

Camps rewarding, expensive Business booming as youths look to improve their game By Angelique S. Chengelis / The Detroit News

Classes are not over yet at Livonia Ladywood, but Liz Obrecht already knows what her next few months hold: basketball and more basketball.

"My summer is gone," Obrecht said, pleasantly.

Obrecht is a 6-foot-2 starter at Ladywood, and basketball camps will dominate her summer. A senior in the fall, she has an exhausting schedule planned, but she is not alone.

The summer sports camp business is booming in Michigan and across the country. Parents are sending their children, some as young as eight, to sports camps run by high school and college coaches and, in some cases, professional athletes.

While some attend just for fun, most parents want their children to gain an edge on the competition, whether it be for a spot on the high school varsity or a possible college scholarship.

"The main reason we go to camps, it just gives them good coaching," said Ruth Ann Mumaw of Grosse Pointe, whose 13-year-old son and 16-year-old daughter will attend basketball camps. "They are kind of pricey, but it's good for your children. It's such a big deal in high school to be on the varsity, and that's what you strive for."

Big money

Camps, offered across the state on college campuses and high schools, are not cheap. A typical camp lasts five days and can cost from \$150 to nearly \$700.

They are extremely lucrative for colleges and their coaches. In 1999, for instance, Michigan State men's basketball coach Tom Izzo, whose three sessions of camps this summer sold out within a month, made \$78,000, according to records. Michigan football coach Lloyd Carr made \$11,000 in 1999 from the Wolverines' nationally recognized camp, and U-M women's basketball coach Sue Guevara made \$6,000.

Aside from attending the AAU nationals with her team in Orlando, and two tournaments at Plymouth Canton, Obrecht hopes to attend an invitation-only prep camp at Western Michigan, the Michigan all-state camp at Traverse City and the team camp at Michigan State. Last summer she attended a Kentucky blue-chip camp, and two years ago she attended North Carolina's basketball camp.

She couldn't put a figure on her expenses but knows her summers don't come cheap. She's hoping there will be a payoff for her family's investment.

"If I get a scholarship, it will come out pretty even,"

Obrecht said. "If you really want to go far, (camps are) worth the investment. They do give you an edge."

Sacrificing summer

Elise Morrison will be a junior at Detroit Country Day, and she, too, has a summer of basketball already planned. Squeezed into a tight schedule are trips to Vanderbilt's three-day camp and Stanford's camp.

"I'm looking forward to playing college basketball," said Morrison, whose older sister, Suzanne, earned a scholarship to Northwestern. "My parents are very understanding. They didn't push me into anything. I'm doing this because I want to get better. I know there's a girl out there doing 10 times more work than I am, so this is about my personal drive.

"Camps have been something worthwhile. I feel I'll look back and say, I was better because I went to some summer camps.' I think it's good for that week to compare your skills to other people and learn about what you have to work for."



David Guralnick / The Detroit News

Country Day's Elise Morrison, who will attend two camps this summer, says, "I'm doing this because I want to get better."

Personal trainers a preferred option

Some parents don't believe camps are the answer for their children. They find that personal trainers, such as Dave Guinane, who runs the Basketball Workshop, give the specialized, one-on-one training that will give their children the best chance to improve.

"I have parents tell me even after a half-hour, 'That's not the same kid I brought in a half-hour ago,'" said Guinane, who offers four, one-hour sessions for \$165.

Pat Manno of Dearborn is a believer. For the last three years, his daughter, Michelle, has made the 80-minute round-trip drive every other week to Guinane's Basketball Workshop at Joe Dumars Fieldhouse. Manno said his daughter's improvement was immediate. She will be a senior guard at Divine Child this fall.

"We've made a commitment financially and time-wise to see a trainer every other week in lieu of all these camps," Manno said. "Unless you're the superstar, the camps are not personalized, you're not going to get that individual help. Basically, we're looking for a positive experience. This is worth every penny. I am pleased I have the means to do it, but I would do it regardless, because I feel it's that important.

"You can see when you put your daughter against girls who don't go to trainers or don't go to the camps, there's a substantial difference. It's become so competitive. The pressure on the girls is almost ridiculous. The pressure to perform is always there and that's why you bring in these trainers to hopefully make the difference."

High school coaches interviewed said by no means do they suggest summer camps are required for a player to make a varsity team. Many coaches say players are not at a disadvantage if they don't go to camps. College coaches who run the camps also say they run teaching camps, not recruiting camps, although they admit they are always watching for that special player who might show up. More often than not, coaches say they will see an 11- or 12-year-old who's worth keeping tabs on.

Making best of it

Still, high school coaches tell their players to go to camps with open minds and not to be disappointed if they don't return with scholarship offers.

"I'm not opposed to camps," said Pat Battani, who coaches the Ann Arbor Huron girls basketball team. "But they really don't need them. I know their big thing is, 'We've got to get a scholarship.' I try to tell them, just relax. I think it's pushed by the parents -- the parents are on them about it because the parents are worried about spending money for college."

Tom Negoshian, the North Farmington boys basketball coach, agrees.

"I just talked to one of my parents the other night, and he asked, 'Do I need to send my kid to the University of Michigan basketball camp?'" Negoshian said. "And I said if the kid thinks he's going to get a scholarship there, they need to see him. Beyond that, it's hard for me to comprehend sending a kid for \$400 or \$500 a week -- it's just blown way out of proportion."

But camps are big money for big-time colleges such as Michigan and Michigan State. For smaller schools such as Ferris State, summer camps mean being exposed to future students and their parents.

"Certainly, the camp program has financial benefits for the school," Ferris State athletic director Tom Kirinovic said. "The money we're generating goes to so many different things, so it not only benefits us in athletics. And there are long-term benefits, like exposing your campus and university to all those kids. In the long run, they might remember their camp experience and want to attend Ferris State. It's a huge marketing tool for us."

Ferris State recently entered in a camp agreement with Nike, which promotes and handles the registration. Nike, Kirinovic said, gives Ferris State more national exposure than the camp program could get on its own.

Michigan State was the host to 8,500 campers for different sports last summer, and Michigan's football camp had nearly 2,000 players from across then United State. The more successful the college program, the more appealing the camp. Izzo's camp, for instance, has three sessions beginning in late June for boys, ages nine to 18. Applications were accepted beginning in February, and the camps -- \$360 for overnight and \$270 for commuters -- were sold out within a month. MSU hockey Coach Ron Mason's camps that range from \$300 for commuters to \$475 for overnight campers, also sold out within the first month.

Staffing the camps are the program's assistant coaches and its players. Often, assistant coaches from other Division I, II, and III schools also participate. Mason said the nice thing about camps is extra income is generated for his assistant coaches and players are hired and paid an hourly rate. The coaches, to whose names the camps are tied, also make extra cash and most try to be hands-on each day.

"I'm here all the time for the camps," said Mason, who has run a camp at MSU for 22 years and accepts about 130 players for each session. "I get on the ice minimum of once with every group, and I'm here to watch all of the scrimmages. I'm pretty involved. The kids get intensive ice time, so they get a lot of instruction. It's a total immersion in hockey. They're getting four hours a day, so if they really work at it, they'll get something out of it."

Calling all sponsors

There are many families that can't afford the expertise of Mason and other coaches. While the top-notch inner-city athlete likely is a highly sought-after recruit who doesn't necessarily need a summer camp experience, more marginal athletes from the city are the ones who lose out.

A recent study by the U.S. Department of Education said the top high school athletes from wealthy families are three to five times more likely to play sports in college than top high school kids from poor families.

Karen Langeland, the former MSU women's basketball coach who now oversees the Spartans' camp program as an assistant athletic director, said the NCAA does not allow college camps to give financial breaks, although some camps will deduct small percentages for team camps based on how many kids are involved.

Detroit native Virgil Phillips, director of REACH, which works with inner-city Detroit kids to encourage participation in sports, is an advocate of all children being able to participate in summer camps, and he tries to make that a reality.

"I try to get whatever I can get in terms of dollars," said Phillips, whose son, Rashad, became the career scoring leader at the University of Detroit Mercy and is now bound for the NBA. "Then whatever I can't get, I'm not too proud to beg."

Several of the Detroit Pistons players sponsor camps in the city, and they extend free admission to some of Phillips' REACH kids. Phillips said he gets financial help from Wayne County, which helped him send 100 kids to camps last summer. A University Camp program run through the city also allocates funds for this purpose, and Phillips helps the committee identify which children should receive those funds.

"Ninety percent of the kids I deal with can't afford it, and I know they would love to have an opportunity to go to a camp," Phillips said. "The kids I bring are hungry. They look at it as an opportunity to get away from the neighborhood. It's like a rut for a lot of kids. I grew up like that, so I understand that."

Raising cash

Mark White, the boys basketball coach at Detroit Renaissance, said his players have fund-raisers to help pay for an overnight trip to a team camp at one of the local colleges. The players had a car wash last weekend for that purpose.

"We try to expose them to as much as we can as a team, and that's why we try to raise money for these kinds of things," said White, who plans to take the team to Michigan State's two-day "shoot-out" camp. "The benefit is it's tremendous in building chemistry. We spend the night together, we learn different basketball philosophy -- but the most important thing is it builds chemistry."

Most parents say their motivations for sending kids to summer sports camps are simple and honest. Frank Bramos of Troy will spend nearly \$1,000 this summer to send his son, Jason, to the football camps at Michigan and Central Michigan. Jason, who will be a senior offensive and defensive lineman, attended U-M's camp last summer and had a terrific time. Based on that experience, about a dozen of his teammates also will attend football camps this summer.

"If you're among the best in the country, you look at these summer camps as a recruiting camp, but I can't look at it as that," Bramos said. "I look at it as just something I know is going to make him better."

And who knows, maybe there's a scholarship at the end of that rainbow.

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