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HEADLINE: More than a game -- Figuring out kids' sports options

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When it comes to navigating the wide world of youth sports, Jean and Erik Pedersen and their 7-year-old twin sons are just heading for first base.

The boys started out playing T-ball through Kingswood Athletic Association and tried microsoccer last fall through St. Wenceslaus Catholic School in west Omaha, where they're now firstgraders. Recently, they wrapped up a season of basketball.

But the family, which also includes two other sons ages 4 and 2, passed on flag football last fall because it would have meant playing two sports in one season. The Pedersens want to leave their sons time simply to run and play.

"We didn't want sports to dictate all our weekends," Jean Pedersen said.

Deciding which sports to try, selecting an organization or select club to play in and figuring out how much to play are all questions parents face from the time little Bobby or Sally breaks out of the backyard and gets involved in youth sports.

As children get older, the questions get more complicated: When, or if, is it time to move to the next level? Can kids hope to play high school sports if they don't participate in more competitive select teams?

Meanwhile, the number of options has grown, especially in the select realm. Even 8-year-olds can play on select teams in some sports.

"There are a lot of things to choose from," said Bertie Plutschak, program director for the Maple Street and Southwest YMCAs. "It's almost overload."

At the same time, Plutschak and others agree that kids should be involved in a variety of activities.

A mix helps kids keep physically active and develop skills such as running, kicking and striking that burgeon from birth to about age 8, said Mike Messerole, assistant director for the School of Health, Physical Education and Recreation at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

"If they get involved in one sport too heavily, yes, the child will become better at that sport than their peers for the short term," Messerole said. "But because of their peers' experience with different sports, they may eventually catch up."

Playing the same sport for much of the year can result in overuse injuries, which doctors are seeing more frequently, he said.

Tumbling and swimming are particularly good for young children. They can learn where their body parts are in space and how to move them. Team sports can be hard for a young child -- ages 2 to 5 -- to understand.

"It's all about them," Messerole said. "Sharing is not a big thing."

If a young child wants to try a team sport, he said, parents should look for modifications -- three-on-three soccer on a short field or basketball with a smaller ball, shorter court and lower hoop.

Parents can get a read on what their kids might like by playing with them, he said.

Sometimes kids will just ask. Messerole's son told him about three years ago that he'd like to try hockey.

"Afterward, he decided that he liked to skate but that the hockey part didn't thrill him," Messerole said.

But parents shouldn't necessarily let a child immediately quit. Messerole advised finishing out the season and then asking whether the child wants to play again.

Plenty of kids will drop out. Research from California indicates that more than 70 percent who start youth sports by age 8 stop playing by age 12, Messerole said.

When it comes down to signing up, parents should consider the time commitment, he said. How often does the team practice and play? What are the start and end dates? How does that fit in with other family obligations?

Parents also should look at a program's philosophy, said Messerole and others. Is the goal skill development or competition? Do kids get equal playing time? What are the backgrounds of the coaches?

"Look for an organization that conveys the values you hope to raise your children with," said David Jacobson, a spokesman for the Positive Coaching Alliance, a Mountain View, Calif.-based organization that has developed a model for coaching.

Parents, Jacobson said, should shop for a team and then be active and involved in it.

So how does a parent know whether -- and when -- to move a kid to a more competitive level?

Again, consider the child.

Bob Danenhauer, supervisor of physical education and athletics for the Omaha Public Schools, recommended consulting with a coach who has worked with the child.

"Most of the time, kids will let you know if they want to try a competitive level," he said.

When a child is playing in the top third of the team and wants to play at a higher level, it may be time to step up, said Pat O'Donnell, president of Omaha Quakes softball, a competitive program that holds tryouts.

Watch select teams play and size them up for fit -- for child and family.

"If they don't care that they're out there, then don't push them into something that's going to demand more of a commitment," O'Donnell said. "Everyone will be miserable."

Karl Ostrand is director of operations for Gladiator Soccer, another club program. He said a number of programs, from recreation associations to clubs, field teams for a variety of ages and abilities. Gladiator Soccer, for example, offers opportunities for little kids on up to collegebound elite players.

He tells parents there are two sides of the equation, no matter the level of play. If a kid isn't having fun, he won't develop as a player. If he's not developing as a player, he won't have fun.

Sometimes, working with the parents, he might move a first-team player to the second team so the child can have fun and success.

Parents also have to remember that kids develop at different rates, said Don Klosterman, women's soccer coach at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

If a child doesn't play on a club team until she's 14 and suddenly becomes a really good player, he said, a club isn't likely to turn her away.

So does a child need to participate at levels beyond the recreational programs to play in high school?

It helps, O'Donnell said. But it's not the only way.

Klosterman said about 90 percent of his players came from competitive clubs. But there are plenty of exceptions. One of his first All-American players did not play club ball.

Meg Searl, an Omaha mother of four sons, said deciding whether to let their sons play select ball has been one of the biggest struggles she and her husband, Chris, have had with sports.

They ultimately decided they didn't want to make the time commitment for select teams. Each boy plays several sports throughout the year at school or recreation organizations.

"If they've got that kind of skill, they'll be able to compete when they get to high school," she said.

Pedersen, with her younger family, figures she and her husband will just have to re-evaluate each year as their sons get older.

"The bottom line," she said, "is how much do you want it to be part of your life."

Recreation or in-house -- Most, if not all, games are played against other teams in the organization.

Practices and games usually are at the same venue, and playing time typically is equal. The YMCA has more competitive "spirit" leagues in several sports. Papillion Recreation Organization offers recreational programs and more competitive teams with tryouts.

Club -- May include teams that play in-house as well as select or travel teams. Select teams involve tryouts, more games, travel and higher costs, although the number of games, costs and travel vary considerably. Select teams typically hold tryouts at the end of the season.

Costs -- Start at roughly \$50 or more a season for recreation programs. (YMCA spring sports are as low as \$35 for members.) Competitive teams start at roughly \$300 and can run up to five times that much. Extra costs may include travel costs, tournament fees and extra coaching. The YMCA offers financial assistance by application. Some other recreation organizations and clubs also provide help.

Where to start

Contact the YMCA.

Talk with other parents.

Watch for fliers from school or news bulletins such as OPS Community Opportunities, a tabloid that goes to all Omaha Public Schools elementary students.

Seek club Web sites.

Check your city Web site.

Keep your eyes open for new options. OPS, with help from donors, has started several select teams in the last several years, in which it tries to involve its high school coaches and assistants. The aim is to grow the game and offer opportunities for students.

Coach your own kid?

It's OK to coach your own child, but the coaching should end when you get in the car, said several local

experts who've been both parents and coaches. Parents who aren't coaching should focus on praising rather than hollering advice from the stands.

Sources: Mike Messerole, University of Nebraska at Omaha; Bertie Plutschak, YMCA; Johnny Boykin, Papillion Baseball Association and PRO Papillion Softball; Bob Danenhauer, Omaha Public Schools; Pat O'Donnell, Omaha Quakes softball.

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