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*Nash Howe**photo provided by Cynthia Howe*

All for the Game

By Cynthia Howe

ALLWORKANDNO PLAY may make Jack a dull boy, but when play becomes work, it's a whole different story. When my boys were young, in California, they watched a young boy named Erik Davis play baseball. He could pitch fire! He worked hard. Spare time was baseball time, and work time was at the local batting cages. He had played select baseball and was the star of the Mountain View High School team. In Erik's senior year he was selected by the Anaheim Angels in the 47th round of the 2004 MLB First-Year Player Draft, but he turned them down to play at the Sunken Diamond for Stanford University. Our son, Nash, would watch Erik pitch with

starlight in his eyes. The light that ignites a passion had been set.

Nash was nine years old when he started to play select baseball on the LAMV Rebels. He pitched for Eric Davis' dad, who knew the game, as well as Matt Snider, an excellent pitching coach from the University of Santa Clara. We decided to join the select team because of the higher level of coaching and higher level of play that would provide Nash the opportunity to expand his skills. With three other sons, all involved in sports, the biggest struggle was staying organized. Grandparents helped out tremendously. Nash's team qualified for

the USSSA Nationals and went all the way to the Pony Baseball "Zone." While Nash enjoyed the experience, the rest of us enjoyed this group of fellow parents, siblings and athletes, who became like family. It was a great time, albeit sacrifices were made.

The Rigsbee family also knows of sacrifices and of the anticipated awards that follow. Kristen Rigsbee is a senior at Frisco High School. She pitches for the Raccoons and has played on the varsity team since her freshman year back in Indiana. Her passion for the game started when she was nine years old and began playing for her first select team. The time commitment grew, as did the financial obligation of paying for pitching and batting coaches along the way, in conjunction with the travel, equipment and team expenses required of any select player. Kristen's mother describes some of the challenges. "You learn to eat on the run, freeze when it's cold and sweat when it's hot. It's grueling at times, especially for siblings. It disrupts normal family time, church on Sundays and time available for other activities with other children." Has it all been worth it?

Kristen will be playing her dreams into reality this fall as she joins the Ouachita Lady Tigers Softball team at Ouachita Baptist University in Arkansas. It's been a long road for the entire family, but well worth it. The friendships for her and the family will long be remembered. "We will miss watching Kristen play. The memories are sweet." While softball has required the lions' share of time and attention for Kristen's family, what happens when more than one child in the family is passionate about their chosen athletic endeavors?

Elise Bases wakes up early in the morning to start her first session of gymnastics practice. This eighth grader practices from 7:45 a.m. until noon when she carools to school. At 3:30 it's back to the gym to practice until 6 p.m. She is in a private school geared toward the elite and gifted, which gives her the flexibility she needs to fulfill the demands of her practice schedule. Where did this young

Elise Bases
photo provided by Sue Bases

lady gain such passion for the sport?

She began gymnastics at the age of two after participating in a YMCA gym and swim class. At the age of five, she joined the Infinite Bounds Select gymnastics team. She has enjoyed a great deal of success in her pursuits, including being a member of the US Jr. Olympic Team for 2005. She was the Level 10 Texas State All Around Champion in 2005 and went on to place 4th at the US National Championship.

While that would keep any household busy, her older brother Ryan, 16, plays goalie for the Liberty High School soccer team, and younger brother, Alex, recently joined the Jr. PGA for tournaments. Well, top athletics with a church schedule, Boy Scouts schedule, let alone friends and family schedule, and you have an arena for one hectic life! How do they make it all work?

"I have a single calendar, and I use my IPAQ to set reminders just in case I lose track of time. Fifteen minutes before I need to be somewhere, it dings," mom, Sue Bases explains. The family regularly goes over the family calendar, making allowances for everyone's schedule, and finding rides when the parents can't accommodate them. "Sometimes it requires early drop offs and late pick ups, but that is what it takes to make it all work." Mrs. Bases credits her husband, Pete, for consistent support in making it all work, as well as making life flexible when necessary. They also chose to home school Elise from 5th grade through 7th grade. "It gave us more flexibility with our time," Mrs. Bases explained.

There are times when such motivated athletes may miss out on other childhood opportunities.

"I remember when Elise was in 4th grade and she gave up a birthday party. A limo picked the girls up from school for the party. Elise cried, but she chose the gym," Mrs. Bases remembers. Ryan has also been approached to play select soccer, but chose to decline the opportunity. He's seen his friends that play select struggle with grades due to practice and



game commitments.

While this family does whatever it takes to make things work for their children's interests, they also strive to build a strong reliance on God. "We all need to remember not to lose sight of our purpose on earth." Every parent that is committed to their child's future wishes them to live a life with no regrets. Mr. and Mrs. Bases don't want their children to miss the opportunities to exercise the gifts and blessings God has given them.

THE PRICE TO PLAY

Young athletes intent on one sport eventually face the reality that participating at the select level may mean the difference between making it onto the high school team or college level. Select teams, however, come with a monetary price. While some programs may cost a few hundred dollars, others may cost the family \$3,000 and beyond.

Once you take into account select team dues (which often covers coaches' pay), private lessons, camps, equipment, travel and hotels, you start to realize why you hear a cash register ringing every

time your kid gets the ball. And while some of the cost is in the form of dollars, the balance is in the form of time. While regular league teams may play their sport for three months, the select team player may play 10 to 12 months out of the year. But many student athletes believe it's worth the cost and the hard work. Iron sharpens iron, and likewise highly talented athletes sharpen against other talented athletes.

When Emily Robinson was two years old, she rode in the front of her daddy's saddle for a long horse back ride. That afternoon she took a nap in the saddle and has been in one ever since. "At that young age, she walked among the horses with no fear." As time progressed her infatuation with horses was evident. At the age of six she began to ride with a trainer and has gained confidence and skill. Her competitive spirit emerged and she began to compete in horse shows.

Emily rides for Angel Fire Arabians five to six days a week at their training facility. Many weekends are committed to out of town shows. She has been quite successful in her six and a half year career,

having qualified and attended the Arabian Regional competition in Ft. Worth four years running. She also qualified for the National competition in Albuquerque for the past two years.

With such a great focus, Emily has had to make difficult choices to keep up the intensity of her pursuits. Soccer, volleyball, piano, church choir, gymnastics, even Girl Scouts eventually fell away in her consistent desire to ride. Even the school district works to accommodate

students who are making a serious effort to develop high-level capabilities by offering Off-Campus Physical Education. Emily leaves school early each day to allow for additional lesson and riding time and spends an average of three-four hours each weekday at the barn. With such a focused child, the family has had to reconcile the demands with the rest of their life. Long weekends away attending shows has required days away from work and juggling schedules to attend their older son's activities. Family members remaining flexible are all keys in keeping their home in balance.

"Our goal is for Emily to have a lifelong passion for an activity she enjoys," stated mother, Beth Robinson. "She has been inquiring into colleges that have equestrian programs, and we will look into the most appropriate ones if she continues her interest."

Meredith Martin loves playing soccer at Pizza Hut Park. She plays for ASG Goal Central, a select team based in Frisco. From the age of five she has exhibited her love of the game. She has been playing select soccer for the past six years and is playing her second year of high school soccer. It all adds up to a lot of practice hours and numerous games. She plays



approximately 80 or more games per year, including five to six out of town tournaments. How do the Martin's make it all work?

They combine out of town tournaments with family vacations; coordinate with each other so that each child is attended to (Meredith's younger brother Jared also plays seasonal sports); and they keep consistent as much as they can. Homework, eating meals together on the weekends and attending church on Sundays take precedence.

Meredith's team plays in Showcase Tournaments that provide select teams the opportunity to play in front of college recruiters. When Meredith becomes a junior, the recruiters will be able to contact her regarding collegiate possibilities, but for now they will simply have to wait.

Coaches require three things from athletes who are seeking out involvement with a select team: natural talent, commitment and coachability. As one high school coach explained, "You can't teach talent. The athlete either has it, or they don't. But as a coach you can make an athlete more intelligent with their talent if they're coachable."

While critics may point out the exuberant time and costs associated with

select athletics, everyone can certainly appreciate the fact that a student busy with athletic endeavors is less susceptible to drugs, alcohol and despair. In addition, the hard work on the field often carries over into the classroom. Mark Goldstein, a child clinical psychologist at Roosevelt University in Chicago stated, "We know from a lot of research that kids who participate in sports tend to do better academically. It forces them to be more organized with their time and to prioritize."

Character, skills, teamwork, sportsmanship, camaraderie, scholarships, contracts – all work and no play may make Jack a dull boy – or Jill a dull girl – but when athletes work at their play, who is to decide if it is all worth it?

Next month we explore the student athlete in college. Are scholarships the only acceptable end result? Or have kids peaked in their sport in high school and ready to work only on academics in college? What if parents are counting on the financial benefit of an athletic scholarship? Read next month's Education Department article for more.

Cynthia Howe is a freelance writer living in Little Elm.