



### **Don't wait too long to leap to elite**

Fall means a new season for many community sports groups, and it may also mean a time for kids to try out for travel, all-star or "representative" (rep) teams. It is a reality, however, that this leap to elite often must happen early in a kid's involvement in sports, perhaps as young as nine or 10 years of age. The competition can be extremely tough and the skill level very high, so it may be too late at age 13 or 14 to break into a rep team roster.

There are many issues for parents and players to think about when considering this step: in my experience, rep sports are a significant family commitment that includes travel and possibly fund-raising. The transition from house-league to more competitive elite levels is complex. I remember one coach warning us as parents of a prospective rep soccer player, "if you've got a boat or a cottage, don't bother trying out for my team."

Coaches are always looking for new talent in open tryouts, and they select players in an identification process that includes evaluating experience, skill level, mental toughness, coach ability, as well as player and parent commitment. It must be recognized that they also look for behavioral, emotional and physical aspects (such as size and body type) that a player can't control.

At the Waterloo Tigers Volleyball Club, John Nelson states that dedicated players (and their parents) interested in higher level volleyball will need to commit to training four hours per week and traveling to games and tournaments throughout southwestern Ontario. Good co-ordination, ball control, and an ability to work hard in a team environment are key, but Nelson notes that a volleyball player's size is an unavoidable factor in a coach's choices, especially at the older ages.

Soccer in our region has rep tryouts in the fall. Brett Knox, a coach with the Kitchener Youth Soccer under-15 Spirit girls, says a high level of talent but also desire to play and a willingness to continue to learn are key points in his selection of players. With heavy practice schedules, players for Knox must be dedicated to working hard throughout a long season.

The higher levels of youth hockey are extremely competitive. Erwin Nickel coaches the midget AAA Junior Rangers (ages 16-17), with players eyeing Junior A and beyond. For Nickel, the physical attributes and skill level of players trying out are important, but he and his coaching staff (which includes a physical trainer and educational advisor) also look for dedication, intelligence, attitude and what Nickel calls "heart." Hard work, he says, can make up for a lack of size.

Nikel's team -- players and parents -- must be committed to nearly 10 hours per week (not including travel time): two games, two hours of on-ice practice, and a further hour of dry-land training. The monetary commitment is considerable as well, and the team engages in fundraising and seeks sponsorships.

Rep try-outs can be a good learning process for players. They get a chance to move into higher-level competition, but more importantly they get a chance to perform their best under pressure, an important skill for later in life.

#### **THINGS TO CONSIDER**

Is the commitment to rep sports something the player really wants?

Do parent and player understand coach's approach to playing time?

Does the commitment of time and money fit in with your lifestyle?

Are there sufficient breaks from training to avoid athlete "burnout"?

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