

# SportsLetter Interviews

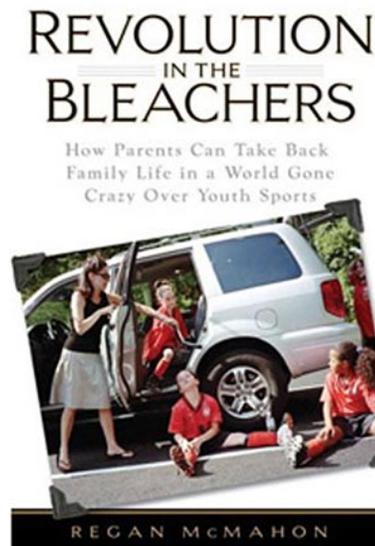
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## Regan McMahon

Journalist Regan McMahon knows about the trials and tribulations of youth sports from personal experience. Raised in Pasadena, she was a competitive figure skater from age eight to 16. More recently, she and her husband have spent hundreds of hours ferrying their two athletically inclined children to practices, games and tournaments in volleyball, baseball and soccer in the Bay Area.

In March of 2005, McMahon, the deputy book editor at the San Francisco Chronicle, wrote a feature article for the Sunday magazine section of the newspaper about the complex issues that families face today in youth sports, including the increased popularity (and expense) of club teams, the dramatic rise in overuse injuries among children, and the lack of downtime that busy families have. Reader response was overwhelming. “The emails started pouring in before I’d even had my coffee on Sunday morning, and they continued all day ... Clearly I had struck a nerve,” writes McMahon.

McMahon has expanded on the article in a new book, titled “Revolution in the Bleachers: How Parents Can Take Back Family Life in a World Gone Crazy Over Youth Sports” (Gotham Books). For the book, McMahon interviewed young athletes, coaches, parents, educators, sports doctors, therapists and professional athletes. Her interest in the subject, she writes in the book’s introduction, “lies in the societal shift in the United States whereby organized sports have become the primary way children socialize and increasingly the only way they play outdoors, and in how



team sports have invaded and transformed family life . . . We all know the many benefits of youth sports. But as youth sports have escalated in intensity, competitiveness, time commitment and parent involvement, certain risks are beginning to surface as well, from overuse injuries, stress and depression to inappropriate sideline behavior and fractured family patterns.”

The result, according to Steve Weinberg’s review in the San Francisco Chronicle, is a cautionary tale that is “part polemic, part investigative reporting, part parenting guide, part autobiography, part question-and-answer.” SportsLetter spoke to McMahon by telephone from her office in San Francisco.

— David Davis

**SportsLetter:** Why did you decide to take your magazine story and publish a book about this topic?

**Regan McMahon:** The genesis of the story that I wrote for the Chronicle magazine was that, as a mother of two athletic kids playing at the rec level, I knew that we were running around like crazy. It felt like a total rat race, and I felt trapped by the system. I looked at the families around me, and it didn’t seem like they were particularly happy leading this life.

One day I just thought, this is so different from how it was when I grew up. Everything starts so much earlier, and people are running around like crazy when they have seven year-old kids. I just wondered, how did we get here? What happened in the evolution of youth sports over the last 20 years that made it be this way? Does it have to be this way? And, whose fault is it that we’re in this? Is it the parents? Is it the coaches? Is it the system?

The other thing I was really concerned about was how this affected family life. That’s also something that’s very different now. People are not eating dinner together at home. People are not having any downtime or time together on the weekend because the family is split up, with one parent going with one kid to a tournament 50 miles away and the other parent

with another kid at a game 100 miles away in the other direction. So, I started thinking about what that does to marriages and what that does to sibling relationships. It seemed like a lot was going on, and people who were swept up in that lifestyle weren't challenging it. They might be grumbling about it, but nobody was standing back and examining it. I wanted to hold a mirror up to the culture and report on what I saw.

Within a couple of weeks after the article came out, I was approached by a publisher who said, "There's enough meat here for a book." I got an agent and we shopped the idea to the big publishing houses in New York. Within a month, I had a deal.

**SL:** In the book, you reveal that you skated competitively when you were younger. Now, with your kids, you're a "soccer mom." How have youth sports changed since your skating days?

**RM:** I led an unusual life because I chose a very demanding and individual sport. I was skating before school in the morning and then in the afternoon I went straight from school to the rink and skated into the evening and did my homework at the rink. Most people in my class didn't get serious about sports - and we're talking team sports -- until middle school or high school.

Back then, you got to be a kid, learning different sports in P.E., playing pickup games in the park, playing catch with your dad, shooting baskets in the backyard, riding your bike around town. You got to do that for years. Then, midway through grade school, you played Pop Warner or Little League. So, you had all those years, from zero to eight or nine or 10, where you just got to be a kid and have a lot of free play and unstructured play. That's what's dried up and disappeared.

One of the big factors that's changed is that now everybody puts their kids in soccer in kindergarten. So, the time commitment for sports starts early, and the parents start getting wrapped up in it. Some of these parents immediately want to move their kids from a recreational league to a more competitive league because they think that's going to lead to a college scholarship. They start making decisions about how their seven-year-old kids spend their time based on this fantasy, or illusion, of a college

scholarship years in the future.

All this has had big sociological implications. Now, it's hard for kids to have friendships -- it's hard for kids to have a social life -- if they're not on one of those teams. Sports has become the main place where kids experience their socialization now. They can't get play-dates after school because all the other kids are at practices.

**SL:** Why do you think this has occurred?

**RM:** Part of it is because, in most families, both parents now work. In the classic paradigm from the 1950s and the 1960s, mom was at home. Now, 72 percent of the workforce are women with kids under 18. One of the things parents are looking for now is, where do I put my kid that's a safe environment? So, they plug the kids into sports programs.

Related to that, in the 1980s there were a handful of sensational stories about kids being abducted. The media went nuts about that, and everybody began to think that they shouldn't let their kids play on the street because they would get abducted. The reality is, stranger abduction is extremely rare. It happens, of course, but mostly children who get kidnapped are involved in custody disputes.

Then, there's the factor of the baby boomer parents. They felt that, as kids, their parents weren't that involved in their lives. The kid would ride his bike to the Little League game, play the game, come home, and the parents would say, "How was the game?" And, that was it.

Now, the pendulum has swung the other way. The baby boomer parents - and the generations that have followed -- have decided that they have to be involved in every minute of their kids' lives. They have to be at every game. Some parents are at every practice. They think that they're bad parents if they don't do everything in their power, financially and otherwise, to give their kids every opportunity to be a success. They feel that they can't deny their kids any opportunity because, if their kids just get the right opportunity and the right training, they have the potential to be special, to get a college scholarship.

**SL:** Whom do you blame for this - parents? coaches? kids? - or is the blame to be shared?

**RM:** When I started out, I had a sense that it was the coaches' fault - that the coaches are pushing the kids too much. What I concluded after my research was that it's the parents' fault. I think that there are occasions where it's the coaches' fault, but it's the parents who are the ones who've made it kind of nuts. So many coaches I interviewed, from the youth level to the college level, told me, "We wouldn't push the kids this hard if the parents weren't demanding it."

**SL:** Why are parents so emotionally invested in their children's sports?

**RM:** I think there's a guilt factor. With two parents working long hours and trying to hang onto their jobs, the only time they have with their kids is on the weekends. So, they plug them into sports programs, which are pre-programmed activities, and that becomes the family time. Parents feel they have to be super-involved because that's the only time they have with their kids. Going to the soccer game and sitting on the sidelines and chatting with the other parents becomes their social life.

**SL:** You mentioned college scholarships: do many parents believe their kids will get a scholarship playing sports?

**RM:** Less than 1 percent of kids who play youth sports will ever get a college scholarship. Still, it's shockingly prevalent that people think that a college scholarship is a possibility. And, the coaches have bought into this. Some of the coaches at the private clubs make promises along those lines. They say to parents, "If you want your kid to play on a college team, join our club. If you don't do it - if you stay in the rec league or just play for the high school - you're going to be left behind." It's a threat, and parents feel that if they don't do it this way, then they're letting their children down.

Also, the emergence of ESPN, which televises minor sports like beach volleyball and lacrosse, glorifies youth sports. When I was growing up, they didn't used to televise the Little League World Series. Sports Illustrated didn't used to put the best sixth grade basketball player in the country on the cover, but now they do. The whole model of what happens

in professional sports has been translated down into youth sports. So, people think, "Wow, if I can get my kid into lacrosse, maybe he can be a star."

**SL:** It sounds like involved parents are good, but over-involved parents are not: where do you draw the line?

**RM:** I think the most important thing is to listen to your kids to see if they're still having a good time. If your kid lives and breathes basketball and wants to go to every basketball camp on top of the regular team, it's a good thing to support that -- provided you can afford it and it makes sense for your family life and the kid can still have some balance in life. The danger is when it becomes about the parents' needs and not the kids' needs. That's the only crime of parents - when it becomes all about their expectations, rather than listening to their child and finding out what their child wants.

What's troublesome is when a kid is not having fun anymore and the team becomes like a job to them. One of the girls I interviewed - she was 15 at the time - was on a highly competitive soccer team in the sixth, seventh and eighth grades. I asked her how many girls on the team were there because they wanted to be or because their parents were pushing them. She said that, out of 15 girls on the team, six or seven wanted to quit but felt they couldn't because it would disappoint their parents.

Parents also have to do what's best for their children. There's a big concern now about overuse injuries. I think this trend to specialize early and play one sport all year long - instead of playing multiple sports seasonally - is another mistake some parents are making. They think it's for a good cause [to specialize], but it's hurting the kids physically and possibly psychologically.

**SL:** How do you measure the cost - financial and otherwise - of the increased presence and importance of youth sports among families?

**RM:** The financial cost is daunting. Club teams are extremely expensive, with all the travel expenses and the membership fees. Many kids have trainers - even at age 10 - and \$100-an-hour goalie coaches. By the time

they're in eighth grade and their parents have invested all this money for all these years, the kids feel like they have to stay with it.

What I think is an unfortunate byproduct of all this is that it's promoting a class divide. Sports used to be a great equalizer. People from all backgrounds used to sign up for Little League and play together. Then, if they had any potential, they went on to play for the high school team. That experience used to be this special thing, with kids from a lot of different backgrounds playing together and bonding for three or four years.

What's happened now is that many kids are being aced out by rich, generally white kids whose parents can afford to pay \$3,000 a year for them to compete at the club level. The kids who make the high school team in sports like soccer and volleyball are the kids who play on club teams and have extra professional training. The coaches know that the kids who've been on a travel team for three summers have the background and the footwork so they won't have to teach them everything from scratch. That's a pay-to-play system.

Meanwhile, a lot of high school teams are being gutted because club coaches don't want their kids to play at the high-school level. They tell parents that high school is an inferior level of play, and that college recruiters aren't looking at the high schools anymore.

**SL:** What does that trend mean to youth sports big picture?

**RM:** I think it's unfortunate. I think there are all sorts of intangibles that come from being part of a high school team. One of the biggest aspects is representing something larger than yourself. You're representing an institution with a history. You're representing your friends, your classmates, often your community. You might be representing a legacy - like, if your brother went to that school. So, when they introduce you at the game and call out your name, it's this special feeling that you're part of something bigger. Kids who are advised by their club coaches to not play for their high school are not getting that experience. When they go play in a tournament, who's there? It's their parents, not their classmates. And they're not really playing for their team; they're playing for themselves. They're playing to be seen by college recruiters. They're representing their

personal goal to get ahead so that they can attain a college scholarship.

**SL:** You write that girls now participate in sports in much greater numbers, particularly after Title IX. What's the impact of this change?

**RM:** On balance, it's been very positive. I think sports are good for everybody, and they're especially good for girls because of self-esteem issues. A girl can feel good about her body and feel good about being strong and experience positive ambition and success. If they have a healthy attitude toward their body and nutrition, they tend to be kids who don't smoke and don't get involved in substance abuse. What I've found is that the girls who do participate in sports tend to have more self-confidence and a better opinion about themselves. They learn skills they can use in the workplace, like teamwork and working hard toward a goal.

What I point out is, by adding girls to the equation of youth sports, parents are running around with their girls just as much as they do with their boys. So, it's double the amount of running around.

The significance of Title IX is that, even though it was passed in 1972, the rules for colleges didn't get ironed out until about 1992. Suddenly, a lot of colleges realized that they had to have more scholarships for girls and had to have more teams for girls. So, there was this moment in time where there was a flood of girls that got college scholarships. That has influenced parents within the larger culture to think, "I've got to get my kid in youth sports because Mia Hamm and Brandi Chastain and all these girls are getting college scholarships." Those were the girls that people refer to as the "Title IX Babies" because they were there when the floodgates opened. But now, getting a college scholarship is just as tough for girls as it for boys. There's just not that many slots that open up every year.

**SL:** You mention Mia Hamm and Brandi Chastain: why did the sport of soccer become so popular among youth?

**RM:** Part of it is that kids starting out in soccer at five years old use skills that come naturally to five-year-old kids: running and kicking a ball. It's so much less difficult, at that age, than trying to hit a baseball or put a basketball through a hoop. Obviously, soccer is a complex game, but at

the beginner level, it's very easy for kids to have fun instantly. There's a lot of people on the team, and everybody gets a chance to play. And, it was a fun social thing for parents to bring their lawn chairs, sit on the sidelines, and watch their kids run around. It was a win-win for everybody. The sports establishment thought, "This will never catch on in America - - soccer is too European." But then it did catch on, and it got bigger and bigger and bigger. I think it's good that kids are out there playing and using their bodies. It's good that kids can pick up a sport when they're little. I think it's a little unfortunate that soccer has completely taken over American life so that nobody does anything else on Saturday mornings except go to their kids' soccer games.

**SL:** When did the emphasis on specialization in one sport -- and even one position -- start occurring and how does that impact youth sports?

**RM:** All of these excesses happened in the 1990s. The saddest thing is when parents feel that they have to have their kids specialize in one sport starting as early as five. They say, "You're going to play soccer and you're going to keep at it until you're the best."

There's all sorts of benefits - physical and mental - from playing different sports. It used to be that kids played football or soccer in the fall, then basketball in the winter, and then baseball and track in the spring. During the summer, they played everything and did a lot of swimming. It's good to use different muscle groups. That way, you can avoid overuse injuries. And, each sport requires different types of thinking. It's totally different to strategize in baseball - Do I steal or not steal? Should I sacrifice here? - compared to playing linebacker in football.

When I talked to the college coaches, they said that the best athletes on their teams were the guys who played three sports in high school. I also talked to professional athletes and coaches who said that there's no evidence that specializing early makes you a better athlete or guarantees you a college scholarship.

I just think it's good for kids to have an opportunity to try different things. Maybe he's a terrific soccer player, but he might have a passion for basketball. If you're pushing your kids to do one thing, you're denying

them all the regular aspects of childhood - like summer vacations and going to the school dance and having sleepovers with friends and holidays with relatives.

**SL:** When should kids start specializing in one sport and/or one position?

**RM:** The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children not specialize before puberty because their growth plates are still forming. If you get an overuse injury in your shoulder or your elbow before those growth plates have formed, that's going to be a more damaging injury.

**SL:** How about the role of coaches in youth sports: how has that changed over the years?

**RM:** Coaches used to be teacher-mentors. They were interested not just in skill development but character development. They were history teachers who were also the basketball coaches. They were on-site and part of the school community. They knew if there were pressures on kids that week because of finals that might affect how they ran practice or how they related to the kids.

What's changed is that there are more professional coaches. Now, it's all business. Even in high school: they're outside people who aren't seeing the kids all day long in school and who don't know what's going on in their lives. It's a different role.

The business of the private, year-round clubs and the personal trainers -- those are commercial enterprises. You're now out of the realm of volunteer coaches who are doing it because they love kids. These people have a financial stake in having kids specialize in one sport. So, the soccer coach is going to strongly recommend that your kid also play in his summer clinic.

**SL:** Do most coaches receive adequate training about being responsible leaders?

**RM:** I don't think so. Certain organizations have tried to address that, like the Positive Coaching Alliance. They work with leagues and do workshops

to train coaches and parents. They talk about winning not being the only thing in sports.

**SL:** What can coaches do to strike a balance between making sure the kids are committed to their team and letting them be kids?

**RM:** At the recreational level, keep things at a sane, balanced level. That means one practice a week and one game a week. If they throw in an extra practice, there should be a good reason - like there's a big tournament coming up.

My son's Little League team had one practice a week. The coach sometimes said, "I'm going to the batting cage on such-and-such night, and anybody who wants to come can come." It was an honestly optional practice, and it was something that was going to help the guys without high stress. The thing that makes kids better in sports is repetition -- not having them stand around in the outfield for hours.

On the ultra-competitive teams, the coaches will say, "We only practice two nights a week, and then there's an optional practice." Well, a lot of times the "optional" is phony. The kids are expected to be there, and their attendance affects how much playing time they get. So, coaches can be honest about the optional practices.

Finally, coaches should be aware that kids sign up for teams not because they want to win. They sign up because they want to play. If the coach is too focused on winning, some kids will sit on the bench a lot and won't have a good time. That's a delicate balance because one of the main things that drives parents up the wall is playing time.

**SL:** What are the implications of the disappearance of unstructured play among youth?

**RM:** Parents see the value in studying a lot. They see the value in playing team sports and being involved in organized activities. They've forgotten the notion that there's a benefit to unstructured play. The value of unstructured play has been lost.

When kids are playing in the backyard and making up games, they work out the situation and the rules. They decide that, because there's no third baseman, if you hit it to this tree that's an out. So, kids learn all these conflict resolution skills.

**SL:** You write about the decline of physical education and recess at school: how does this impact the situation?

**RM:** I think it's enormous. Again, I think that's another place where the culture has taken a wrong turn. If you want kids to lead a healthy lifestyle, they should be running around for part of their day at school. They should get exercise at school. They need to associate physical activity with fun and play so they can develop lifelong habits of being active. I think it's a crime that less than 50 percent of the states now have P.E. requirements. Institutions should be concerned about educating the whole child -- their mind and their body.

**SL:** You write about the increased participation in youth sports, and yet there's been a rise in obesity among youth. How do you explain this?

**RM:** That's a fascinating situation. One of the coaches I interviewed in the book said something interesting. He wondered: how much time do kids who are so involved in youth sports actually spend playing sports? They spend so much time driving to the games, and then they play for just a little while. They're eating crappy snacks in the car, and there's no dinner at home so they end up eating fast food.

The other thing is, with kids leading this kind of stressful life, when they get home they want to plug into a videogame. They want to watch TV. They don't want to go shoot hoops in the backyard.

**SL:** When you talked to teen athletes for the book, what did they tell you about the nature of organized sports?

**RM:** I think most kids like it. I think some of them feel worn out. They're aware of what they're missing. I talked to kids who missed the prom because they had to go to a volleyball tournament. I think that's a shame - I mean, the prom only happens once.

Some of them said, “Well, I know I’m giving up a lot. But it’s my favorite sport, so it’s okay.” I felt that way as a skater: I knew that I was living a different life than other people. What concerns me is that so many kids are leading this life.

I think the kids feel the rat-race aspect of it. One of the girls I spoke to said that sitting in her bedroom and listening to music is the unattainable dream. All her life is programmed to be on these teams. She spends all her time playing and traveling, and then she comes home and has to plug into homework. They’re under so much pressure to perform and succeed. It’s not okay to just be okay. You have to be great. If you’re on one of these competitive teams, the coach and the culture is telling you that you’re great. That wears on people - they feel they have to be a winner all their lives.

**SL:** How about steroids among youth: is this a big problem?

**RM:** I think it is a problem, and I think that high schools are trying to grapple with it. My friends at the Chronicle who wrote the “Game of Shadows” book about BALCO [reporters Mark Fainaru-Wada and Lance Williams] told me that coaches have been complicit in this. They’ll tell some kid, “Well, you really have to bulk up.” That’s a euphemism for “go get some supplements.

“ Unfortunately, testing [for drugs] is very expensive. School boards are not excited about this. They’d rather handle it with education and making sure the coaches are watching out. New Jersey is the first state to have regular testing in the high schools.

I think the news is out about the physical harm that steroids can cause. But a lot of kids are taking supplements, which have their own health risks. They’re not illegal, but they’re dangerous for kids to get into. Once they’ve done supplements, it’s not that much of a leap for them to say, “Well, if I want to compete at a higher level, I’d better start taking steroids.”

**SL:** What general advice would you give parents about not letting sports consume their lives and their kids’ lives?

**RM:** I would advocate balance. Try to think of the things that are also important to kids besides sports and winning, like spending time with family and relatives, eating dinner together at home, having family vacations that are not team related.

In the book, I quote the coach of a nationally-ranked soccer team who tells the eight-year-old kids who sign up for his program, “Everything in your life for the next eight years has to be put on hold. All of your vacations and all your free time are going to be spent playing this sport.” To not have Thanksgiving with your relatives for eight years -- that’s your whole childhood!

I would also encourage parents to have a realistic outlook. College scholarships are rare, so parents shouldn’t do everything based on the notion that their kids are going to get one. They can hope for it - and they can support their kids with their passion - but a college scholarship shouldn’t be the guiding force in their decision-making. Also, keep in mind what many college coaches told me: kids don’t need to specialize in one sport until middle school or later. So, why not consider having a life that’s more balanced when the kids are still young?

**SL:** What strategies should parents use if they do have a child who’s very talented? And how should they deal with pushy coaches?

**RM:** One couple I know has two very talented kids, one of whom is a prodigy. Their goal is to support their kids, but they don’t have the expectations that their kids are going to play professionally. That’s not what’s driving them. They’re trying to do their best and have their kids be on competitive teams so that they’re not bored. They’re not consumed with this fear that if they don’t follow the path that, rumor has it, is the path to the pros, they’re going to fail their kids.

With coaches, I would encourage parents to ask if what the coach is suggesting is necessary. A typical thing that happens at the club level is the coach will say, “Our team will play four tournaments this season.” Later in the season, the coach will say, “We’ve been invited to this tournament and it would be great if our girls went because we might play that other team in the championship.” They add things that wipe out family time and

add to the expense and travel time and stress. I would encourage parents to say, "Wait a second. We signed up for four tournaments, and that's what my family can handle. I'm voting no."