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More Than a Game

Youth sports have become a \$15 billion industry. What does that mean for the kids who play?

By Sean Gregory for TIME, adapted by TIME Edge editors | October 30, 2017

Teacher's Guide

Lexile

- Main article (current view): 1000L
- Alternate reading level: 780L

Analyze Author's Purpose

In a commercial culture, anything can be turned for a profit, even our hopes and aspirations. [Expand Teaching Notes](#)

Joey Erace knocks pitch after pitch into the netting of his \$15,000 backyard batting cage in southern New Jersey. His private hitting coach tells Joey to shorten his stride. The coach is charging \$100 for this hour-long evening batting-practice session. It follows a one-on-one fielding lesson in Philadelphia earlier in the day, which also cost \$100.

Relentless training is essential for a top player like Joey. He plays for nationally ranked teams based in Texas and California, thousands of miles from home. He has talents that scouts **covet**, like lightning quickness and a rare knack for making slight adjustments at the plate—lowering a shoulder angle, turning a hip—to drive the ball. "As long as he keeps putting in this work, he's going to be a really, really solid baseball player at a really, really high level," says Dan Hennigan. He is Joey's hitting coach, and a former minor leaguer.

Already, Joey has a neon-ready nickname—Joey Baseball—and more than 28,000 followers on Instagram. Jewelry and apparel companies have asked him to **hawk** their stuff. Pretty impressive for a 10-year-old.



FINLAY MACKAY FOR TIME

Joey Erace winds up for a pitch in front of the batting cage his father set up in their yard, in Mullica Hill, New Jersey.

An Early Start

Joey is an extreme example of a new reality for America's aspiring young athletes and their families. Across the nation, kids of all skill levels, in virtually every team sport, are getting swept up by a changing youth-sports economy. It is increasingly resembling the pros, at increasingly early ages.

Neighborhood Little Leagues, town soccer associations, and church basketball squads that once bonded kids in a community have largely lost their luster. These local leagues have been nudged aside by private club teams. They include development academies associated with professional sports franchises and regional squads run by coaches with little experience. The most competitive teams **vie** for talent and travel to national tournaments. Others are elite in name only. They take expensive participation fees from parents of kids who have little hope of making the high school varsity, let alone the pros.

The cost for parents is steep. Families can spend more than 10% of their income on registration fees, travel, camps, and equipment. Joe Erace, Joey's father, says his son's budding baseball career has cost more than \$30,000. A volleyball dad from upstate New York spent \$20,000 one year on his daughter's club team. Much of it went to paying for gasoline. Up to four nights a week, the dad and his daughter commuted two and a half hours round-trip for practice, not getting home until 11:30 p.m. That pales beside the road time of a mom from Springfield, Missouri. In the summer of 2017, she regularly made a seven-hour round-trip journey to take her 10- and 11-year-old sons to basketball practice. Others hand their children over entirely. A family from Ottawa, in Canada, sent their 13-year-old to New Jersey for a year to increase his ice time on the travel hockey circuit.

"It's definitely taken over everything," says Magali Sanchez, a legal-records clerk from San Diego. Her daughter Melanie Barcenas, 9, and son Xzavier Barcenas, 8, play travel soccer. Practice and tournaments overtake their nights and weekends. Sanchez says they often have to skip family weddings and kids' birthday parties. "This sports lifestyle is crazy," she says. "But they're your kids. You do anything for them."



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Melanie Barcenas, 9, prepares for a kick in the practice field her father made in their backyard in San Diego, California. She plays in multiple soccer games on most weekends. To save money, her family stays in a hotel only if a game is more than a four-hour drive from home.

Business Is Booming

The U.S. youth-sports economy includes everything from travel to private coaching to apps that organize leagues and live-stream games. It is now a \$15.3 billion market, according to WinterGreen Research, a private firm that tracks the industry. And the market is growing rapidly. According to figures that WinterGreen provided exclusively to TIME, the nation's youth-sports industry has grown by 55% since 2010.

There are upsides to the **frenzy**. Some kids thrive off intense competition, the best players receive an **unprecedented** level of coaching and training, and the travel circuit can bring people of different backgrounds together in a way that local leagues by definition cannot.

But it's worth asking what's lost in the process. Already, there are worrying signs. The average number of sports played by children ages 6 to 17 has dipped for three straight years. That is according to the Sports & Fitness Industry Association (SFIA). A growing body of research shows that intense early specialization in a single sport increases the risk of injury, burnout, and depression. In May, *The American Journal of Sports Medicine* published a study by University of Wisconsin researchers. They found that young athletes who participated in their primary sport for more than eight months in a year were more likely to report overuse injuries in muscles, nerves, and tendons.

Additionally, fees and travel costs are pricing out lower-income families. Some 41% of children from households earning \$100,000 or more a year have participated in team sports, according to the SFIA. In households with income of \$25,000 or less, participation is 19%.

And some kids who don't show talent at a young age are discouraged from ever participating in organized sports. Those who do often chase scholarships they have little chance of earning.



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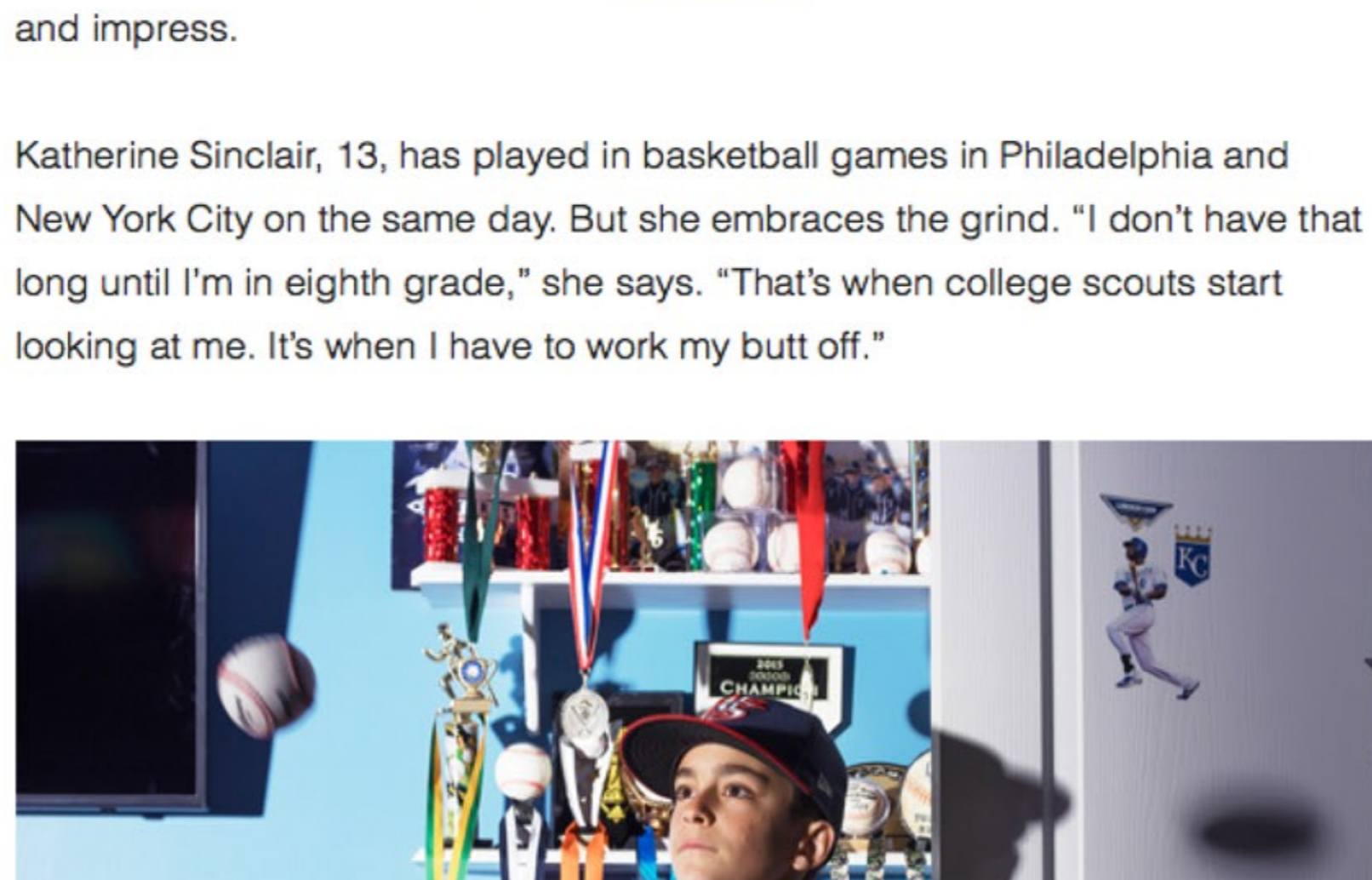
National Youth Basketball Report has ranked King-Riley Owens, 9, as a five-star prospect. He lives in Los Angeles, California, but he has traveled for tournaments to Utah, Texas, and Nevada. His parents used GoFundMe to help pay the costs. If the NBA doesn't work out, King-Riley wants to be a veterinarian.

The Scholarship Scramble

Millions of sports parents hope their children will earn a college scholarship through athletics. There may be no single factor driving the professionalizing of youth sports more than the dream of free college. The cost of higher education is skyrocketing, and athletic-department budgets are swelling. NCAA schools now hand out \$3 billion in scholarships a year.

The odds are not in anyone's favor. Only 2% of high school athletes go on to play at the top level of college sports, the NCAA's Division I. Still, the scholarship chase trickles down to every level. College coaches are now **courting** middle schoolers, and competitive high school teams are scouting the club ranks. Kids learn early that it's **imperative** to attend travel tournaments—and impress.

Katherine Sinclair, 13, has played in basketball games in Philadelphia and New York City on the same day. But she embraces the grind. "I don't have that long until I'm in eighth grade," she says. "That's when college scouts start looking at me. It's when I have to work my butt off."



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Joey Erace shows off the spoils of an already distinguished career as a youth-league baseball star.

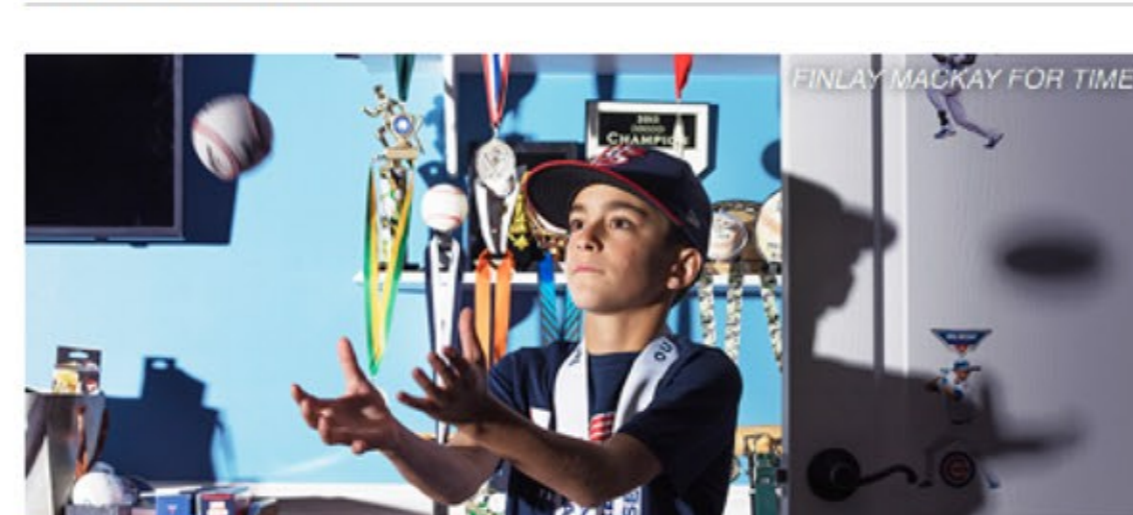
Kid Stuff

One weekend in early June, all eyes were on Joey Baseball. "Is that him?" a rival player asked his coach. Yes, indeed, it was Joey Erace of southern New Jersey, in the flesh. He was warming up on a field in the town of Sulphur, Louisiana. Joey had flown there to play for the Texas Bombers at a regional tournament.

But amid all the plane rides and high-pressure tournaments, there are still moments when things lurch into **perspective**. During a rare family vacation, in Florida, Joey was approached by a **person** at a restaurant. The boy wanted Joey's autograph. But Joey Baseball has yet to learn cursive. He is, after all, only 10 years old. They snapped a picture instead.

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