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By Ryan Basen - rbasen@charlotteobserver.com

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Shortly after his family moved to Charlotte two years ago, Brandon Bates got cut from his middle school football team. Last year a broken wrist kept him from trying out.

This year, the 14-year-old is determined to play.

So three to four days a week this spring, the South Charlotte Middle eighth-grader went to Velocity Sports Performance center off Nations Ford Road, prepping for preseason workouts at Providence High. Young, energetic trainers pushed him through rapid-fire drills in small groups of mostly boys.

“I’m trying as hard as I can to make the football team,” Brandon says.

He’s one of many young athletes driving a growing industry: sports performance training for kids.

Youngsters used to rely on a cottage industry of personal trainers and coaches who offered lessons and camps in specific skills, such as baseball pitching.

The new wave of sports training centers promises to improve youngsters' speed, agility and strength, and help them avoid injury.

They focus on – and measure – core skills such as jumping, running and changing direction. It's similar to training once available only to college and professional athletes.

TOP VIDEOS



Parents of dedicated athletes spend about \$200 to \$300 a month on the training. It has grown into a billion-dollar industry with hundreds of operations and thousands of customers nationwide. Centers are affiliated with sports conglomerates such as Nike and smaller companies that are all looking for new ways to market their products to youth.

Charlotte has at least three big sports performance training centers – Velocity, Athletic Republic and Epicenter Performance at OrthoCarolina – and some independent companies. Three national companies also say they're considering the region for expansion: Athletic Republic, Velocity and D1 Sports Training.

Most serve ages 7 through adults. But the biggest draw is middle and high-school kids “trying to make the baseball team, trying to make the basketball team,” says Todd Riddle, president of Pineville's Athletic Republic center. “People are seeing they can't just practice a sport any more. You can't just hit the weight room anymore and expect to be better than anyone else.”

More than 18 million American youths were avid players of at least one sport last year, according to the National Sporting Goods Association. Some experts question whether all the emphasis on amateur sports and training is appropriate for them.

“It's a double-edged sword,” says Dan Gould, director of Michigan State's Institute for the Study of Youth Sports. “The benefits are kids get stronger and less likely to get injured. But the con is by age 13, a kid is a mini pro athlete.”

Teaching diverse skills

Coaches certified in athletic training lead the youths, often in small groups. Few sessions are the same.

On a recent afternoon, Brandon and four other middle school-age boys warmed up by crouching down a 60-yard track. They did dozens of leg lifts. Then one- and two-legged jumps of 18 inches from floor to platforms. And they tossed 6.6-pound medicine balls to partners 10 yards away.

The 5-foot-9, 160-pound Brandon hopes to start on the Providence junior varsity in the fall. “If you're looking to be first string, you've got to do something extra,” he said.

Many kids agree. They train because they get more attention and hone skills that are neglected at school team practices, they say.

Andrew Goodman trained to prepare for football seasons at Alexander Middle and Mallard Creek High schools. Andrew, 14, a Mallard Creek freshman, hopes to quarterback the junior varsity this fall. He needs to improve his scrambling, said his father, Jim Goodman, who added: “It's very competitive in (Class) 4A sports in Charlotte.”



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The number of customers nationally at Velocity centers nearly tripled from 2003 to 2005. They had 65,000 last year. Numbers are growing at most centers. This year Velocity opened five locations and plans three more.

Large centers serving all ages may generate more than \$1 million in annual revenues, said Dallas-based industry consultant Stephen Tharrett. Independent programs for kids bring in \$200,000 to \$350,000.

But Velocity has closed four centers this year. Bill Parisi, who runs 30 sports performance training schools in the U.S., cautions that the industry is competitive and it's difficult to profitably run large facilities long-term unless you partner with other organizations.

“Open up a sports training facility for kids? That's harder than opening a health club,” Parisi says. “You have kids with busy schedules who won't make long-term financial commitments.”

'No chill time'

The Bates family of five managed to fit Brandon's training into their spring schedule.

His father David Bates says the family was able to avoid overscheduling. But it wasn't easy.



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“(Kids) don’t have nearly the free time I did as a kid,” he says. “Between (schoolwork), sports and coming (to Velocity), it’s all we can get done. Weekdays, it was constantly going. No chill time.”

In addition to about six hours at Velocity, in an average week Brandon spent 35 in school and seven to eight on homework. He stopped swimming and missed a couple days riding motocross to fit everything in.

Many young athletes train at the centers four to six hours per week, plus regular games, practices and weight-lifting. More training would be too much, says Ranjan Maitra, a Gastonia orthopedic surgeon who specializes in sports medicine. He adds that kids ages 6 to 8 may not gain physically from the training at all.

And sports performance training is not appropriate for every kid, experts say, noting that it pushes them to work out nearly as much as pros.

“We worry sometimes that it’s more adult-driven than kid-driven,” says Gould, of Michigan State’s youth sports study institute. “We worry there’s a shift from (sports being) fun and educational, to everybody trying to get a college scholarship.”

The training’s questionable for elementary-age kids unless they enjoy it and are building motor skills and knowledge of sports, Gould says. It could burn out kids by their teen years. In his opinion, “puberty is a good cutoff.”



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Still, he adds, “some kids are talented and you take them for special piano lessons. We need programs for gifted kids.”

Brandon's parents spent about \$300 per month on his training (an average session costs \$25). They're pleased with his results.

In 10 weeks his 40-yard dash time dropped from 5.75 to 5.47 seconds, his vertical jump grew from 20 to 22 inches. His time in a key agility test dropped from 5.56 to 5.09 seconds.

His mother Lisa worried about burnout. His father David didn't because Brandon began more demanding twice-daily workouts with the football team last week.

His Dad likes the emphasis on fitness even if his son “never played on another team.”

Brandon measures success differently. He wants to eventually start on the Providence varsity and perhaps play in college. First things first: The JV this year.

“Long-term health, that's good and all,” Brandon says. But starting for the football team “is what I'm focused on.”

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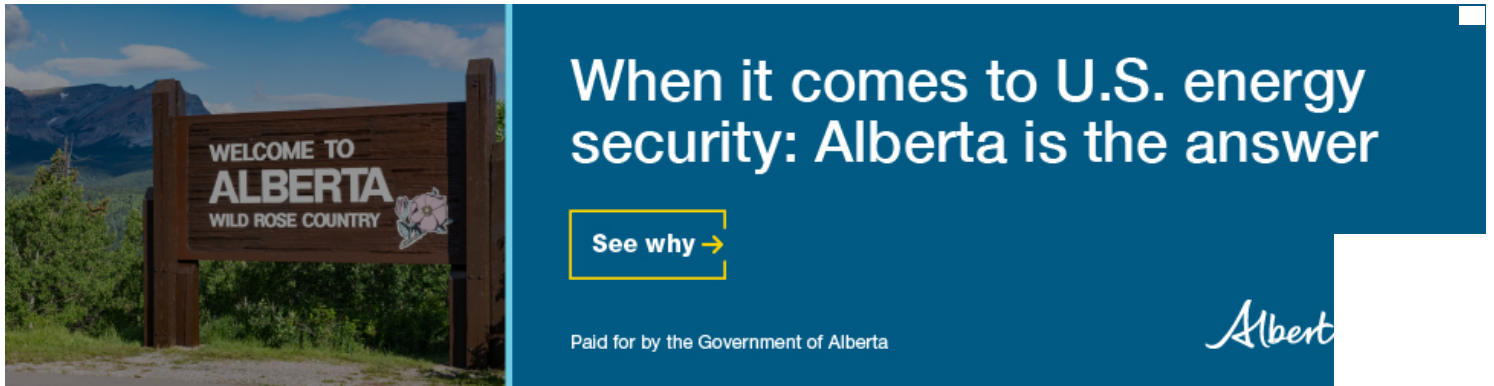
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