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HEADLINE: U.S. youth sports lose their magic amid pressures;
Book review

BYLINE: Craig Smith, Seattle Times staff reporter

"Game on"

By Tom Farrey, ESPN Books, \$24.95.

Tom Farrey, investigative reporter and father of three, spent years examining kids' sports in America and has a two-word description: "runaway train."

"Youth sport is the most important institution of all our sports, because it is where the magic begins," he writes. "It is where we learn to love sports, picking up fitness habits and rooting interests that can last a lifetime. But it's an institution at a historic crossroads, one in which performance often matters more than participation does.

"It's less and less accessible to the late bloomer, the genetically ordinary, the economically disadvantaged, the child of a one-parent household, and the kid who needs exercise more than any other the clinically obese."

Farrey, a former Seattle Times sports reporter, is now a senior writer for ESPN The Magazine, and an on-air journalist on ESPN's E:60 newsmagazine. His work has won two Emmys for outstanding sports journalism. This, his first book, is an important work in that it touches almost every American home with kids.

Some of the information in the book is startling: college athletes being paid for their sperm by women or couples who want athletic children; a "world championship" golf tournament for 6-year-olds; fourth-graders getting letters of interest from college basketball coaches; a national ranking for fourth-grade basketball players; 6-year-olds with personal trainers; and a New England couple that spends an estimated \$100,000 a year on sports for its five kids who aren't yet in high school.

But this isn't a book that is out to bash people.

"I must say, I came to like nearly everyone I met," he writes. "The stereotype of the abusive parent pushing the reluctant kid usually doesn't apply. Most want their kids to be champions in life, not just sports. And when parents go to extremes in prepping their kid for athletic stardom, it never springs from a lack of love."

As a father his infant son Kellen is on the cover he knows parental impulses and dilemmas firsthand. He deftly weaves his kids, all under 12 years old, and their situations into his story.

He writes that he and his wife, Christine, reluctantly let their son Cole play "travel" (select team) soccer at age 8 because they were concerned that "if he doesn't catch the bullet train now, he might lose the chance to play soccer in high school. The other kids would be too tactically advanced."

Farrey makes a lot of points and backs them up with research:

-- Grade-school travel teams don't reliably identify future stars but instead reward early bloomers and discourage other kids and leave them behind. Result: Kids quit.

-- Unstructured play is often more valuable than organized competition because it develops creativity. However, the emphasis is on adult-supervised teams and often the teams play too many games and over-emphasize winning instead of fun and skill development.

-- The pursuit of college scholarships from an early age can turn sports into a mission rather than a pleasure.

-- The poor aren't benefiting that much from sports. A Department of Education study showed that children with a high socioeconomic status (top 25 percent) are 10 times more likely to play Division I sports than those in the bottom 25 percent.

-- One of the roadblocks to more sports participation in the nation is the interscholastic system that only has one varsity team in each sport.

Farrey laments the deplorable playground conditions in many low-income communities and how limited the opportunities can be. He also criticizes the policy of cutbacks in physical-education classes at a time when childhood obesity is an epidemic.

Farrey interviewed hundreds of people for the book and one of the most interesting was Jack Welch, retired CEO of General Electric. Welch said his background of playing pickup baseball as a boy groomed him for life as a corporate executive.

One of the goals of youth sports is early development of athletes who eventually can win for the U.S. on world stages such as the Olympics. Farrey said other nations, particularly Australia, are much better at this and describes what they do. The Beijing Olympics will amount to a report card, and Farrey says he won't be surprised if the results are disappointing. FACTS

TOM FARREY will be at Elliott Bay Book Co. at 7:30 p.m. Monday for a book signing. More information: <url>www.tomfarrey.com