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HEADLINE: The Great One's message to parents: Let your kids have fun;
It's important for children to play other sports, says Gretzky after a spate of young stars have lost their desire for hockey

BYLINE: ERIC DUHATSCHEK

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He doesn't pretend to have all the answers about youth-hockey burnout, but Wayne Gretzky knows what worked for him - and what works for his kids.

Mr. Gretzky reiterated yesterday a gospel that many Canadian parents have ignored - that too often, young hockey players can get burned out by the pressure and the time commitment.

"First of all, I think every kid is different," said Mr. Gretzky, a Hall Of Fame player and currently the coach of the NHL's Phoenix Coyotes. "Some kids can play every day, all year long, like Gordie Howe - until they made him take his skates off. But that's a rarity, I really believe that.

"In youth hockey, in most cases, it's really important for kids to play other sports - whether it's indoor lacrosse or soccer or baseball. I think what that does is two things. One, each sport helps the other sport. And then I think taking time off in the off-season - that three- or four-month window - really rejuvenates kids so when they come back at the end of August, they're more excited. They think, 'All right, hockey's back, I'm ready to go.' "

Mr. Gretzky's comments came after a handful of recent examples of young athletes who, for whatever reason, lost their desire for their sport.

Stefan Legein, a Columbus Blue Jackets' draft choice and a member of Canada's world junior championship squad, notified the team last month that he wouldn't be attending training camp, reportedly because he'd lost his passion for the game. Brandon Regier, a 16-year-old from Abbotsford, B.C., passed on a chance to play for the Brandon Wheat Kings of the Western Hockey League this year (he was the team's first-round choice in the bantam draft) because he wasn't interested any more. Colorado Avalanche prospect Victor Oreskovich, a second-round pick in 2004, retired last October and returned to school to complete a business degree.

Mr. Gretzky, the NHL's all-time leading scorer, spent much of his youth as a multi-sport athlete and became good at both baseball and tennis as a youngster.

Winters, he'd spend hours skating on the backyard rink that his father, Walter, flooded every year in Brantford, Ont., once the weather got cold enough. But once hockey ended - and in that era, hockey usually ended in April - he was ready for something else.

Today, many young athletes, seeking to achieve an elite level in a single sport, often devote all their energies toward that pursuit.

Summer hockey camps are so common that many parents fear their children will be left behind if they don't participate in them.

"It's a fine line," Mr. Gretzky said.

"I know, for myself, when the hockey season was over, I couldn't wait to play baseball. I had no interest

in playing ice hockey until September. Then you get a guy like Gordie Howe, he couldn't skate enough. I don't have the answer, other than I think it's good for kids to participate in all sports."

Mr. Gretzky and his wife, Janet Jones-Gretzky, have five children - and the three oldest have chosen different paths athletically. His oldest daughter, Paulina, was mostly a dancer. Ty spent a year playing hockey for Shattuck St. Mary's, a prep school in Minnesota, but is now devoting more time to golf. Trevor is a two-sport athlete at Westlake Village Oaks Christian - high-school quarterback on the same team as Trey Smith, son of Will Smith, and Nick Montana, son of Joe. Trevor is also the catcher on the school's baseball team.

Mr. Gretzky said he encouraged all his children to sample a variety of sports.

"I always tell them, at a young age, you should just go out and play, just enjoy it," he said.

"As you go along and you get better, then you can start thinking, 'Okay, I can go to school' or 'I've got a chance to maybe get a scholarship.' But at a young age, 12 or 13, 14, 15 - just play and enjoy it. Learn what it's like to be around your teammates - the highs of winning and the lows of losing. Just enjoy it - and my kids do that."

The year after he retired from the NHL, Mr. Gretzky coached his son Trevor's little-league team.

Over the years, one of the most frequent questions he's been asked by parents seeking his advice was to assess the chances of their children playing professionally.

According to Mr. Gretzky, there is a neighbouring town close by his Los Angeles residence that he described as "a baseball factory."

"But not one kid has ever made it to major-league baseball from there," Mr. Gretzky said.

"It's a tremendous program; a lot of them get scholarships and play Division 1, but to actually play major-league baseball, not one.

"But everybody asks the same thing, 'Do you think my son can make pro?' The answer is, he's 15, just enjoy it. Just let them have fun."

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