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TELEVISION REVIEW: Downside of Sports: Burned Out at 13

By WALTER GOODMAN

The pressure on youngsters, some of them very young, to excel in sports is a staple of journalistic exposes. And to judge by tonight's "Investigative Reports," it is more manic than ever. Fueled by parents, coaches, schools and the children's own visions of glory, sports are taking up ever more time and passion, sometimes with consequences that bode ill for health and family relations. You can't tell from the examples deplored on "Playing to Extremes" how widespread such cases are, and there is little mention here of the influence of television and sponsors in keeping enthusiasm at a high pitch. Instead, the hour goes into the impact on a few families that seem to have been altogether carried away by visions of glory. They include the family of 13-year-old Jimmy Gardner, a star soccer player who warms up for three hours every weekday and is out two nights a week and on weekends on what is known as a travel team. On the weekend covered here, that means a six-hour ride to the playing field. His father, an organizer of the travel team, reports: "We travel every weekend for soccer. That's our life." The regimen can have unanticipated effects. A doctor who specializes in sports injuries of children tells us of an 11-year-old who complained of knee pain. It turned out that what with soccer, hockey and tennis, he was subjecting his limbs to heavy duty for four to five hours a day. He faces the prospect of joint-replacement surgery. A family's cost in dollars and cents can also be high, for travel, equipment, clinics, uniforms and so forth. And Jimmy's father tells of the emotional cost. Referring to the parent-instigated fistfights he has seen on the sidelines, he says that the competitive spirit "probably transfers over to the way we handle our kids."

Behind some of the obsession with sports, the program notes, are hopes that it may lead to a college scholarship. The family of young Ally Absher, a basketball star at a North Carolina school, is laying out thousands of dollars a year on her career. Her coach acknowledges: "I'm not one of these people that believes we're just here to have fun. That's not why we're here." Ally says, "I want to go to a big college where you get seen on TV." Unfortunately for Ms. Absher and for the program, on the night the camera is covering, her team loses a tournament. Milton Lyles, a maintenance worker at a Florida public school, is spending much of the family savings on his two sons, talented hockey players. His plan is for them to get into a classy prep school that will lead to a scholarship. That means constant attendance at competitions where they can show their stuff. "He forces me a lot of times when I don't want to go," one son says. "He's pushing us too hard." The cautionary statistic cited here is that 70 percent of youngsters burn out by 13 and that fewer than 1 percent qualify for any sort of college scholarship.

INVESTIGATIVE REPORTS Our Children at Risk: Playing to Extremes A&E, tonight at 9
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