to say the least. Ask a coach or athletic director about parental involvement in school sports today, and you’ll get an earful.

Davis, who played field hockey and lacrosse in high school and college and on the U.S. women’s national lacrosse team, is acutely aware of parents’ involvement in their daughters’ athletic careers.

“Athletics are very public. These kids and coaches are on display every day at practice or at games,” she says. “Every action is being analyzed. Can you imagine if it was like that for teachers in the classroom? Can you imagine if parents were in the back of the room, saying, ‘Oh honey, you know the answer to that,’ or telling the teacher, ‘You should call on my daughter to answer that question?’”

“We all think our children are the best and the brightest,” says Holley of the Gilman School. “But we don’t always have the most objective view of how our children stack up against other people’s children. Sometimes hard work is not enough to get that pot of gold.”

In addition to the pressure parents apply to their kids, they can also go too far on the field. “The kids get a lot of attention and guidance and that’s terrific,” says Holley. “It takes a village to raise a child, but if the mentors are giving conflicting messages, the villagers get confused.”

Dwayne Green, a high school varsity football coach and counselor at Poly, says that he, too, has to manage interfering parents: “I tell parents, ‘Allow me to be the bad guy. You don’t need to critique your kid’s performance. I’ll do that.’”

William Henderson, the track and field athlete at Poly, is grateful for his parents’ involvement. Above all, he credits his parents for keeping expectations high and supporting him, and for prioritizing his education.

“No one pushed me,” he says. “I’m a fourth-generation track athlete in my family. The pressure wasn’t on me doing track, but I love track, and we decided to focus on



Gilman’s Athletic Director Tim Holley and Middle School Counselor Armond Lawson team up.

that.” The “we” includes his parents. “I understand where they’re coming from. All they want is the best for me, so I make some mistakes, and they jump on it, but once they see the improvement, they back off.”

Green puts academics first for all of his players and stresses that Poly supports students holistically. “I had a conversation with each player on my team. I told them, ‘You have to know your role. Not everybody is going to be the star player,’” he says. “And sometimes they have other challenges. It’s not just the Xs and Os of the game. That kid’s not going to perform if he’s hungry or stressing about something

going on at home.”

Henderson says, “I had to handle my education first. My parents were the forces of that, and my coaches allowed me to miss some things to get my education right.”

Armond Lawson is the middle school counselor at Gilman. He talks passionately about what he calls “the race to nowhere.”

“Kids are overwhelmed,” he says. “I’m a parent, and I hear parents complain all the time about the overscheduling, and I’ve complained about it with my own kids’ schedules. But we keep doing it.”

Piling onto the scheduling and academic

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pressures is the issue of overuse injury resulting from specialization. The kids get tired, really tired, and their bodies push back.

Dr. Teri McCambridge has been practicing sports medicine for 17 years—at one point, she covered the U.S. women's national lacrosse team. In her practice at Towson Orthopaedic Associates, she's seen a surge in overuse injuries. Her opinion about specialization is strong: Kids should not specialize in sports before they're in high school, or at least not until they reach skeletal maturity. For girls, this is usually in eighth or ninth grade; for boys, it's 11th or 12th grade.

"I see a lot of growth plate-related injuries," she says. "You've heard of Little League elbow, Little League shoulder. This is inflammation of the growth plates." She sees inflammation of the growth plates of the heel and the knee, too, as well as stress fractures of the tibia and metatarsals from too much running, whether it happens in field hockey, lacrosse, soccer or elsewhere.

"It's better to play different sports, especially if you're playing year-round," says McCambridge. "And you *have* to take breaks." What's the minimum break a teenage body needs? She says athletes need at least one day a week when they're *not* playing a sport. Ideally, over the course of a year, they're taking a cumulative month off as well—two weeks here, one week here, one week there.

Like so many high school coaches, Green remembers the old days—before specialization—fondly. "When I was coming up," he says, "the best athletes played everything."

Green played football in high school and college and is emphatic about the benefits of diversity. "Multisport athletes are the best athletes," he says. He cites a statistic from USA Football, the sport's national governing body: 224 of the 256 players selected in the 2015 NFL draft played two or more sports in high school.

Holley says that at Gilman this year, they've decided to have formal conversations with parents about expectations. "The full ride is very rare," he says. "The reality is that there are more academic dollars available for scholarships than

athletic dollars, so if families were more committed to academic preparation, they'd be more likely to get that scholarship. Investment in greater academic preparation will most likely yield financial scholarship"

"Parents make a significant financial investment in their children's sports," says Davis. "But the money spent on club teams and trainers—I'm not sure they see a return on it in terms of scholarships."

Of course, there are benefits simpler and more important than college scholarships. Henderson credits high school sports with keeping him and his friends out of trouble.

"Most of my friends don't necessarily *love* sports the way I do," he says. "They do sports so they can stay out of trouble, stay off the streets. Poly is like a home for us.

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We all want to hang around there after school, so we don't have all this free time."

Holley has a theory that because kids are so resilient, this age of hyped-up athleticism is the new normal. They don't know anything different. Blue, McCarthy and Henderson all loved their experiences, although in different ways. McCarthy missed playing sports in college, so he joined an Ultimate Frisbee club. Blue says that she and her athlete friends, now graduated from college, feel a bit at loose ends without organized sports.

Parents want what's the best for their kids. But how can we know what this is?

Green says the focus needs to be on fun, not winning.

"There's so much research on this," says Davis. "The best thing parents can say is, 'I love watching you play.'" □

Home Away From Home

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magic of camp," says Rosenberg, "is delivered through the expertise of trained camp professionals, fun and developmental programming and a camper's eagerness to learn."

Of the more than 14,000 summer camps in the U.S., 8,400 are resident camps, many of which target specific activities. Maryland, which is host to both lush natural settings and dynamic urban environments, has dozens of camps that offer a stunning variety of approaches. There are camps for budding chefs, for wannabe astronauts, for kids with cancer, for aspiring marine biologists. There are camps geared toward computer game software and camps that teach etiquette. There are baseball camps and debate camps; there are Catholic camps, Jewish camps, Episcopal camps and more. There are city camps and rural camps and camps in the suburbs.

The most popular length for overnight sessions is one week or less, the ACA reports, although most independent camp operators offer four-, six- and eight-week sessions. Each residential camp does it differently, but all try to foster an environment that's friendly to personal development.

"One of the greatest gifts you can give a child is a sense of success and achievement," says Alexi Grote, director of operations at Baltimore County's Camp Puh'tok. "An empowering camp experience provides children with an opportunity to learn powerful lessons in community, critical thinking, character building, skill development and healthy living."

Jennifer Braveman Silber, executive director of Camp Moshava, says, "Being away from home for an extended period of time at an overnight camp promotes the development of self-confidence, problem solving and social skills in children. Campers advocate for themselves and for each other; they learn to take action if they see a problem; and they have room to make mistakes and grow from those mistakes. Overnight camp provides a safe and supportive environment for kids to learn about who they are as a person, separate from parents/guardians."

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