

An early leg up

Personal trainers for kids? More parents are forking over the money, whether to give children an edge or just teach good habits.

By Rita Giordano and Kristen A. Graham

Inquirer Staff Writers

Their first game is more than two months away, but Jim Peditto's baseball team means business.

One night a week, the players hit the batting cage. Another, they clock 90 minutes with a personal strength coach, "maximizing their athletic potential" at Velocity Sports Performance's new supermarket-size training center in Cherry Hill.

"They all play other sports, but they're committed to this as an off-season regimen," coach Peditto said. "We talked about it, and seven of the guys decided to do it."

"The guys" are 11- and 12-year-olds. They play on Peditto's Mount Laurel Baseball Under-13 team.

Sean McDougall, a cheerful 12-year-old, summed it up nicely: "We wanted to do it, and our parents said they'd pay."

A growing number of parents here and around the country are helping their children get a competitive edge through personal trainers or the rapidly expanding field of sports training centers.

Paying fees that can easily reach hundreds or even thousands of dollars, parents help gifted athletes get honed into stars, would-be-cut kids transformed into players, or GameBoy grabbers turned into creatures with a pulse.

Often this is done through conditioning techniques once reserved for pro athletes.

The National Strength and Conditioning Association says its membership, which includes personal and sports trainers, has jumped 40 percent in three years.

"When we started 25 years ago, we were specifically dealing with the collegiate strength coach. It's trickled down," spokeswoman Robyn Curtis said.

Of course, it is controversial.

Many of the youths who get the training say they're delighted with their improved play and greater confidence.

Their parents say they want the best for their children, and that athletic achievement can boost confidence and maybe even win a college scholarship. Others see the training as a new advantage for those with money.

"The gap between the wealthy and the poor in this country has grown in the last 25, 30 years, and that is being manifested through sports," said Jay Coakley, a sociology professor at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs, who studies sports in society.

What some worry about are the extremes - driven parents pushing children endlessly and an intense youth-sports culture kicked up another notch.

According to the National Alliance for Youth Sports, 70 percent of children in organized sports drop out by age 13. "Kids say they drop out because it ceases to be fun, and it ceases to be fun because of the pressure of coaches and parents," said alliance president Fred Engh, author of *Why Johnny Hates Sports*.

Many of the trainers, especially those at the performance centers, say they urge multiple sports, in part to avoid burnout. They also say youngsters get positive reinforcement and learn to exercise safely.

What observers do agree on is that the phenomenon, while still relatively small, is growing.

Members of the International Health, Racquet and Sportsclub Association report increased interest in personal trainers for children, said Bill Howland, the association's research director.

"That is something that has just hit the radar screen in the last few years," he said.

Robin Wiessmann got her son, Alex Jarin, 11, a personal trainer. Not that Alex is a heavy-duty jock, said his mother, a financial-services consultant who lives in Upper Merioneth. He's also into Boys Scouts and politics. "I'm a really heavy Democrat," Alex said.

Having a personal trainer twice a week, he said, "is interesting and fun because they know a lot about how to take care of your body."

At \$40 a session, "it's expensive," his mother acknowledged. But, she said, "this is the time you've got to get the children, so they'll see the reward of fitness."

Meanwhile, those sports training centers are growing by leaps and bounds.

Velocity, one of the largest chains in the country, started with one center in the Atlanta area in 1999. There are now 15, and chief executive officer David Walmsley said the company expected to have 75 to 100 within a year, including centers in Doylestown, Villanova and Washington Township. The company estimates that youth sports training is a \$4.1 billion industry - driven, Walmsley said, by cuts to school sports and increased participation by girls.

The training that children receive at centers such as Velocity - and homegrown establishments such as Lightning Fast in Downingtown, Cherry Hill and Princeton and Aspiring Champions in King of Prussia - isn't sport-specific, although it can be tailored.

Instead, youngsters learn to develop their speed, strength and agility, abilities that help in any sport. Downingtown's Lightning Fast even has an Irish dancer who signed up.

And while pros and college-level athletes are welcome, the centers' target is youths - and not necessarily the best. "We see a lot of kids who would not have otherwise made the team," Walmsley said.

Children in these programs say they've seen results.

Amy Coyne, 17, of Wayne, a lacrosse player for Conestoga High School in Berwyn, said she had gotten faster and stronger during her two years at Aspiring Champions. Last spring, "I was on JV, and I got moved up to varsity for the playoffs."

Of course, many people couldn't even consider paying the tab (though some centers occasionally offer scholarships). To some observers, the training is another way that access to sports has become more a matter of privilege.

"The stakes for success in sports have gotten higher," said Coakley, the Colorado sociology professor. To many parents, he said, sports mean social status for children, not to mention possible scholarships.

Paul Morina, athletic director at Paulsboro High School in Gloucester County, a school with a good reputation in sports, said he could see the benefits of the training, but that usually it's kids with money who receive it. "If a person wants to do this, it's fine," he said. "But the kid who can't do it is at a disadvantage."

Coakley told of a 9-year-old who, after four years of competitive swimming, told his mother that he wanted to "retire."

"I think it's driving kids crazy," Coakley said.

Lightning Fast founder Duane Carlisle said some parents weren't content unless their children ended a workout pumping sweat.

"They feel like they're not getting their money's worth," he said. Some parents, he said, will yell to their children, "You've got to work harder!"

Kathy Henry wasn't yelling at anybody, just watching and waiting as her son Bryan, 14, went through his paces at a combined program of the Cherry Hill Lightning Fast and the Hit Doctor Academy, a baseball clinic. They head there five days a week from Columbus, Burlington County.

A shipping clerk married to a police officer, Kathy Henry isn't rich. The \$500 a month the couple pay for Bryan's training "is a big expense. This is a car payment," she said. "You sacrifice a lot. Vacation? We don't take one. This is our vacation."

But she wasn't complaining. She played softball in school. Loved it. No training like this then, she said. For Bryan's future, there are dreams of scholarships, college. But for now, there is this:

"I want to keep him happy," she said. "This is what he wants. He wants to have the edge."

