



## **Kids: Parental and Society's Control of Them.**

By Kerry Schmidt 08-20-2006

Or to be more truthful, you can say lack of control of them.

In today's world, kids are exposed at a very early age to many things, a lot of them bad. From promiscuous sex to drugs to violence, et al.

I look back on how much "simpler" it was when I raised my kids and when I was a kid myself.

But this column is not about life's generalities and children's exposure to same.

This is a sports column.

And for the vast majority of kids playing sports, from the pee wee levels on up through high school and perhaps college, it can and should be a wonderful time of their lives.

But for a tiny minority of the truly gifted athletes, it can become a nightmare.

Now far too often, the pressures abounding on a young star come not from him or herself, but more often from parents. And worse yet, from outside the school/family realm. It comes from giant corporations, recruiters, agents and other leeching types who simply want to engorge themselves at the trough of the next super star.

I think this phenomenon really came of age fairly recently, when LeBron James, as a sophomore in high school, was featured on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*. A 16-year old wunderkind.

Fortunately, he turned out not only to be as great – actually greater – than the expectations, but his mother kept him, mostly, from the temptations that came from many outsiders, whose only interest were to have a "piece of him."

But the seed was planted by the media, and the eyes were focused on the next James, and trying to find him as early as possible.

Which brings us to one Justin Jenifer.

Like, James, he plays basketball.

Many say he is the most highly scouted player in the country.

Also, the corporate leeches are scrounging around his every move, with the "in-fighting" between Adidas and Nike already reaching fever pitch (remember that huge war there was between Nike and Rebook for James, which eventually led to a \$90 million contract for him).

The scout groups come in four levels for Jenifer.

And as of this writing, only one group can actually pursue him, although next year another group can join the fray and soon thereafter the final two groups.

Only the various AAU and other like traveling all-star teams can beg him to play for them.

Why? Because Jenifer just turned 10 years old! True.

He just finished the 4<sup>th</sup> grade. The nation-wide high school basketball powerhouses cannot legally talk to him until he enters the 5<sup>th</sup> grade.

But that does not keep them from using his parents for influence.

Also, he must be finished with middle school before the colleges can come calling, and they are lined up a mile deep.



## OFF THE WALL SPORTS

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Even the NBA has film clips of this tiny, 4'6" kid who, as one "expert" said, "If you just saw the film of him and did not look at his size, you would think he was already in the NBA."

Frightening.

For the past year plus, one Scottie Bowden, on behalf of Adidas, has entered Jenifer's life. He has given him and his all-star teammates, bags, shoes – Jenifer has over 20 pair, socks, jackets, etc.

And Bowden makes no bones about the fact the he "Fully expects Justin to repay his loyalty by playing exclusively for (the team Bowden has chosen for him)

But lurking in the shadows is Carlton Carrington, who coaches a Baltimore-based AAU program called Team Melo. Not coincidentally, Nike sponsors that team and will pay for air flights all over the country, certainly a thrill for a 10-year old. And if that is not enough to steal Justin's loyalty, Carrington says he will have NBA star Carmelo Anthony come and talk to Justin. "Once the big fella (Anthony) speaks, he (Justin) will come to our side."

So to recap, you have two giant corporate conglomerates fighting an all out war (to make money for themselves) by using a 10-year old kid, who is more interested in the food the gets after the games he plays than anything else.

Good, clean American commercialism at its finest.

Justin's father, Howard, is starting to cross over the line of impropriety.

He pushes his son into workouts that would make some NFL players weep, and he "encourages" the scouts and sponsors to come around.

Only his mother, Kisha, (his parents are divorced) tries to keep it in perspective.

"Coaches, other league people, total strangers, they come and put money in his hands," she said. "He has no idea why they do this. When the ice cream truck comes around, he runs into his room and grabs a handful of money. A Popsicle costs 50 cents, and he just gives the driver the \$13 he grabbed. (The driver only took the cost of the ice cream). It's just some paper to him."

Los Angeles Clippers' guard Sam Cassel came to watch Justin practice, and after seeing him hit a dozen consecutive jump shots, handed him a \$100 bill.

Kisha says, "I tell him, 'you can't always take free money, shoes, food.' Later on, I don't want everybody to be looking at Justin like they own him."

She adds, "All these strangers, they're like trying to buy him or something. (sic) I tell them, "my son is not for sale."

But she cannot hold off the stampede.

According to sports psychologists, parental, peer, sponsor and other outside pressures, plus the national player ratings, places undue stress on youngsters.

Colleges and sponsors waving all the promises only intensify the problem, they say.

"The main problem is kids become one-dimensional, says Dr. G. Joseph Zielieniewski, a University of Cincinnati professor. If their sports career falls through, what have they got?

Many say that severe psychological problems may ensue.

"Instead of stage parents, now we have sports parents," say Dr. Natalie Newton, an Atlanta sports psychologist



She goes on to say that the natural desires of the child can be against the wishes of the vicarious parents, causing some potentially major problems.

Zieleniewski also adds that these kids are pampered, over protected and overindulged, and when they eventually get into situations where they lack maturity and their “protectors,” are not there, they cannot handle them. This, he says, is a potentially very dangerous problem for the kid as he grows older.”

For every LeBron success story, there are also many sorrowful failures.

One I witnessed first hand in Southern California was that of football QB Todd Marinovich. His father was the epitome of everything horrible about parental manipulation of children’s sports. The ultimate vicarious seeker.

His dad forced his mother out of the house into an apartment, so he, and he alone, could “mold” Todd. Then, for the next 14 years, he controlled every waking moment of Todd’s life. He often went to such extremes that some said were illegal and cruel punishment for kids. The police were called at least four times, and his schools filed abuse reports with various agencies.

Once, after he had a bad game at the old age of 13, his father made him run six miles home, following him in the car and, at times, getting out and berating and even hitting Todd when he slowed down.

Todd did have a decent college career, and played in the NFL a little for a couple of years. Todd’s NFL career was short lived, as deep psychological problems were evident from day one, and he quickly fell into substance abuse and just as fast disappeared off the sports map. He refused to speak to his father.

And get this. Once Todd was no longer of use to dear old dad, dad divorced his mom, remarried a much younger woman who was also a former collegiate athlete. When asked by the press why he did this, he said, “I need our combined athletic genes to breed another gifted athlete so I can groom him for greatness.

SICK does not cover it.

You may also remember tennis star Jennifer Capriati, who at the old age of 13 was on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*.

She had been pushed to the limit by over zealous parents, and fell into drugs and alcohol. Fortunately, after she was able to divorce herself from the parental strangle hold, she has made a pretty decent comeback.

Another current prodigy, 15-year old basketball phenom, O.J. Mayo has been enrolled in the nationally renowned North College Hill academy (nationally renowned for its basketball team.).

Mayo, 6’4” will be a freshman this fall, and has already been featured on CNN and ESPN and dubbed, “the Next One,” an offshoot of SI’s having tagged James, “The Chosen One” (This piece of information was obtained off the internet from a story written on Mayo by Tom Groeschen of The Cincinnati Enquirer).

So, where does it end?

Or really, I should say, where does it begin?

Even recruiters shake their heads and ask, “What’s next, rating kindergarteners?”



# OFF THE WALL SPORTS

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Now let me repeat, these parents, badly in need of their vicarious fixes, are the minority, but even one is one too many. When dealing with 10-year olds - or younger, you are potentially playing with the lifelong problems that you may cause your children.

But as you have read above, vicariousness of the parents is well fed by the money driven agents, athletic clothing companies, recruiters and other outsiders.

In this day of the internet, super and instantaneous media coverage and content, any potential new super star can, and will be spotted very quickly.

One can only hope that the parents and trusted friends can tightly and properly control the gold rush.