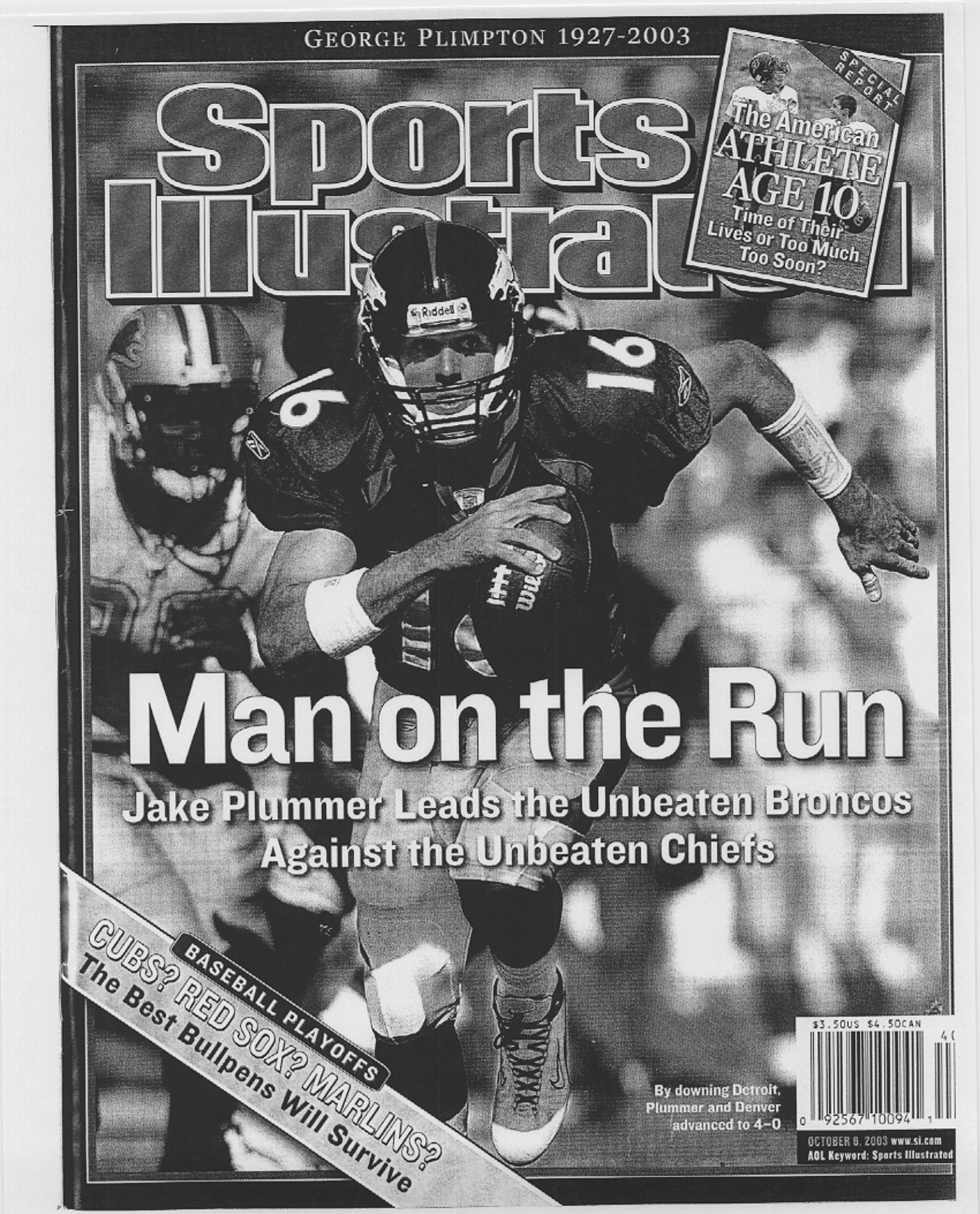
GEORGE PLIMPTON 1927-2003

Sports Illustrated

SPECIAL REPORT

The American ATHLETE AGE 10

Time of Their Lives or Too Much Too Soon?



Man on the Run

Jake Plummer Leads the Unbeaten Broncos Against the Unbeaten Chiefs

BASEBALL PLAYOFFS

CUBS? RED SOX? MARLINS? The Best Bullpens Will Survive

By downing Detroit, Plummer and Denver advanced to 4–0

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IN 1978 A REAL-ESTATE AGENT SHOWED Colman McCarthy a brick house overlooking Friendship Playground, an Elysium of baseball diamonds and basketball hoops in northwest Washington, D.C. It was the easiest sale that agent would ever make. "Didn't even bother to check the plumbing," remembers McCarthy, a writer and teacher whose three boys grew up playing on what became an extension of the family's front yard. ¶ Now, on summer weekdays on that very playground, one of those boys, John McCarthy, runs Home Run Baseball Camp. It's an enterprise that nods gratefully to his childhood by recreating a sandlot atmosphere in which kids don't need the intercession of an SUV-driving, PDA-wielding baby boomer parent to amuse themselves.

To be sure, Coach Mac and his staff provide plenty of instruction and motivation. But coaches let campers—who range in age from five to 13—choose teams and make lineups. No one keeps score until the final day of each weekly session. And every day the staff turns over one hour after lunch to free-form play. "They play a lot of pickle and tag-up," says McCarthy. "Some invent games. Some just sit and talk. Our only rule is to stay within the fence. It may look unorganized, but in fact it's very organized. It allows leaders to percolate and develop. When the kids come back to the coaches in the afternoon, they're a more directed group. With a 10-year-old, you want him to fall for the sport hard. He can pick up the details later."

OPTIONS A 10-year-old's choices range from traditional to extreme.

Camp ends at 3 p.m., but McCarthy is cheered to hear many children tell their parents to fetch them at four. They do this for a reason that's notable in an era marked by the playdate, the proliferation of elite travel teams and the fear parents have of leaving their children unsupervised. It turns out that many campers want to play stickball.

McCarthy has spent a lot of time insinuating himself into the heads of 10-year-olds. "They aren't yet set in their ways, so they'll absorb a lot," he says. "They're the most popular group to coach. If I want to get my batteries recharged, I go hit fungoes to the 10-year-olds."

There's a crossroads quality to being 10. The hormone-fired moods of adolescence are still a ways off, but innocence is yielding to budding sophistication. Ten-year-olds know how babies are made, but they won't necessarily let on that they know. It's by 10 that kids have a fully developed conscience, not just to guide their own behavior, but also to serve as a matrix into which the particulars of the world around them fit. "That's not fair," is a classic 10-year-old's declaration, whether uttered to a playmate or to Mom after a sibling has gotten away with something. ("That's unfair," Emma Eddy, a 10-year-old soccer player in Hinesburg, Vt., said recently upon learning that the WUSA had folded. "They should have a girls' league too. I need some sports to play when I get older. I mean, do I want to play, like, *golf*?")

Though fourth- and fifth-graders typically stand less than five feet tall and weigh less than 100 pounds, you can have a startlingly high-level conversation with them, during which you're likely to learn what they unabashedly love: to be praised; to be asked their opinion and tell you what they know; to *belong*, be it to clubs or teams or other groups; and to hear true stories, not just made-up ones. If 10 is the time to step out in the world, Mark Twain captured the age perfectly in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, based on Twain's own recollections of that period of his life.

Sports offers many of the things 10-year-olds crave. Teams are clubs; victories and defeats are real, not made-up; and rules are presumably applied evenly. "Ten-year-olds are collectors and organizers," says Bob Ditter, a family therapist who practices in the Boston area. "That's why baseball, which is very methodical and specific, and basketball, where there are plays, appeal to them. There's an elegance to sports that makes sense to a 10-year-old."

There's a usefulness to them too. With the 10-year-olds' impending physical maturation, sports will soon separate them,

VJ LOVERO; GARY BOGDON (BOP-DGETZ); CHRIS USHER/APEX (INSET)

sometimes very quickly, according to size and skill level. And as they prepare to move from the romantic "having fun" stage to the technical "getting better" stage, kids can be quite aware of the implications, for by the end of the fourth grade they've become strikingly more realistic about their strengths and weaknesses. "They know for sure who is really good at math and can feel that they're not going to magically get better at it," says Michael Thompson, a child psychologist and co-author of *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys*. "Indeed, if you wanted to have a class of fourth-graders nominate their future valedictorian, they could do it with considerable accuracy. That ability to be realistic is a huge step forward. The sad part is that they lose the capacity to engage in magical thinking, to believe that they'll suddenly get much better at something at which they're not in fact very good."

So it is that children at 10 also reach a sporting crossroads—and as any student of the blues will tell you, crossroads can be fraught with complications. Whereas eight- and nine-year-olds are conformists and cultivators of wide-ranging interests, at 10 kids might delve deeply into their passions but have fewer of them. It's the age at which a child is likely to either set sports aside or choose to throw himself into them—or into one sport.

How seriously sports are taken varies around the country, but 10 seems to be the universal age of demarcation. In Garden City, N.Y., the Little League keeps no standings for ages five through nine but introduces that unforgiving metric for its 10-year-olds. In the Kalispell (Mont.) Pee Wee Baseball League 10-year-olds are consigned to "minor league" play except those who, in the cold and determinist words set forth on the organization's website, "are ready."

But how can you tell who is ready?

WHAT'S GOING ON INSIDE A 10-YEAR-OLD?

TEN-YEAR-OLDS aren't miniature teenagers. They're preadolescent tweens, and until puberty sets in, it's difficult to predict which ones will blossom physically and break from the pack. At 10 Michael Jordan was still a dozen years from becoming one of the five best basketball players on earth; in junior high he was best at baseball and football, and at 15, as a high school sophomore, he stood only 5' 9". Nonetheless, says former NBA forward Bob Bigelow, author of *Just Let the Kids Play* and perhaps the most pointed provocateur in the lively debates over youth sports, "Many adults have the misguided belief that looking at a kid at this stage gives an indication of what he'll be like down the road: 'My gosh, wait till we see him at 14, 18, 22!' But there are so many late-developing kids, and so many get frozen out by the process."

A fully developed young athlete might wind up with a temperament for golf, not basketball, or with the perfect distance runner's body, not a tight end's. Yet premature specialization can foreclose the possibility of finding that out and perhaps sour a kid on sports entirely. "Specialization should come after medical school, not when you're 10," says Thompson. "It leads to heightened expectations from parents and burnout in kids." The American Academy of Pediatrics formally opposes specialization before a child reaches puberty, usually at 11 for girls and 12 for boys. Even former Baltimore Oriole Cal Ripken Jr., that icon of devotion to his chosen sport, joins them *(box,*

Index of the 10-Year-Old

Number of 10-year-olds in the U.S.: 4.2 million

Favorite sports to play (in order): basketball, football, soccer

League whose games they most like to attend in person: major league baseball

Percentage who rate their athletic ability as expert: 40.2

Percentage who believe having a boyfriend or girlfriend is the biggest problem facing them: 39.2

Percentage who own a Nintendo 64, Sony PlayStation, Nintendo Gameboy: 59.1, 58.0, 53.8

Percentage who own in-line skates, skateboard, snowboard: 58.8, 42.2, 22.4

Percentage who have stopped playing a sport because of a lack of time: 29.1

Favorite candy (in order): Butterfinger, Skittles, Starburst

Pieces of gum chewed per week: three to four

Percentage who believe that being physically fit is extremely important: 57.4

Percentage who are afraid of being fat: 81.0

Favorite TV shows (in order): *SpongeBob SquarePants, The Simpsons, Lizzie McGuire*

Percentage who own or plan to get a cellphone in the next six months: 16.9

What they rank as the biggest problem facing the U.S.: terrorism

Percentage who think that Pete Rose should be allowed in the Hall of Fame: 44.6

Sources: SI FOR KIDS survey, 2003 Roper Youth Report, U.S. Census Bureau, Eating Disorders Awareness and Prevention

page 68). "My advice to every 10-year-old baseball player is to put down your glove at the end of the season and try something else," says Ripken, whose 10-year-old son, Ryan, also plays soccer and basketball. Ryan's dad believes that the balance and footwork that soccer requires, and the explosiveness and hand-eye skills that basketball demands, transfer easily to baseball.

There are exceptions, famous ones. But prodigies such as Tiger Woods and the Williams sisters, whose early dominance held up beyond puberty, play individual sports, in which the cognitive challenge differs from that in team sports. Many sports psychologists and physical educators believe that before age 12, children simply aren't ready to perform the complex sequences of skills that many team sports require, just as calculus would flummox a kid still struggling with long division. Think about the movements and hand-eye skills that must be strung together to turn a pivot at second base for a double play. Or the welter of options facing a young basketball player who has received a pass as defenders converge on her, and as coaches, parents and even teammates shout often-conflicting advice. Or what sports sociologist Jay Coakley calls "the beehive effect" in youth soccer, in which all the worker bees swarm after the queen with the ball, spacing and positioning be damned—a common scene that tends to drive parents and coaches nuts. Perhaps it wouldn't if the adults reminded themselves that a typical 10-year-old shouldn't be expected to do much else.

Still many parents want to know whether their 10-year-old has a future. "They ask me at seven, eight, all the way up to 14, 'Is my child wasting his time in his sport?' " says Paul Musser, a travel-team basketball coach and camp director in South Florida. "I always ask them to clarify that, and it invariably comes down to, 'Are they going to get a scholarship?' And that to me is mind-boggling."

Musser cites one of his fourth-grade basketball players, whose dad, a basketball coach himself, enrolled him in fifth-grade travel-team ball. But as a result of the pressure he felt, the boy simply didn't show up. "That's the most dangerous thing about putting too much pressure on them when they're 10," says Musser. "By 12 they're not playing anymore. At 14 they can get into trouble when they're not playing sports."

Ditter is treating a young athlete from an upper-middle-class family who has just turned 11. For about six months this child had gone on a stealing binge, lifting wallets, cellphones and Palm Pilots from teammates, coaches, even a teacher. It turned out the child desperately wanted to please his father, who was extremely vocal on the sideline. "What came out was the tremendous pressure this kid felt he was under because of sports," Ditter says. "It was almost as if this boy was saying to himself, 'I can't legitimately win, so I'll steal.' He breaks down in tears and talks about how he hated himself because he could never feel he was good enough. He's doing much better now, not stealing anymore, but he has a tough decision: Does he want to remain in that competitive environment?"

If youth sports can have so much influence on the 10-year-old psyche, it can also disrupt the development of the 10-year-

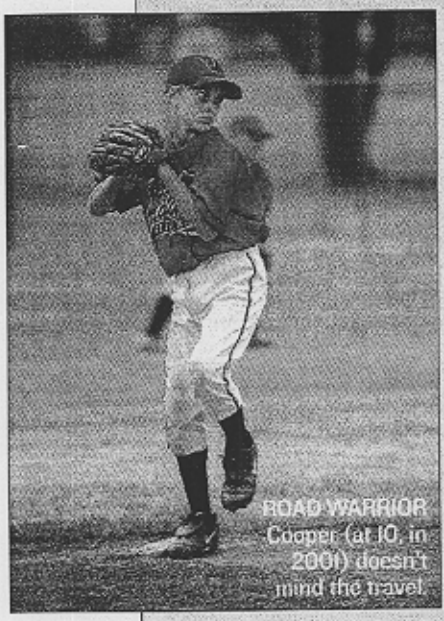
LEON EDWARDS; MANNY MILLAN (INSET)

A BOY ON A MISSION

Baseball or Bust

With big league dreams, Cooper Moseley played 127 games in 10-and-under ball

IT WAS after the 2001 U.S. Specialty Sports Association World Series that Carey and Eve Moseley decided that the life of their 10-year-old son, Cooper, rarified though it already was, would become more exceptional still. Cooper played for the North Alabama Vipers' 10-and-under travel team, which had just finished fourth in an 82-team field. But their elimination had come with Cooper on deck, and the thought that he had narrowly missed a chance to change the result left him inconsolable. "None of the other kids were crying like that," Eve says. "We thought, Let's throw a bone in front of him and see if he'll run with it."



ROAD WARRIOR Cooper (at 10, in 2001) doesn't mind the travel.

Since that July day the Moseleys have tailored their lives to further Cooper's goal of playing major league baseball. The World Series game turned out to be one of 127 that Cooper would play in 2001, 90 of them with the Vipers, which are based in Huntsville, Ala., a two-hour, 45-minute drive from the Moseleys' home in Montgomery. From that August until New Year's, he appeared in another 37 games in three states as a guest player in tournaments with five other teams. "About half my closet is uniforms," says Cooper, who plays no other organized sport.

Cooper is an only child whose father and mother can arrange their work schedules to meet the demands of baseball. For the first half of that 2001 season Cooper was still a fourth-grader at Alabama Christian Academy, and the Moseleys sparred with teachers and administrators to spring him for the time to travel and train. Today he's enrolled in a modified home-schooling program.

This year he has played 91 games, all for the Vipers' 12-and-unders, but he's skipping fall baseball because a physician impressed on his parents the importance of downtime. He joins the East Cobb (Ga.) Elite Astros this winter, which will shorten his round-trips by 40 minutes. "[The travel] is worth it to me," says Cooper. "Playing baseball is my favorite thing to do."

"The biggest adjustment for him has been missing the everyday things other kids do," Eve says. "Like spend-the-night parties. He wants to do everything, but there's just not enough time.

"You don't *make* children do this," she adds. "Children *desire* this. Our goals seem far-fetched now, but if he puts the effort from here on that he's put in so far, he'll succeed." —A.W.

old body. Dr. Lyle Micheli, director of sports medicine at Children's Hospital Boston, used to see a steady stream of acute traumatic injuries like broken arms and ankle sprains. Now he's treating more and more repetitive stress injuries, particularly a disorder called osteochondritis dissecans (OCD). It's similar to a stress fracture, but it affects only the joint surface. And the growth plates located at the joint surfaces are essential to the body's healthy maturation. "Our sports medicine clinics are packed with kids with this condition, which wasn't the case 10 to 15 years ago," Micheli says. He recently encountered OCD in a 10-year-old football player, while treating him for a torn anterior cruciate ligament. With the growth plate in the injured leg affected, surgeons will arrest the development of the healthy leg to forestall a permanent discrepancy in length.

"There's some evidence that excessive running and pounding on the growth plates may affect the overall growth of a child," says Micheli. "We don't know how much is enough or too much, but we recommend that kids between 10 and 14 not run more than three miles a day. There's an old saying: No horse ever rode itself to death until there was a rider on its back."

WHAT DO ADULTS WANT FROM YOUTH SPORTS?

THE SHORT ANSWER is: far too often, more than they have any right to expect. When its 2001 report called youth sports "a hotbed of chaos, violence and meanspiritedness," the National Summit on Raising Community Standards in Children's Sports wasn't referring to some *Lord of the Flies* scenario in which kids are running amok without adult supervision. Nor are children responsible for the athletic landscape in South Florida, where youth football programs have become feeders for the high school powerhouses and a promising seven-year-old will be scouted and "signed" to practice but not play on what one disgusted parent calls "prepubescent taxi squads." Says Thompson, "If a child has specialized in one sport or played on select teams, she has seen a lot of adult behavior that clearly demonstrates that this isn't 'just for fun,' as adults have been saying. The unguarded reactions of parents on the sidelines, the criticism of performance, the shouting at refs—it all tells kids that this is serious stuff. No child misses the message."

Remarkably, a child might still be able to override that message. After a recent youth soccer game in which he failed to make a critical save, 10-year-old Adam Weinberger of Bethesda, Md., was approached by the father of a teammate. "He said, 'You should have gotten that one,' " Adam recalls. " 'It's O.K. But you should have gotten it.' " How did Adam react? "I was just—I really didn't think he had any idea what he was talking about."

But far more often kids hang on the words of parents and coaches. "Adults will emphasize competition because that's what's fun for them," says Martha Ewing, an associate professor in sports psychology at Michigan State. "Once they get the skills, kids will want to compete too, but adults want them to compete now. So they put their kids in a higher league and separate them from their friends, which may not be what children want."

Coaches deserve their share of blame too. In doing the reporting for his forthcoming *The Encyclopedia of Sports Parenting*, author Dan Doyle found 10 to be the age at which travel-team coaches begin to exert pressure to specialize in their

PETER GREGOIRE (3); DANNY MILLER (INSET)

A GIRL IN FULL

Different Strokes

One day soon Elizabeth Beisel, accomplished violinist and aquatic athlete, will have to make a tough decision

IT'S OPENING NIGHT, and the curtain at Rhode Island College's Roberts Auditorium is about to rise for the first of two performances of *The Wiz*. Elizabeth Beisel takes one last deep breath before stepping on stage in the role of the title character, the perfect part for this precocious 10-year-old.

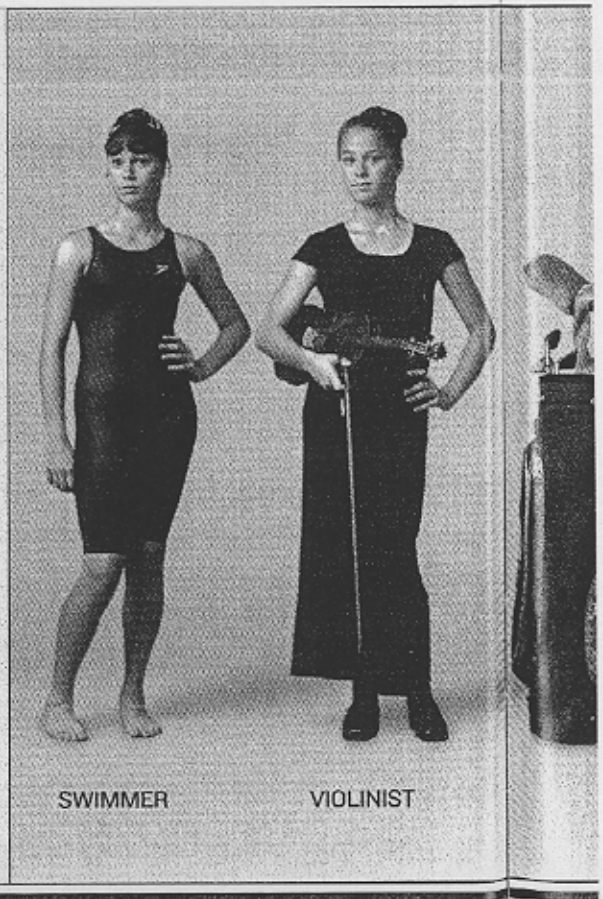
Participating in the children's theater program each summer is just one of the many activities enjoyed by the North Kingstown, R.I., native. She plays violin in the Ocean State Youth Orchestra on Sundays—following a one-hour lesson and five hours of practice during the week—and takes piano lessons as well.

But sports is as big a part of Elizabeth's world as is the arts. She owns a total of seven national 10-and-under age-group swimming records in freestyle, backstroke and individual medley, and as a year-round competitor has set her sights on qualifying for the Olympics someday. When the conditions are right, you'll find her surfing in Narragansett Bay, and when her schedule permits, she plays golf. (In the summer she's in a Thursday-morning junior league.)

"At times I feel like it's a little much," says her father, Ted, a construction superintendent. "All I care about is her being happy with it."

She says she is. "I couldn't just sit down all day and stare at the TV," says Elizabeth, who has a brother, Danny, 9. "I have to be active. I just love everything I do."

Elizabeth, who turned 11 in mid-August, will soon reach a juncture many 10- to 12-year-olds face: As an elite performer she will have more and more opportunities to participate at a higher skill level, an option



SWIMMER VIOLINIST

sport. "It's quite common for a coach to say, 'If you don't commit to our travel team, you'll be left in the dust by those who do,' " says Doyle. "Of course that statement is fraught with error, but it does happen often." Travel-team soccer coaches are notorious for this, particularly in the spring, when travel soccer is blamed for declining participation in baseball.

Indeed, Ripken can instantly separate the kind of youth baseball coach he prefers from the kind who is likely to turn kids off the game: "If you want to teach kids to hit, you tell them, 'Wait for a good pitch to hit.' If you want to win, you tell them, 'I want you to take until you get two strikes'—but in the end, what have you got? You haven't taught them how to hit, only how to draw a walk and run the bases."

WHAT DO KIDS WANT FROM YOUTH SPORTS?

Softball, basketball, time for fun
I can't wait to see everyone
Winning or losing I don't care
It's just fun to play every year
I get nervous before the game
But win or lose, I'm still the same
Play your hardest all the time
But don't take it too serious, everything will be fine
If we win, we don't brag
If we lose, we don't act sad
All these sports are true to me
Having fun is up to thee.

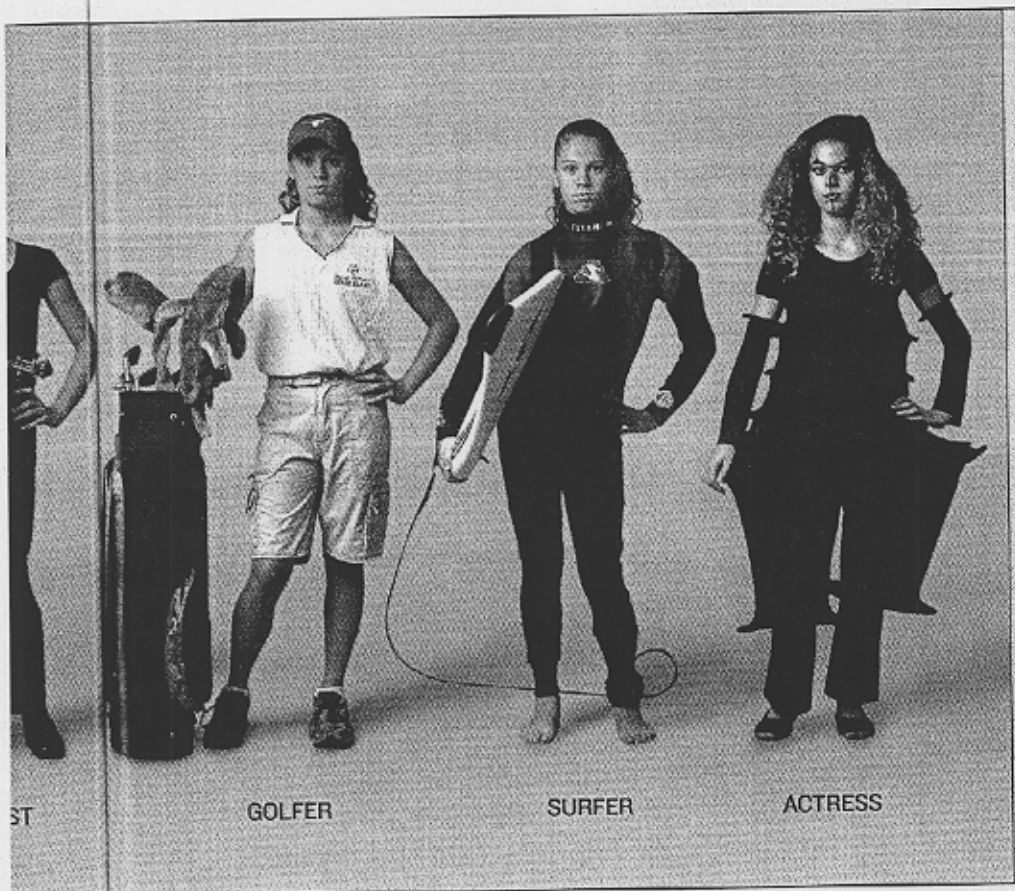
—SPORTS EVERY YEAR, by Lorie Borelli of Orange, Conn., written at age 10

AT FIRST it sounds like one of those federally funded boondoggles that former senator William Proxmire used to honor with his Golden Fleece Awards. A 1991 study by the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports (YSI) reached the astonishing conclusion that the No. 1 reason 10-year-olds play sports is to have fun. Yet what's revealing is the reasons kids were less likely to cite. "For the challenge of competition" and "for the excitement of competition" placed eighth and 10th, respectively, behind such motivations as "to do something I'm good at," "to get exercise," "to learn new skills" and "to play as part of a team." (YSI hasn't updated the study, partly because it believes if one were done today, it would produce similar results.)

When 10-year-olds speak, they give those findings voice. "I play a lot of sports, but I don't excel," says Andrew Somerville of Kensington, Md. "I can admit that I stink because I'm good at other things, and that's just me."

"Swimming's the greatest sport they ever thought up," says Elizabeth Beisel of North Kingstown, R.I., who holds seven national records for 10-year-olds but also surfs, golfs, acts and plays the violin and the piano *(box, below)*. "I definitely don't swim because I want to win. I know I'm not going to win every race."

"Playing beats watching," says Jack Grodahl of Portland, "and I love getting better. When I was eight, I couldn't really dribble a basketball that good. I had to look down or something. I could barely get it to the hoop." That was only two years ago—indeed, most kids begin playing organized sports around ages eight or nine—and that sort of newfound competency can be enormously exciting and all that's necessary to keep a child hooked.



PETER GREGOIRE (3); MANNY MILLAN (INSET)

that will require a greater commitment to one instrument or sport—at the expense of the rest. For now the Beisels are avoiding this specialization, but they realize that day is coming. This summer, as a member of the Magnus Aquatic Group based in Attleboro, Mass., Elizabeth swam in five meets nationwide, from Austin to Boston, increasing her three-hour practices from five times a week to six.

Of course now that she's in middle school, her homework load will increase and she will have the typical preteen girl's desire to spend more time with her friends. Child psychologists suggest that children delay specializing in one activity until they're at least 12, but what will Elizabeth do even then? "I don't know," she says. "I'm an athlete and a musician. I wouldn't want to stop either of them, but if I have to, I'll know it would be for a really important reason."

Would she give up the violin for a spot on the Olympic team? "Yes," Elizabeth says.

Would she give up swimming for a spot with the Boston Pops? "Not sure," she says.

"I hope that whichever she chooses, she has a passion for it," says her mother, Joanie. "It may not be either." —*Gene Menez*

At the same time, over the past decade municipal recreation leagues have been threatened by the rise of travel teams—essentially the best players who take on their counterparts from around the region, state and nation. Talk to the parents and kids involved in travel-team sports, and they're more likely to cite challenge and competition as their primary motivations to play. "Kids want to play with and against kids who are about the same skill level," says Jim Thompson, founder of the Positive Coaching Alliance (PCA), a growing movement to certify coaches and bring rabid parents to heel. "That's good. The downside is that parents are more invested in it. Coaches tend to be more professional. So it's easier for the win-at-all-costs mentality to take over."

Don DeDonatis is CEO of the U.S. Specialty Sports Association, which invited more than 370 teams of 10-year-olds to its three-tier World Series this summer. He believes his organization is serving young baseball players by offering three skill levels within each age group and by giving more advanced players a chance to opt out of their rec leagues. "I've coached rec ball and had kids who didn't want to be there," says DeDonatis. "Dad signed him up because he wanted Sonny to play baseball. The kid was looking at the sky and picking at grass."

In the world of 10-year-old travel-team baseball, there are two schools: muscle ball, in which a team is stocked with unusually mature kids who can hit and throw with power; and small ball, where teams whittle out victories with polished fundamentals. The North Alabama Vipers, a 10-and-under team that finished third at this summer's USSSA Major World Series in Henderson, Nev., play classic small ball. They've mastered cutoffs, 6-4-3 double plays and bunt defense. This apparent riposte to those who believe sequential

INSIDE OUT

The Perfect 10

It's the age when a kid becomes a player—on the field and at the mall. Here's what's going on in his body and soul

MIND While eight- and nine-year-olds tend to be conformists and willing to try a wide range of things, 10-year-olds **will assert their independence** and delve more deeply into their passions.

HEART Because this 10-year-old is a boy, he's more likely to **join a team first, then make friends** among his teammates. Girls at 10 tend to join teams with their preexisting friends.

IDOLS At 10, kids are **deep into their favorite player.** They'd rather know everything about Shaq than a little bit about a lot of different players.

BASEBALL Though it is the team sport 10-year-old boys are most likely to play, more than 60% of them won't be playing the game six years later—**one of the largest drop-offs** of any sport.

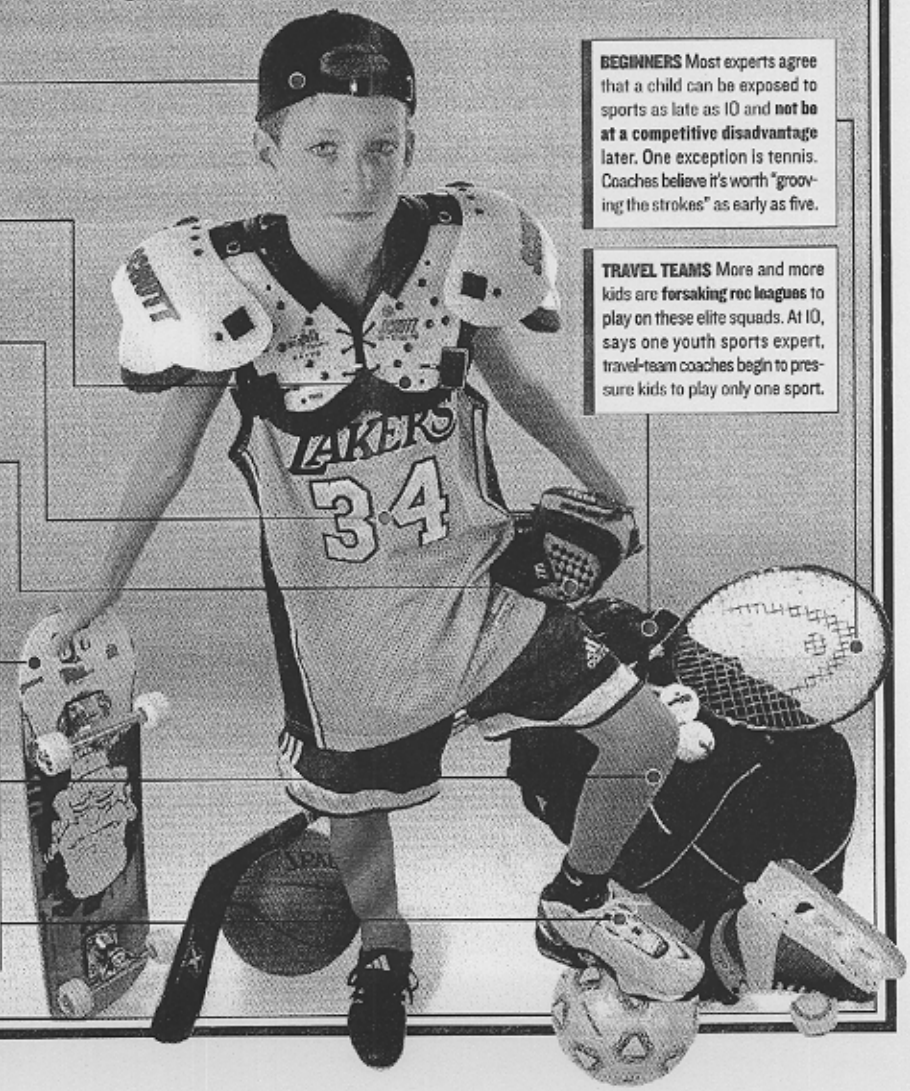
EXTREME SPORTS When coaches and parents take the fun out of traditional sports with misplaced emphasis and boorish behavior, kids increasingly turn to the **adult-free world** of extreme sports, in which they can make their own rules.

GROWTH PLATES Excessive training can cause repetitive-stress injuries that damage them. And damaged growth plates can **diminish a child's ultimate adult height.** Orthopedists recommend that a 10-year-old run no more than three miles a day.

BRAND NAMES By 10 kids have developed an **acute brand-consciousness.** More than 80% of eight- to 11-year-olds have a favorite brand of sneaker—and it's Nike by a mile.

BEGINNERS Most experts agree that a child can be exposed to sports as late as 10 and **not be at a competitive disadvantage** later. One exception is tennis. Coaches believe it's worth "grooving the strokes" as early as five.

TRAVEL TEAMS More and more kids are **forsaking rec leagues** to play on these elite squads. At 10, says one youth sports expert, travel-team coaches begin to pressure kids to play only one sport.



HOWARD SCHATZ, BABY DODSON (INSET)

CHRIS USHER/AP/SIPIX

skills are beyond the cognitive ken of 10-year-olds is the result of the V-I-P-E-R words emblazoned on the back of a team T-shirt: VERY INTENSE PRACTICE EQUALS RESULTS. "Bottom line, if you teach it, they'll learn it," says team founder Ricky Diehl. But listen to Diehl a little more, and it's clear that he keeps his kids on a tight tether. "What a 10-year-old won't grasp is good pitches to hit, when to steal and so on. He'll swing at a curveball on a 3-and-0 count." That's why Vipers coaches call every play, even every pitch, from the dugout.

"I know a lot of people don't like what we're doing," says Carey Moseley, whose son, Cooper, has spent more than five hours in a car to commute round-trip from the family home in Montgomery, Ala., to play with the Vipers, who are based in Huntsville *(box, page 63)*. "But this isn't for everybody. Bob Bigelow [the author and former NBA player] thinks kids at age 10 don't want to win. Well, don't tell that to kids on this team. I'm not a criminal because I allow my son to do this."

Certainly if adults reserve for themselves the right to pick lineups and dictate tactics, 10-year-olds will win and win quickly. But if kids get that authority, over time they may wind up even better. "How do you make good decisions?" asks the PCA's Jim Thompson. "By making bad decisions and learning from them. If the coach is making all the decisions, how can you learn?"

Whether a 10-year-old wants most to win or to have fun, adults shouldn't lose sight of what the child is hoping to get from sports. Some 40 million school-age kids play some sport, yet by 13 almost one-third of those who were active as 10-year-olds will have dropped out. "Of the friends I played soccer with at 10, pretty much half quit by 11," says Ethan Machurat of Amesbury, Mass., who's now 13 and still plays soccer, baseball and basketball, and has taken up lacrosse. "A lot just skateboard and don't do anything else."

Analysts disagree on what accounts for this attrition. Do kids willingly drift off to acting and music and Dungeons and Dragons? Or do adults turn kids off with misplaced emphasis and boorish behavior?

Rick Wolff, chairman of the Center for Sports Parenting at the University of Rhode Island, believes that 11- and 12-year-olds go elsewhere because parents and coaches aren't giving them the sports experience they want. He cites the boom in extreme sports as proof. "With mountain biking, snowboarding and skateboarding, kids know parents aren't involved," he says. "And because parents aren't involved, they know they can go do those things to enjoy themselves."

Indeed, that Youth Sports Institute survey asked kids who abandoned sports at 10 what might lure them back. The top three answers were: "If practices were more fun," "If I could play more" and "If coaches understood players better."

Which suggests once again that it's worth cocking an ear.

CATCHING ON Two aspiring backstops drill for McCarthy at his Home Run camp.

"They aren't yet set in their ways, so they'll absorb a lot," John McCarthy says of 10-year-olds. "They're the most popular group to coach."

LUNCH HOUR is over at Home Run Baseball Camp. The games of pickle and tag-up have wound down, and coaches keep their distance as two 10-year-olds choose sides at a diamond tucked into the far end of the park. "They know exactly who the best are," John McCarthy says. "They don't need coaches to tell them."

George Wojcik of McLean, Va., has been designated one captain, and he picks his team from the gallery of unwhiskered faces seated before him. "It takes me a long time to choose them," he'll say later. "I want to see who's making eye contact with me. And I'm influenced by people I've already picked."

With its culture of on-field chatter and idle dugout banter, baseball is well suited for the 10-year-old's fledgling rhetorical confidence. Disconnected thoughts materialize and fill out the natural pauses of the game, eventually organizing themselves into a kind of conversation:

"In the hole—that's an odd term, don't you think?"

"You know what? If a glove is in our lost and found for more than a week, we send it to the Dominican Republic."

After a teammate fouls off a handful of two-strike pitches: "Uh, uh, uh, uh, stayin' alive, stayin' alive!"

At an opposing base runner, to the tune of *We Will Rock You*: "We will, we will, pick you off! Pick you off!"

"I love infield chatter. The only problem is, you don't want to say anything insulting like, 'We want a batter, not a broken ladder.' "

"I know how it feels when everyone's saying, 'Ea-sy out, ea-sy out' when you come up. But 'Move back,' that's O.K."

"Did you know that the winning design to replace the Twin Towers is taller than the Petronas Towers?"

Somebody mentions the word *cooties*, and talk veers off in still another direction.

"Girls are impossible to understand. If you ask a girl if she has a crush on you, she'll always say no. Of course, boys do that too."

"A girlfriend is when she likes you also. A crush is just secret."

"Girls are more important than baseball. I mean, the human population depends on us."

"Yeah, if there'd just been Adam, he'd have had to have done it with a snake. Can you imagine? Half baby, half snake?"

Can you imagine? If you were 10, you could. □

CHRIS USHER/SI SIMS

HOWARD SCHATZ; GARY BOGDON (LEGS)