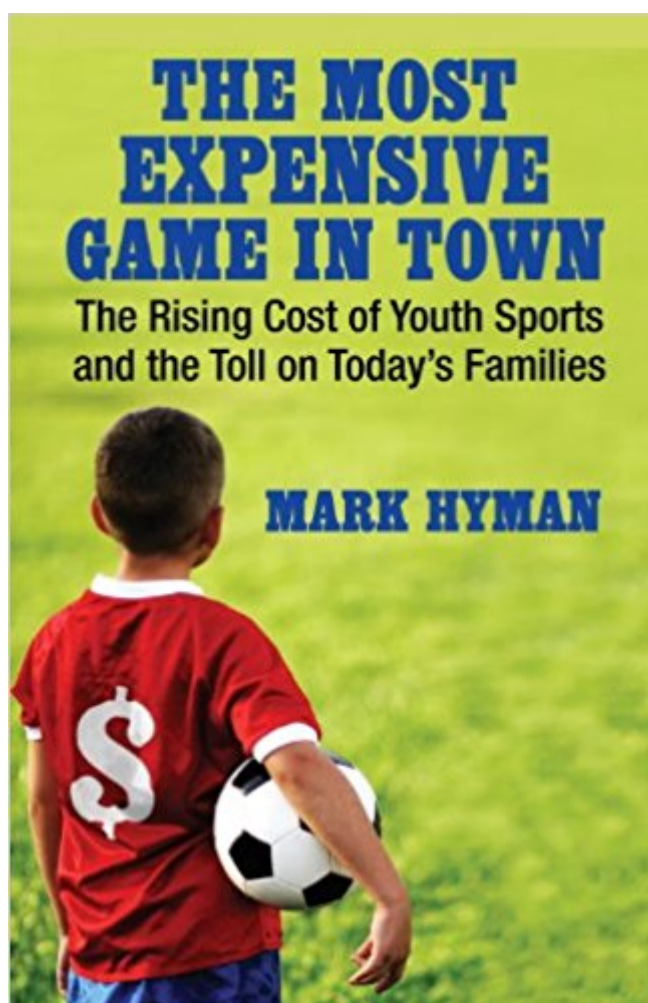


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# The Most Expensive Game In Town: The Rising Cost Of Youth Sports And The Toll On Today's Families



## Synopsis

A look at how commercialization has transformed youth sports from fun into a heavily commercialized and profitable venture. Examining the youth sports economy from many sides—the major corporations, the small entrepreneurs, the coaches, the parents, and, of course, the kids—Hyman probes the reasons for rapid changes in what gets bought and sold in this lucrative marketplace. He reveals the effects on kids and profiles the individuals and communities bucking this destructive trend of commercialization. From the Hardcover edition.

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## Customer Reviews

"Hyman -- a recovering sports dad himself -- adopts a refreshingly nonjudgmental attitude toward the parents who started out pacing the sidelines and ended up walking off the deep end."-Gordon Marino, New York Times Book Review  
"It is widely noted that youth sports have their problems, from the obsession with results to premature specialization. However, economics are at the heart of these problems, and what often gets left unsaid is clearly outlined in Mark Hyman's new book."-Doug Glanville, Time.com  
"[Hyman] presents the numbers to prove that most folks who feel that clinics for eight-year-olds and private coaches for children too young to brush their own teeth are more likely to lead to burnout than to brilliant careers."-Bill Littlefield, National Public Radio's "Only A Game."  
"This book, for me, is a Rosetta stone for understanding why youth sports have become so unbearable for so many."-Dave Zirin, The Nation  
"Hyman -- a recovering sports dad himself -- adopts a refreshingly nonjudgmental attitude toward the

parents who started out pacing the sidelines and ended up walking off the deep end. . . . With a mix of facts and anecdotes, Hyman pivots to explore the supply side of the equation. • Gordon Marino, New York Times Book Review • “It is widely noted that youth sports have their problems, from the obsession with results to premature specialization. However, economics are at the heart of these problems, and what often gets left unsaid is clearly outlined in Mark Hyman’s new book The Most Expensive Game in Town. • Doug Glanville, Time.com • “An eye-opening look at yet another way that profit-driven adults are robbing kids of fun. Mark Hyman’s compelling exploration of the business of youth sports today is an important read for anyone who cares about children or how the game is played. • Susan Linn, author of Consuming Kids and The Case for Make Believe: Saving Play in a Commercialized World • “[Hyman] presents the numbers to prove that most folks who feel that clinics for eight year olds and private coaches for children too young to brush their own teeth are more likely to lead to burnout than to brilliant careers. • Bill Littlefield, National Public Radio • “Only a Game. From the Hardcover edition.

Mark Hyman (@sportsparents) is the author of Until It Hurts: America’s Obsession with Youth Sports and How It Harms Our Kids and co-author with Dr. Robert Cantu of Concussions and Our Kids: America’s Leading Expert on How to Protect Young Athletes and Keep Sports Safe. He teaches in the sports management program at George Washington University.

I really wanted to like this book and had great expectations for it after listening to an interview with the author. Furthermore, I agree with the author that the cost of youth sports - just to participate - is out of hand. The book, however, didn’t really tell me anything that I didn’t already know. If you have a child that participates in youth sports, nothing in this book will surprise you. Sure I learned about some new websites and services that prey on parents in the elusive quest for the college scholarship and there are plenty of stories about the extent that youth teams travel, but similar stories could have been accumulated at any youth soccer, hockey or basketball game. The extent that ESPN now covers high school sports will come as a shock only to those readers that don’t generally watch sports on TV. I guess that the audience for the book though - people out of touch with the reality of youth sports. If you’re in it - even a little bit - you know exactly what he’s talking about. There’s nothing new here. And no solutions about how to put the genie back in the bottle.

I wish it had kept its focus more on youth sports rather than going into the endorsement and advertisement. Beyond this, it extended into scouts at the college level. Having said this, I am a parent who has fallen into the trap the author so clearly defines! This book was a gift from my dad. Though he did not read it, he thought it would be important for me to read. Daughter of the purchaserCEJ

This book describes exactly my experience with youth sports

I spent a couple of evenings reading Mark Hyman's book when it came out, *The Most Expensive Game in Town: The Rising Cost of Youth Sports and the Toll on Today's Families* (Beacon Press). The book is an investigative deep dive into how big businesses - and many little businesses - are profiting from the youth sports boom, and, sadly, how so many are putting their bottom line ahead of the interests of kids, and in the process ruining a critically important time in their lives, when they should be having fun, and allowed to just be kids. The book chronicles the insane amounts of money families are either required to pay or, many times, feel compelled to budget for extra lessons, clinics and products for their children in today's hypercompetitive world of youth sports, including a chapter on the burgeoning business of youth sports tourism, which has become part of the \$7 billion youth sports industry, in which hundreds of summer tournament organizers together spend more on marketing and advertising than Proctor & Gamble and Gatorade combined. If anyone had been watching me while I was reading the book they might have thought I was a bobble head doll I was nodding my head so often in agreement at the stories Hyman tells. For me, *The Most Expensive Game In Town* isn't news. Being in the youth sports "business", the subject of the book is very familiar territory. It's my life. Every day my e-mail inbox, and those of MomsTeam's editors, are flooded with press releases, meeting invitations, and pitches from public relations professionals and companies wanting to tell us more about a new product or service being marketed to sports parents and youth athletes. I have also seen the big business of youth sports, as they say, "up close and personal," attending my share of so-called "combines" and "showcases." Last summer, for instance, I spoke to the parents of nine hundred elite high school football players who were only too happy to practice and play in the dangerous heat and humidity of Virginia in the hopes of impressing all of the college scouts there to watch enough to land a college athletic scholarship. I've walked the fields of mega-tournaments, watched countless instructional DVDs and books, appeared on television to promote new football helmets, and, over the years, have turned down the chance to promote

hundreds, if not thousands, of products, many making claims that could not be backed up by peer-reviewed studies, some whose advertisements were later found to be misleading by the Federal Trade Commission. Not a week goes by without an introduction to some new money-making youth sports-related product or service being touted as a "must have" in order to be the next champion this, pro that. MomsTeam and I would be swimming in sponsors if we accepted even 10 percent of the sponsors who want to advertise on our site. And, yes, it is mind-numbing and exhausting. Which is a long way of saying, I am so glad someone else wrote this book! Hyman has done his homework. The book is meticulously researched. It includes interviews with some of the country's top youth sports scholars from academia, among them such luminaries and personal favorites as child psychology professor Frank Smoll, and sports sociologists, Michael Messner and Jay Coakley. The stories Hyman has selected beautifully illustrate the book's central theme: that too many organizations and individuals are putting making money well before the health and safety of kids playing sports, in the process essentially robbing them of their childhood and separating their parents from their hard-earned money, money that would, ninety-nine times out of a hundred, be better spent on a certificate of deposit to help defray their child's college tuition. A personal favorite is Chapter Two, titled "Baby Goes Pro", which tells the story of a business called Gymtrix, founded by a woman named Doreen Bolhuis, which sells parents of infants as young as six months on the idea that its DVDs and gym sessions will somehow give their baby an edge against their peers. It is based on a piece Hyman wrote in 2010 for the New York Times about Bolhuis and other "baby-sports" entrepreneurs who tap "into a wide vein of angst and insecurity among parents about when to start a child in sports", playing on a fear of "waiting too long" which "nudges us to search out soccer leagues with nursery-school divisions for three-year olds." Soon after the article appeared, I got a call from a producer at the "Today Show" who had read my book, Home Team Advantage, the second chapter of which, titled "Too Much, Too Soon", dealt with the subject four years earlier. She felt it provided ideal background information for a segment the show was doing on how the tentacles of the youth sports business machine were now reaching into the cribs of babies in a search for new customers. To make a long story short, I ended up as a guest on the show as part of its "Baby Goes Pro" segment, during which I pointed, not only to the absence of any studies to show that getting babies and toddlers started in sports gave them an edge later on, but to data showing that only one out four kids viewed as "superstars" at the age of 10, 11 or 12 went on to be a star in high school sports (e.g. were what is called "early bloomers"). The Gymtrix story, though, highlights both the greatest strength of The Most Expensive Game in Town and perhaps its biggest weakness. While Hyman does a great job of reporting, the book raises more questions than it

answers. Perhaps it is because the author is a journalist, not someone like me, whose business it is to offer practical advice to sports parents on how not to get, as I put it in Home Team Advantage, "sucked into the crazy vortex of competitive youth sports." For instance, if the problem parents face is marketers trying to separate them from their money for organized sports at ever earlier ages, instead of giving kids time for the unstructured, free play they need for healthy child development, perhaps the solution for parents is to start their own parent-run free play group for their kids at a local church, synagogue, mosque, or community center. While *The Most Expensive Game in Town* does a good job of dispelling the myth that youth sports has become so expensive that it is beyond the reach of inner city children and the poor, I wish the book had included a discussion of ways in which we can keep sports affordable for everyone. But even for someone who lives and breathes youth sports, I found the book thought-provoking and a "good read." Sports parents, less familiar with the subject, are likely to find *The Most Expensive Game in Town* to be an eye-opener. If the book gives parents pause, to stop to think about how and where their money is going, it will have done its job. But it will still be up to all of us who want to see youth sports become safer, saner, less stressful and more inclusive to do ours. Note: My review originally ran on MomsTeam.com

There's nothing wrong with this book, but there's nothing especially excellent about it, either. As another reviewer or two have noted, the main points in this book have been covered extensively by many other media outlets for many years. I'm not sure why a publisher would want to pay Mark Hyman to duplicate excellent magazine and newspaper work by him and many others, except that it's a hot topic. Hyman visits interesting places and does some first-hand reporting on some of the egregious businesses that have arisen in the sports-industrial complex, such as the communities that host youth sports tournaments or the hucksters who claim that their videos will get kids college athletic scholarships. Reading about that stuff just makes me glad that my teenage son is content to play community-level sports once a week, and that I can be an occasional substitute coach. The book suffers from a few things that probably reflect a rush job. First, the preface states (I'm paraphrasing) that the book will follow the travails of three disparate families who have kids in competitive sports. But the author references them only in one chapter, and the three families are hardly representative of anything, given that almost all of the parents are journalists and artists. Second, there's a chapter about corruption in urban sports leagues that are trying to groom the next NBA star, but I'm not sure what that has to do with sports in upper-middle-class suburbia, which is the focus of the rest of the book. And third, a few folks in the book are criticized for their actions in 2009-2010, and the author makes a point of saying they haven't cleaned up their act. But he wrote

the book in 2011, so it's not like they had a lot of time to adjust. In short, if you're new to the topic, this book is a good introduction. If you're already entangled in youth sports, this book is a reminder to keep your perspective and to watch your wallet.

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