

The making of an Athlete  
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By Lana Button

I'm a dance mom. My eight-year old, 10 year-old, and 13 year-old daughters dance- everything from ballet to hip-hop, and between the three of them we are at the studio over 20 hours a week, and spend at least 4 weekends a year at dance competitions. For my family it's worth it. My girls are active and happy in a studio that's like a second home. But life gets crazy with classes, costumes and competition fees. What exactly are you signing up for when your child takes the leap from a recreational to a competitive program? We talked with three families to see how they cope.

### **A Balancing Act**

**Who:** Sarah Dissegna

**Age:** 12

**Sport:** gymnastics

**Level:** 4

**Training:** 12 hours a week

**Cost:** \$2600-plus a year

Sarah Dissegna found her passion the moment she landed her first back flip. Since eight, Sarah's been competing in at least three meets a year. She's not training for the Olympics; but for the sheer love of the sport. But being on the competitive team at the Burlington Gymnastics Club in Burlington, Ontario means training 12 hours a week, 11 months of the year; which is a real time sacrifice, not just for Sarah, but the whole family. Even family vacations get planned around Sarah's schedule. "The gymnasts really only have July to relax," says Sarah's mom, Paula.

And if Sarah continues in gymnastics, her level of commitment will only increase. Level 5 athletes train 16 hours-and miss one afternoon of school-per week. "There's definitely an out of school commitment," says Paula. "They have to be on top of their academics." But so far Sarah's been able to balance training and school. When she's not in the gym she's usually hitting the books, which often means no TV or computer games.

Although Sarah's dad Davide definitely pitches in, it's mostly Paula who tightly manages Sarah's schedule right down to carpooling and meals. And with her own commitments, Paula says it comes down to whether she can fit what she wants to do into Sarah's schedule. "There's give in my schedule," says Paula, "but not hers."

In order to keep Sarah's annual gymnastics fee at \$2600.00, Paula must volunteer 68 hours a season, doing anything from bingo nights to office administration. Although Paula doesn't mind, it's one more thing for this busy family to juggle.

So what does Sarah gain from gymnastics? Definitely confidence, says Paula. Though she practices with her team, gymnastics is an individual sport: "Sarah has no fear whatsoever to do a presentation at school, because she gets up all the time by herself, in front of judges."

Brooke de Lench, Editor-in-Chief of MomsTeam.com and author of, *Home Team Advantage: The Critical Role of Mothers in Youth Sports* writes that in addition to health benefits, girls in competitive sports get better grades, develop a positive social network of friends, and have a better self image than girls not involved in sports. "While sports are not the magic potion," de Lench says in her book, "they do help girls get through the trials of adolescence."

They also give children a feeling of support. "The greatest value for a child on a competitive team is the community of people watching out for them," says Alana Turner,

director of the dance studio, Dancer's Burlington Inc. She says that children today can become isolated and completely engrossed in a video game culture where they sit alone and play by themselves for hours. But that's not the case for a child in competitive sports, because not only are they active, they are a part of a team. "They know they're not alone," says Turner, "And that can make a big difference to a child." Paula agrees. That sense of community has benefited the entire family, she says. "I don't know half of the kids in Sarah's class at school, but I know the families on her gymnastics team." And she adds, "I've made some great friends myself through gymnastics." Sarah's love for gymnastics makes the heavy time commitment and tight scheduling worthwhile, says Paula. "It's equity you put in now, and the work you do ahead of time to give your child direction and teach them commitment." Qualities that Paula and Davide feel will carry Sarah well into adulthood.

### **The multi-sport competitor**

**Who:** Samantha Sherrard

**Age:** 9

**Sport:** Swimming, hockey, soccer

**Level:** Rep A Atom

**Training:** seven hours a week swimming, four hours a week playing hockey, four hours a week playing soccer

**Cost:** \$840 a year swimming, \$750 a year hockey, \$225 a year soccer

Ask Samantha Sherrard, "What are you, Sammy?" and she'll answer with a twinkle in her eye, "I'm a dolphin!"

Like her 12 year old brother Connor and seven year old brother Cameron, Samantha plays rep. hockey and soccer, but she's also a talented swimmer, competing for the Pointe-Claire Swim Team in Quebec.

The city of Pointe-Claire subsidizes hockey and soccer programs, making the competitive programs half the cost of those in some provinces, but Larry and Shirley still have their hands full juggling the schedules of all three athletes. "Larry draws up a color coordinated spread sheet each month so we can figure out where everyone's going."

Larry and Shirley rotate whose games they watch each week, and because two people can't be in three places at once, they rely heavily on car pooling.

But Samantha thrives amidst all of the action. "I'm sure this schedule would be too hectic for lots of kids, but she loves it," says Shirley. She attributes Samantha's ability to take on such a busy schedule to her laid back, easy going personality. "She just doesn't get stressed out about things; she's a very laid back child. She doesn't get wrapped up in winning, or how she is performing, she just loves being out there playing with all of the friends from each of her teams." And Shirley adds Samantha has no problem following the Sherrard's number one rule, 'School comes first.'

The only problem that sometimes occurs is choosing which sport Samantha will play when her schedules clash. Swimming takes priority when she's preparing for a meet; hockey takes priority during playoffs, and when those sports ease up Samantha concentrates on soccer.

But ask Samantha which of these sports is her favourite and she'll have to think long and hard before answering, "...soccer, no...hockey." She's definitely not in any hurry to pick one sport. And her parents feel that while she's young she should play as many sports as she wants. "And her swimming coach encourages her to do other things."

According to the consultation paper, "*Long Term Athletic Development*" which is a study published by Canadian Sport Centres describing a seven stage Canadian model of long term athlete development, the ideal way to train young athletes is to allow them to play in

more than one sport or activity. Yet some coaches pressure athletes at a young age to concentrate on only one sport.

Cara Button, program director at Canadian Sport Centre Calgary, works with, and offers support for Olympic and high performance athletes. She says coaches and sports organizations often think selfishly about what's best for the team, and not the athlete. "It's a lot of pressure on a child when the coach says, 'you need to do this full time,' or 'you need to quit that other sport.'" Button says that as athletes mature, they usually choose to concentrate on one sport, but while they are young, athletes need to be able to develop as young people and have the opportunity to play and even excel at more than one thing.

But there are limits to what the Sherrards will squeeze into their timetable. This year Samantha was the only player from her soccer team who chose to skip winter soccer. "Samantha was disappointed, but Larry and I felt the family needed a little break from the jam packed schedule," says Shirley.

Parents need to be willing to adjust the family schedule to meet the needs of their child's athletic schedule, says Brooke de Lench, but the key is finding the appropriate balance between sports and family life that works best for your family. In her book, de Lench says, "If you feel that sports are taking too much of your family's time and money, if you are ready to exclaim, "Stop the world, I want to get off!" you need to restore some sanity."

### **Bankrolling future success**

**Who:** Alex DeSantis

**Age:** 11

**Sport:** hockey

**Level:** rep A. minor peewee

**Training:** up to six days a week

**Cost:** \$1700-plus a year

Its 5:30 am on a chilly Friday morning and Alex DeSantis has laced up his skates for the fifth time this week. A rep hockey player in Burlington, Ontario, Alex practices four times a week minimum and spends every weekend from August to April playing hockey. Though Alex's love for hockey grows with every new season, his parents, Deb and Lawrence, have watched the price of hockey escalate since that first house league game when Alex was five. Keeping Alex in rep hockey, and his 12-year-old sister Julia in competitive dance, takes up every bit of expendable money.

It's a challenge to get a handle on the budget, says Lawrence, because both activities have inevitable hidden costs. Hockey tuition, for example, is \$1700 a year, but extra ice time-and an additional fee- is often booked for skills clinics; like power skating and shooting clinics.

Equipment costs \$600 for a growing hockey player, and the travel and hotel expenses associated with 'away games' can climb well above \$500 a season.

When the season is over, Alex, along with the bulk of his teammates, join a summer hockey league, which costs \$225 for the season.

Brooke de Lench says that as a child moves up the competitive ladder the cost can become the third biggest item in the family's budget, after mortgage and car payments. Lawrence and Deb both feel that the financial sacrifice is definitely worthwhile as is the time they both must put in. "You absolutely have to be on the same page and agree to make those sacrifices, and know that you are going to give up time that you could be spending together, and money you could be spending on each other for several years," says Lawrence. "We have friends who aren't and their marriage has dissolved."

The DeSantis's make the sacrifices needed so that Alex can play rep hockey because they feel that, on top of being physically fit and being part of a team, Alex is learning transferable skills; such as time management, commitment, and a hard work ethic, that

will carry him into a successful career as an adult. Brooke de Lench agrees that in addition to helping boys channel physical aggression and develop self control, team sports help boys to develop the social skills that will allow them, as an adult, to successfully work together within collaborative groups, such as business organizations. Alex has already learned that it's not all about winning. "The kids lost the Provincial Championships in overtime of the semi-finals". Lawrence says, "Five minutes later all they could talk about was how much fun the tournament was." And success, in Alex's eyes, is judged by how much fun he's had at the end of the day. And for Lawrence and Deb, those experiences are worth every penny.