

The New York Times

April 11, 2004, Sunday, Late Edition - Final

SECTION: Section 14WC; Page 2; Column 5; Westchester Weekly Desk

HEADLINE: **FOR THE RECORD;**

A Washout at Age 9? Sports Cuts Go Deep

BYLINE: By MAREK FUCHS; E-mail: Fuchs@nytimes.com

DATELINE: SCARSDALE

JONAH WINSTON, who got a turtle for his last birthday, hardly seems the sort to have recently reached a decisive moment in his athletic career. Jonah, who also likes wrestling with his older brother and sister and named his turtle Anthony because the name popped into his head, was cut from a soccer team for this spring. Sports history is, of course, rife with legends of future stars, like Michael Jordan, who were once cut from teams. Most of those stories, though, focus on athletes who met their defining challenge when they were in high school.

Jonah, 9, is in the third grade. He is a student in the Scarsdale school system, which means he is not tracked academically. But he has been tracked athletically.

"It was a little bit difficult to get cut from the teams," said Jonah, fidgeting in a chair at his home here and speaking about the Scarsdale Youth Soccer Club travel team. "The kids were really happy to make the teams and were cheering and it was pretty hard because everyone was asking me if I had made it. I felt a little sad and a little mad."

Dennis Bianco, the club president, declined to comment.

Jonah uses the word "teams" because there were three of them available in his

age group for the Scarsdale Youth Soccer Club, at Levels A, B and C, that he was trying out for, all created so the teams could absorb many children. Still, many does not equal all.

Even with the perspective of time, the pain of being cut has not eased for Matthew Starr, now 11, who was only 9, like Jonah, when he was cut from the Scarsdale Youth Soccer Club. The club's Web site details what it is looking for during its multiday tryouts, when prospective players are scrutinized by a team of parents and coaches. Its Web site says: "The selection of players for teams is based on a number of factors, which include (in alphabetical order) aggressiveness, agility, athletic ability, attendance record, attitude, ball handling, 'coachability,' commitment, field sense, hustle, physical maturity, skill, speed, sportsmanship and teamwork."

Matthew, for one, thought he had excelled on many counts. He was excited while waiting for the call from the coach. "I thought I did really well in the tryouts," he said. But he was surprised and left close to speechless when a coach called and told him that he had not made the team.

"I was sad for a little bit but then got over it," Matthew said bravely, before reconsidering. "O.K., I cried. Maybe a lot."

Tryouts for baseball were up next. "But I didn't want to do that," Matthew said. "The first tryouts sucked out my confidence. The baseball time I didn't even try."

Lori Amer Winston, Jonah's mother, received the call that her son was cut. Then came a follow-up. A second coach thought she should know, so she could prepare Jonah, that he was the only third grader who had been cut from all three teams. Dozens had made it.

Dr. Mark Hershman, a childhood specialist at Four Winds Hospital in Katonah, said that cutting children at the age of 9 was both wrong-headed and impractical to those looking to develop a good crop of athletes. Nine-year-olds are still developing psychologically and physically and their athletic abilities are very much in flux, he said.

There is also a common misconception, Dr. Hershman said, that the process of trying out for a team at an early age prepares children for the world at large, which can be tough. If a 9-year-old plays in a game and loses, he can, with luck, learn the lesson that hard work in practice can give him a better chance next time, he said. But what does a 9-year-old who was cut have to look forward to? Next year's tryouts are a lifetime away, conceptually.

As for Jonah, a thoughtful little boy, he falls into bouts of self-recrimination: "Maybe it was because I was keeping the ball a little too much," he said. "Maybe I was going too much for myself. I wanted them to think that I was good at shooting, not just defense. Maybe I should have passed it a little more."

Matthew, for his part, looks forward. "When I have kids, I think it's better for them if they don't play too many sports," he said. "I'm probably not going to let them, because then they'll be stressed. And I won't let them go to travel teams because they'll just be disappointed when they don't make it."