

Constructing a Teen Phenom

By MICHAEL SOKOLOVE

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If you were to compose a scouting report on the young baseball player Tommy Winegardner, it would note his strong throwing arm, the impressive balance and footwork he displays as an infielder and the beginnings of what the pros would call "pop" in his bat -- a budding ability to hit the ball with authority. But no one would say that he looks, at first glance, like the next Ken Griffey Jr. or Roger Clemens. At 14, Tommy is 5-foot-6 and about 145 pounds. He is still a little soft-looking in the way that many mid-teenage boys are, but his hard work in the weight room has started to build muscle definition, and his mother has changed her way of cooking -- more lean meats and chicken, less starch and fat -- to complement his physical training. He is just an average runner at present, but a more supple body might help make him faster. One thing Tommy has no control over, of course, is his eventual height, but everyone with an interest in his baseball career is eagerly anticipating a pretty good growth spurt, and with some good reason, since his father is 6-foot-2. "You can't put your finger on how big a kid's going to get," said Tommy's coach, Ken Bolek, "but if he gets as big as his father, I think we'll all be very happy."

What Tommy has, most of all, is a zest for the game and parents with the willingness (and means) to invest heavily in his athletic success. I met Tommy at IMG Academies, in Bradenton, Fla., where it is fair to say that he was majoring in baseball and where he was part of an emerging trend: the raising of team-sport athletes in the same kind of hothouse atmosphere that has long been imposed on children in individual sports like tennis and gymnastics. IMG Academies, known mostly for turning out tennis phenoms under the legendary coach Nick Bollettieri -- the latest is the reigning Wimbledon champion, Maria Sharapova, 17, who began training in Bradenton at age 9 -- now has 221 soccer, basketball and baseball players among its 637 full-time students. (The rest are tennis players and golfers.) Girls softball is likely to be the next sport added. IMG students practice their sport four or more hours a day, at least five days a week from early September through May -- longer than most professional seasons. They participate in intense physical conditioning at what IMG calls its International Performance Institute and undergo weekly "mental conditioning," or sports psychology sessions.

IMG is certainly on the outer edge of youth sports culture, extreme in all ways, but it mirrors mainstream trends in communities all across America: children specializing in a

single sport at ever-younger ages; professionalization of coaching; seasons that never end; an ethos of sports as work, a set of skills to be acquired and goals to be attained.

One day in early October, I watched Tommy arrive for practice at the academy's lush, manicured baseball fields. On the other side of a dirt road, a long line of golfers hit balls on a range, and on other nearby fields, several dozen soccer players had just started their practice. It was in the mid-90's, and the mugginess had brought out a thick swarm of gnats. But Tommy looked happy, and I could well understand why. His courses at Pendleton School, on IMG's campus, which had begun at 7:30 a.m., ended at noon, at least two hours short of a typical high-school day. Some IMG students attend other private schools in the area, but after IMG opened Pendleton -- "added an academic ingredient on the compound," as one administrator put it -- most students enrolled there. "The thing about Pendleton," Tommy said, "is they respect your sport."

As Tommy stretched and played catch along with about 30 other boys, his mother, Lisa, sat on a lawn chair in a shaded area, watching practice as she did every day. She was living with Tommy and his sister, Jacki, a college student, on IMG's sprawling 180-acre campus in a \$310,000 condominium that the family purchased last year, when Tommy enrolled at IMG as an eighth grader. Her husband, Chuck Winegardner, had stayed back on the Eastern Shore of Maryland to tend to his car dealerships, but he visited frequently for long weekends. Lisa called after every practice. "I need to give my husband full reports," she said. "What they're working on, how he looks, is he paying attention."

The cost for the baseball program alone at IMG is \$22,800 -- or \$30,300 for the players who board in dormitories rather than with their families. Tuition at Pendleton is about \$12,000 for high-school students. But for many at IMG, the sport and school fees are just the beginning. There is private coaching -- for example, Bollettieri's one-on-one tennis sessions cost \$500 an hour. Individualized physical training is available, as is private mental conditioning, which typically includes the videotaping of practices and games and the production of personalized inspirational tapes. With the extras -- including the expenses and fees associated with traveling to games and tournaments -- a year's costs can reach \$70,000, or even more.

Tommy Winegardner's parents had gone in for one of IMG's new offerings: media training. It is provided by a company called Game On, which has an office on campus and is "retailed out," as it is said at IMG, for \$2,500. Tommy is many years (if not forever) away from having to face some media mob after a game, but the program is also designed to prepare students for such eventualities as college and job interviews as well as to bring ease to everyday social interactions. Tommy, who has a mop of brown hair and an easy smile, noticed an immediate benefit. "It makes you more social," he said. "Like, if you're afraid to talk to girls, it will make you be able to do that better. I've talked to six girls so far this year."

A couple of Tommy's friends, fellow ninth-grade baseball players, overheard this. "You counted them up?" Johnny Walylo, a 15-year-old from Pennsylvania, asked. "When you

talked to them, did they say anything back, or did they just ignore you?" Tommy laughed and walked off. His friends followed.

Chuck Winegardner said that he was not sure how to calculate the annual cost of sending his son to IMG. "I'd hate to even throw a number at it," he said. "Counting the condo, it could be 50 grand; it could be 70 grand." Like other IMG parents I talked with, the Winegardners seemed to believe their son's passion and talent virtually compelled them to pay for his total sports immersion -- that if they had not, a moment and perhaps an opportunity would have passed. "He's sort of like a natural," Lisa Winegardner said. "I'm his mother, so I would feel that way, but that's what coaches have said ever since he picked up a ball. We just felt like he needed this to get to the next level. If you have talent, and it's overlooked, you're not doing your kid justice."

Tess Walylko, Johnny's mother, spoke in terms that were remarkably similar. Her husband, Ray, who owns a nursery, built a 40-foot-by-100-foot steel building next to their home near Johnstown, Pa., at a cost of \$80,000, so that Johnny and his teammates could practice baseball in cold weather. Johnny played on multiple teams and competed in more than 100 games a season. But still, Tess and Ray Walylko were not sure this was enough to fully nurture his athletic gift or to prevent it from slipping away. "We did this for our son," Tess Walylko said. "He's very talented. You only have a couple of years of opportunity to reach for your dream, and this is his -- it's his opportunity."

played organized sports through my high-school years in the early 1970's, but like most other kids of my generation, I spent many more hours engaged in unorganized sports: burst out of the house, pick a game, choose sides, play till dark. If we had five to a side for baseball, we "closed" right field, and any batter who did not hit the ball to the left of the pitcher was called out. We played basketball outdoors through the winter, even if we had to bring snow shovels to clear the court. We did things that would terrify today's hovering parents (myself included) -- like playing hockey on lakes that may not have been fully frozen.

It is no secret that adult-sponsored and -supervised play, especially in middle- and upper-class suburbia, has taken the place of unorganized sport. Take a drive on a summer day: most of the baseball diamonds and athletic fields sit empty, and the rare one with children playing invariably has an adult in charge. I asked Tommy, who is as devoted a ballplayer as there can be, if he had ever wanted to play so badly that he just rounded up friends for an impromptu game. He didn't think that he ever had. "Even if you wanted to," added his IMG classmate Tyler Pastornicky, a 14-year-old from nearby Venice, Fla., "you couldn't get anybody else to play. They wouldn't do it."

Organizing, coaching and tutoring young athletes has become an industry, and a big one. It is also one that is hard to measure fully (an estimate in *The Boston Globe* put it at \$4 billion) since instruction at the lowest end -- for example, high-school or college athletes charging by the hour to tutor younger players -- occurs off the books. Many large, multiteam soccer clubs, especially in affluent communities, are now run by paid directors, and their upper-level teams are coached by professionals rather than parent

volunteers. In some areas, the whole youth soccer industry has been taken over by pros who come from countries with deeper soccer traditions than those of the United States.

Not all the professional instruction is sport-specific. Velocity Sports Performance, based in an Atlanta suburb, specializes in turning kids into faster runners and charges up to \$2,500 for a full year's training. Velocity currently has 40 franchises in 22 states and Canada, with 5 more scheduled to open by the end of this year. The company's Web site says that it costs between \$215,000 and \$642,000 to equip a facility -- a warehouselike building laid with artificial turf and synthetic running tracks -- and get it operating. (Loren Seagrave, a co-founder of Velocity, is also affiliated with IMG.)

The people I talked with who are in the business of teaching and enhancing young athletes are not without ambivalence. They certainly see a value in imparting professional instruction in place of uneven (or even destructive) volunteer coaching. But they also have a sense of being at the center of a transformed and somewhat bizarre culture. "I got all the way up to Triple A ball," Brendan Sullivan, 29, co-founder and director of Headfirst Baseball in Washington, said. "That made me, what, one of the 1,500 best baseball players in the world? But my whole professional career, I never saw video of myself. Maybe I should have; it probably would have helped. Now I'm videotaping 10-year-olds. I had a kid recently who had this off-balance, bailing-out swing. His parents said to me, 'Can we get video analysis of that?' I had to tell them, We can sort of see what's going on here without resorting to that."

Sullivan spent \$20 at a Kinko's in Idaho Falls, Idaho, to make a flier out of his baseball card during his first season on a minor-league team, figuring he would do some private baseball coaching in the off-season. Headfirst Baseball, which began operating as a full-time business in 2001, now operates a large summer camp, provides year-round private instruction, runs leagues 10 months a year for players in various age groups and grosses more than \$1 million a year.

All teams are coached by members of Headfirst's paid staff, eliminating, Sullivan said, "the Alpha Dad as psycho travel team coach -- you know, the dad who plays his kid at shortstop or pitcher and bats him cleanup, and then the whole team falls apart. You're never going to have youth sports without parent volunteers, nor should you. We try to take various measures to lower the overall level of psychosis, but it's a constant battle."

Sullivan grew up in Washington and graduated from St. Albans School and then Stanford University. (His father, Brendan V. Sullivan Jr., is a prominent lawyer who has represented, among others, Oliver North.) "I know this world," he said. "I came from it. These are high-end kids under pressure, even on the field. Everything they do is with excellence in mind. They're not allowed to get anything but an A. I have to tell them: It's O.K. to go 0 for 4. Baseball's a hard game; it doesn't care how hard you're trying. Sometimes you're not going to do well."

Left on their own, children are natural cross-trainers. They climb trees, wade in streams,

play whatever sport is in season and make up their own games. The lure of the great indoors -- cable TV and the Internet -- has made them, in general, less fit. But what is recognized less is that the way youth sports are now organized has made even those who are dedicated participants less athletic than they should be. The culprit is early specialization: many young athletes can perform the mechanics of their own sport, but too often in a repetitive, almost metronomic way, and they lack many of the other elements of all-around athleticism. "I see it all the time," Sullivan said. "I look at some kids, and they look good with the bat in their hands. They're perfect. And then they go out on the field, and I say, My God, this kid is a horrible athlete. He can't run. He can't move. He's spent all his time in the batting cage. So many of these kids have played no other sport. They're one-trick ponies."

I heard variations of this same lament, repeatedly, at IMG, which receives a steady stream of kids who have focused on a single sport just about from the cradle. They have missed out on what David Donatucci, director of the academy's International Performance Institute, calls "important neural parts of athleticism." "We've got tennis kids who can't hop, skip or jump," he said. "We've got golfers who if you threw them a ball, they'd duck -- basketball players who can't swing a baseball bat. We've got some kids who are really good at their sports, but if you looked closer, you'd be surprised at how unathletic they really are."

They are also more at risk for injury. "We're seeing stress fractures, overuse injuries of all kinds," Jordan Metzl, medical director of the Sports Medicine Institute for Young Athletes at the Hospital for Special Surgery in Manhattan, said. The day before we talked, an 11-year-old boy came into Metzl's office complaining of a sore arm after throwing 120 pitches in a game -- more than a typical starting pitcher throws in a big-league game. The boy had an injury to the growth plate, which had been "pulled off the inside of the elbow." Metzl had also recently treated a 9-year-old girl for a pelvic stress fracture. She had been playing soccer six days a week, two to three hours a day.

U.S. Youth Soccer, the governing body of state soccer associations, recommends a series of measures intended to put the brakes on go-go youth soccer culture, like no travel tournaments for players under 10 that "promote winning and losing and the awarding of trophies." Also: no encouraging of specialization until players reach at least the age of 12. "We teach in our coaching courses that there's no advantage to it," said Sam Snow, U.S. Youth Soccer's director of coaching education. "Soccer is a late specialization sport. Players do not peak until they're in their mid-20's." I asked Snow if he felt his advice was being heeded. "No," he said. "It's not."

The more-is-more, overcoached, overscheduled approach to youth sport in America has led some coaches into an odd role -- reteaching (or teaching) athletes how to engage in free play. Tom Durkin, director of IMG's soccer academy, spent much of his childhood in Brazil, where, as he put it, "they play soccer in every form -- on grass, cement, dirt, in the street. Our society is one of constant supervision -- it doesn't allow for that." The consequence, he said, is that some of his best players come to him technically proficient

but lacking an important ingredient of soccer that comes from playing for low stakes and away from the censorious eyes of coaches: creativity.

Brendan Sullivan told me much the same thing: he is paid good money to impart sophisticated coaching, yet he sometimes finds himself teaching children how to be kids. For a change of pace, he will try to get them to organize their own games, or he'll show them stickball or some other derivative form of baseball. "They can't do it very well," he said. "And they don't like it. They're like: 'If I'm going to play baseball, I want Sully around. I want to be in uniform and I want an umpire.'"

"Dunk the ball!" Dan Barto, a basketball coach, shouted at 6-foot-11 Ricky Sanchez, 17. "Don't be laying it on the backboard!" It was 9:15 a.m. inside IMG's cavernous gymnasium. Throughout the morning, 41 boys and 9 girls practiced ball handling and shooting skills and then formed into teams for scrimmages. Watching them, what was most striking was their wide disparity in skills, typical of all the sports at IMG. The threshold for admission is not talent but money. There are a handful of stars, many earnest strivers and a few kids who just look clueless. Some parents choose IMG as a sort of boot camp for their wayward teenagers, others as a weight-loss camp. There's a way in which the place feels like a sports fantasy camp, where middling athletes get to play on the same field with real stars. Tony Tucker, the head basketball coach, told me of an overweight kid who came to him with low self-esteem and minimal basketball talent. The boy slimmed down and got good enough to at least share the court with better players. "We changed his life," Tucker said. IMG teams compete against area high schools, and while they do well, they do not generally dominate -- largely because everyone plays and the emphasis is on player development, not winning.

Sanchez, a fluid athlete with the quickness and coordination of a much smaller player, is considered a possible candidate to jump right from high school to the N.B.A. But I also saw a short, chubby kid shoot several balls completely over the backboard while practicing foul shots. Matt Uohara, 17, looked to be somewhere in the middle range of the players -- he is a clever ballhandler and good shooter, but at 5-foot-5, he is very short for an aspiring basketball player. A native of Hawaii, where his father is a gynecologist, he says he hopes to earn a place on the team at the University of Hawaii. "That's a good goal for him to have," Tucker said, avoiding the issue of whether it is a realistic one. Of the 50 basketball players, Tucker said, "30 of them are recruitable," but he meant at all levels of college basketball, not just the top Division 1 schools.

The baseball players display a similarly wide range of skills -- some very good players and a few who appear to have just taken up the game. But anyone who pays close attention to instruction should emerge with something like a Ph.D.-level knowledge of the game. I sat in a classroom one afternoon as Ken Bolek, IMG's director of baseball, lectured on hitting. "O.K., we've talked about Bernie Williams; now let's consider a guy like Ichiro," he said with the solemnity of a high-school English teacher directing his students to compare and contrast Hemingway and Fitzgerald.

Tommy Winegardner and his teammates sat ramrod still, zoned in on material that was quite technical. They learned about proper "launch position" -- where the bat and hands should rest just as the swing starts -- and about the difference between a "linear hitter" like Ichiro Suzuki, who keeps his weight evenly distributed and takes a balanced swing, and a "rotational" hitter like Barry Bonds, who loads his weight on the back foot and swings for the fences. (Bernie Williams, they were told, is somewhere between these two styles.)

Out at the ball field, I watched a four-hour practice devoted to "situations." "Runner on third base, one out, infield drawn in -- what do you do?" Bolek asked. Tommy was the first to answer. "You hit a fly ball." "Right," the coach said. For the next 30 minutes, hitters stood in against pitching from an assistant coach and practiced taking the kind of swing that would produce an outfield fly ball. When the infielders moved back, they practiced hitting ground balls to score the runner. They worked on sacrifice bunts and on hitting ground balls to the right side of second base to move runners from second base to third base. The last part of practice was devoted to the art of taking a proper three-step lead off of third base, a subject so arcane that I suspect many big-league players do not know the correct technique.

And this was just one day. The curriculum is exhaustive.

The coaching at IMG is also, undeniably, first rate. (I learned more about hitting in one hour from Bolek, who has been a college and minor- and major-league coach, than I did in four seasons of high-school baseball.) But on many other levels, IMG can be viewed only as the epicenter of a sports culture gone mad. What is going to happen to all of these kids whose parents have invested hundreds of thousands of dollars into their sports careers? A soccer player I met, Edward Cartee, 17, was hoping for a Division I scholarship, although the money his parents had already spent for two years at IMG is easily what a couple of years of higher education would cost. Tommy Winegardner wants to play professional baseball -- preferably, he told me, without stopping first in college. His friend Johnny Walylko stated the same goal: pro ball, no college.

The official line at IMG is that students who apply themselves will "max out" -- they'll realize their full potential, whatever it is. Explicit talk about the possibility of professional careers is discouraged, but it is sort of in the air, hinted at in various ways. One day I sat in on a mental-conditioning session for the baseball players. Trevor Moawad, the mental-conditioning coach who was leading it, interrupted himself and directed the students to look out the window. "You see that guy walking by," he said. "That's Jeff Berry, one of IMG's baseball agents. He's not here to look at you, but I guarantee, if you're doing something good, he'll know about it." (IMG Academies is just one unit of a multinational sports and entertainment business that represents hundreds of top athletes, including Derek Jeter, Tiger Woods and Venus Williams.)

There is no proof, though, that IMG's program develops a better team-sport athlete -- that Ricky Sanchez or Tommy Winegardner or the kid I saw shooting the ball over the backboard is any more likely to achieve their goals than if they had stayed home and



played in more traditional settings. Greg Breunich, the longtime director of IMG Academies, said that team sports began to be added a decade ago when the popularity of tennis seemed to be waning. He described IMG Academies as "a package business" -- it offers sports instruction, academics, private coaching and other extras, even real estate for those families who want to move to Bradenton. "We can make just about any sport work," he said, but he meant that in a business sense.

en Bolek has graduated about 80 baseball players over the last decade, and while many have gone on to play college ball, only one has been selected in the annual June baseball draft. (And baseball selects a lot more prospects than other sports; its draft goes on for 50 rounds, compared with the 7-round N.F.L. draft and 2-round N.B.A. draft.) "Creating professional players is not the standard I set for success, and it's never been suggested to me by the administration that it should be," Bolek said. "Every now and then, you get a kid with great genetics, a real quick kid or a big, exceptionally strong kid. But those are the exceptions. We take what we're given here and work with it. These boys are very lucky to be here. I don't have a doubt in my mind that it's the best baseball education available."

Tommy Winegardner, a natural right-handed hitter, batted left-handed when I watched him practice as part of a switch-hitting experiment ordered up by his father to make him more "sought after." I asked Bolek if he could succeed hitting from that side of the plate. "I don't know," he said. "We'll give it a year or so and see."

Bolek figures Tommy, along with his friends Johnny Walylko and Tyler Pastornicky are among the top 10 percent of players in the nation for their age group. But they're not old enough for him to even know their best position. Unless Johnny and Tommy get substantially faster -- or big enough to hit home runs -- they might have to be pitchers. "But are they going to be able to throw in the low 80's or in the 90's?" Bolek said.

Over at Mental Conditioning, they like to say that "no stone is left unturned" in IMG's quest to build athletes. The mind, the body, the technique, the competitive spirit: everything is honed to a sharp edge. But the raw material is the raw material.

One day I was standing in the weight room with David Donatucci as he scanned a couple of dozen young athletes, all of them with their own shapes and sizes and strengths and limitations. "You know what would be great?" he mused. "If Marion Jones and Michael Jordan had a baby. Now that would be an amazing athlete."

But IMG does not, alas, get involved at that stage of the game.

On Nov. 15, Tommy Winegardner returned to Maryland. He had dropped out of IMG. Until at least the end of this school year, he will be home-schooled and may play baseball for a private school that allows home-schooled kids on its team. "All of us were missing each other too much," Lisa Winegardner said. "It didn't have anything to do with IMG." Tommy said that he agreed with the decision even though he had to abruptly pack and

leave. He has since talked to his IMG friends a couple of times on the telephone. He hopes to return there for his senior year of high school and to board in the dormitory.

Chuck Winegardner believes he can get close to \$400,000 for the condominium at IMG he purchased a year ago for \$310,000; the real-estate market on campus is booming. On the day they left Florida, Tommy and his father went directly to a fitness center after their plane touched down in Maryland -- so Tommy could work out and continue the speed and strength training that they hope will make him a more accomplished baseball player. "He had been there a year and a half -- we just decided it was time to come home and regroup," Chuck Winegardner said. "But the plan is for him to go at it harder than ever."