

In the
News

ARE YOUTH SPORTS OUT OF CONTROL

MORE THAN A GAME
It takes time and money
to play youth sports.

VOCABULARY

strategy: the skill of making or carrying out plans to achieve a goal

tournaments: a series of games that usually lasts several days

scholarship: money given to a student to help pay for school

commitment: a promise to do something

grind: boring, unpleasant, or difficult work

ISTOCKPHOTO/GETTY IMAGES

GO TO
WEB VIEW

CONTROL?

Some young athletes are getting serious about sports at an early age. Is that causing other kids to quit?

BY TOD OLSON



Samantha Burkett was just 4 years old when she fell in love with soccer. She loved everything about it—the

teamwork, the **strategy**, the running, and the feel of the ball on her foot. “It made me so happy to play,” she recalls. “Soccer had my heart forever.”

Before long, the sport also had most of her time. She practiced three times a week with her club team in Illinois, and on the weekends, her team traveled all over the country to compete in **tournaments**. They competed in Missouri, Indiana, Arizona, and North Carolina. College coaches scouting for recruits attended her games.

For Samantha, soccer wasn’t just an activity—

it was a full-time job. And she’s not alone. Welcome to the new world of youth sports.

PAUSE AND THINK: Why was soccer like a full-time job for Samantha?

Getting Serious

A generation ago, being an athlete meant playing on school teams: soccer in the fall, basketball in the winter, and tennis in the spring. Today, more athletes are devoting themselves to a single sport at an early age, which worries some experts. Travel teams like Samantha’s are growing quickly, but overall, fewer kids are participating in team sports. Why?

Some experts say that too much pressure is being put on young athletes to



excel in their sport. On some travel teams, 6-year-olds play for national championships. Websites rank elementary school-age athletes on their skills. And last October, a football player who was only in sixth grade was offered a **scholarship** to a big-time sports university. Kids who can't keep up or who just want to play for fun get frustrated and often drop out.

But some kids never get a chance to play in the first place. Youth sports have turned into a big business, and every year, American families spend about \$17 billion on their kids' sports. Samantha's dad says her yearly soccer costs added up to about \$8,000.

Not surprisingly, many families can't afford the costs associated with travel teams. Kids in these families often decide not to play at all.



PAUSE AND THINK: What are two reasons kids drop out of sports?

Calling It Quits

What about the teens who stick it out? One study found that 90 percent of elite high school athletes love their sport. Samantha was one of them. She didn't mind practices, and when she wasn't on the field, she worked on her skills at home.



“When soccer was taken away from me, I didn't know who I was.”

—SAMANTHA, 16, WHO WAS FORCED TO QUIT BECAUSE OF INJURIES

But a high-level **commitment** like that comes at a cost, which includes giving up other sports and activities. Every week, Samantha's friends invited her to spend time with them, but her response was always the same: “Sorry, I have to play soccer.”

After a while, the game you love can turn into a **grind**. Some kids feel like they are under mountains of pressure and quit. Others hurt themselves by putting their bodies through too much. More than 3.5 million young athletes are injured each year.

That's what happened to Samantha, who suffered three head injuries in a little over a year. As a sophomore, she had to give up soccer to protect her health. “I was always the soccer girl,” she says. “When that was taken away from me, I didn't know who I was.”



PAUSE AND THINK: Why did Samantha quit soccer? How did she feel about it?

The Washington Post

Early Lead

Youth sports still struggling with dropping participation, high costs and bad coaches, study finds

SERIOUS BUSINESS
Some travel team tournaments now look like pro sporting events.



Chance of Fun

Now, a year later, Samantha's doing better. She competes on the tennis team—where she's less likely to get hit in the head—and she's excited about college again.

Samantha has no regrets about her time on the soccer field. "It was 100 percent worth it," she says.

Most kids aren't as dedicated to sports as Samantha is, but that doesn't mean they have to be limited to watching sports on TV. Experts

say you should play at the level that makes you happy, which might mean a travel team, your school team, or just a pick-up game at the park.

And while you're at it, try different sports. Playing more than one reduces your risk of injury. It also increases your chances of having fun. In the end, is there really any other reason to play? •



PAUSE AND THINK: How can you reduce your risk of a sports injury?



5 Questions About Youth Sports



WHAT TO DO: Answer the questions below. Use full sentences.



1. Why are so many kids dropping out of sports or choosing not to play?



2. How much money do American families spend on kids' sports each year?



3. Who is Samantha Burkett?



4. When did Samantha start playing soccer, and when did she have to stop?



5. What can help keep young athletes safe and happy?
