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**Held Back to Get Ahead;**

*More children are repeating a grade in school to gain an edge in athletics.*

Experts worry about fairness and skewed priorities.

BYLINE: David Wharton, Times Staff Writer

By eighth grade, Perry Webster had little doubt about his talent as a basketball player, but he also knew that when he reached high school, he might have to ride the bench for a while.

It's something many young athletes go through, waiting to grow bigger and stronger. Webster took a different route.

With his parents' blessing, he chose to repeat his final year of middle school, staying behind as his friends moved on. This tactic, he hoped, might eventually "help me with getting a scholarship for basketball, which might help me with the rest of my life."

So far, the decision has paid off. After growing 2 inches during his second year in eighth grade, Webster became a freshman starter at Mission Viejo High last season and helped lead his team to a Southern Section title.

Nothing prohibits what he did. Experts say this sort of thing has gone on quietly for decades. They also call it troubling.

Repeating a year to gain an athletic edge can skew a youngster's social

development, they say, and create unfair situations on the playing field. There is also a matter of priorities.

"We get out of balance when we start putting too much emphasis on sports," said Marty Ewing, former director of the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports at Michigan State University. "It fits the caliber of our culture in sport, that being successful by whatever means is good."

The practice of staying back is borrowed from college sports, where for many years the rules have allowed athletes in their late teens and early 20s to "redshirt" a season, practicing with the team but not playing in regular season games, which adds a year to their eligibility.

Researchers don't know how often this happens informally -- and with potentially disruptive consequences -- among grade schoolers and high schoolers.

Most of the data are anecdotal, and parents are not overly cooperative.

"Most parents aren't going to advertise it," Ewing said. "They give you the socially acceptable response. That makes it hard to study."

But what is known points to an increasingly common practice.

In the 1980s, Texas high school officials didn't need research to spot a pattern. More and more middle school athletes were repeating a grade.

Ultimately, the situation came to a head.

"There was almost an entire class of youngsters held back in one of our schools," recalled Bill Farney, director of the University Interscholastic League, which oversees sports at Texas public schools.

"All the kids repeated seventh grade," he said. "It was a collective decision on the part of the parents. They just sort of decided together."

After that, officials enacted a rule requiring parents to submit evidence --

scholastic records or letters from counselors, for example -- to show cause for holding their children back. Otherwise, the athletes would forfeit a year of high school eligibility.

"I'm not going to say we've stopped this.... It still goes on," Farney said. But, he added, the rule has an effect "because there is some fear on the part of parents."

The California Interscholastic Federation stipulates only that an athlete who turns 19 before June 15 is ineligible to compete the following school year.

A state Department of Education official said that although the issue was of some concern, there had been no call to adopt stricter rules.

In the meantime, at Los Alisos Intermediate School in Mission Viejo, where Webster spent an extra year, Principal Jerry Ray sees a growing problem.

"In my first 10 years, we probably had only one or two cases," Ray said. "In the last several years, there have been at least that many per year."

Some school districts frown upon the practice, forcing parents to home-school or move their child to another district if they want to repeat. Ray's district gives parents the final say.

The administrator worries about plucking children out of the educational cycle, taking them away from their peers where they might feel like "fish out of water."

"Until Perry [Webster] came along, I'd never seen a success story, and I'm not even sure whether I'd call him a success story yet," Ray said. "Basically, you're giving up a year of a child's life on a bet that it will work out."

The gamble seems to be paying off for the Clausen family, whose youngest son, Jimmy, repeated sixth grade. A sophomore quarterback this fall at Oaks Christian

High in Westlake Village, he has drawn attention from college recruiters.

The Clausens acted even sooner with their other children. The two oldest boys, Casey and Rick, repeated kindergarten. They excelled athletically and academically in high school and became big-time college quarterbacks at the University of Tennessee. A daughter, Katie, also repeated kindergarten and was a senior volleyball player at Oaks Christian last season.

Their father, Jim, said he had been criticized for holding his children back. "I never saw the negative," he said. "Even in third grade, my kids were a little older, a little bigger, a little more mature. Maybe at that point they become the ball monitor because of it. We thought it was important for our kids to be leaders instead of followers."

Other issues can influence the decision. Mike Moustakas said his son, also named Mike, repeated eighth grade because of social, emotional and academic concerns.

"He has a September birthday and he was always a year younger than all the other kids in his class," Moustakas said. "We thought he would benefit from getting into a group of kids his own age."

Last season, as a freshman, Moustakas played shortstop and pitched for a Chatsworth High baseball team that finished undefeated and ranked No. 1 in the nation. In the same infield was another freshman -- third baseman Matt Dominguez -- who was 11 months younger.

Experts acknowledge that parents consider a variety of factors. Linda MacDonell, assistant superintendent for the Orange County Department of Education, said, "I guess you have to look at it from the parents' perspective.... They're trying to do what is best for their kids."

Still, few experts condone repeating, especially if a child has progressed normally through six or seven years of school. Myron Dembo, an educational psychology professor at USC, said it could "lower expectations in academic areas, because the whole emphasis is on sports."

Webster concedes that his second year of eighth grade was hardly enriching in the classroom, even though he took honors courses. "It was the same old stuff all over again," the 16-year-old said.

Parents also can put their child at risk for problems if athletic expectations don't pan out.

"You run into this whole issue of, 'My kid's going to get a college scholarship,' and if he can't play varsity right away, he won't go to college," said Dan Gould, the new director at Michigan State's youth sports institute. "Statistically, you're better off sending him to the library five hours a night. When you look at the number of academic scholarships, your kid has a much better shot."

Even Jim Clausen warned that repeating a grade wasn't right for everyone. "Just because you're a year older doesn't make you better," he said. But it might, and therein lies the allure.

In Texas, Farney suspects that coaches quietly encourage any parent who might express interest in giving a talented young athlete another year to mature. Brian Mulligan, the basketball coach at Capistrano Valley High in Mission Viejo, is uneasy with the idea but has seen his team benefit from a few such kids.

"Many of them do have an edge," he said.

Webster decided he wanted to repeat after watching his older brother play

basketball at Mater Dei in Santa Ana with teammates who had repeated grades. The teen quickly made friends among the younger kids in his new middle school class. The family even joked about the situation, yelling, "Finally!" when he got his eighth-grade diploma at graduation exercises.

His father, Del, figures that without the extra year, those 2 inches and 10 extra pounds, "he would have played varsity, but he would have been a reserve." Now, Webster has the chance to be a four-year starter, giving him more opportunity to be noticed by recruiters, and he will be among the older students when he graduates.

"We wanted him to have a chance to be 18 years old his [entire] senior year because he is an athlete," Del Webster said. "We thought physically that would be the fairest and best way to go."

Times staff writers Mike Hiserman and Rob Fernas contributed to this report.