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Rethinking Youth Sports

Increasing Pressures Are Put On Children

Posted: October 6, 2011
By EMILY SHARRER

HARRISONBURG — About 10 years ago, Emmy award-winning ESPN correspondent Tom Farrey flew to Australia to have his son's DNA tested.

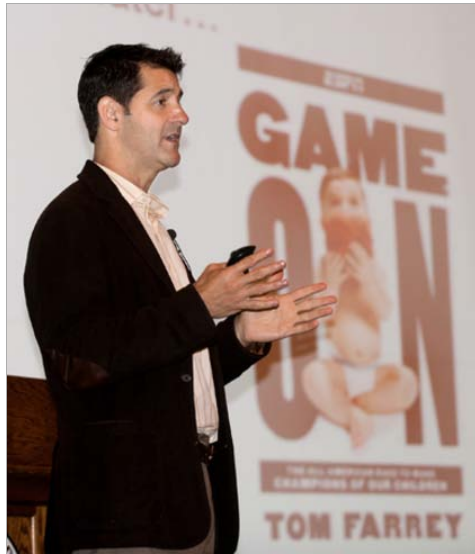
But it had nothing to do with lineage or potential health problems.

With one swab of his 1-year-old son's cheek, Farrey was going to find out if his son was born with any inherent athletic genes. By looking for a specific DNA strand, some experts believe the test can predict a child's athletic abilities.

"They're like, 'Well, no football, no baseball, no basketball. Well, how about a biathlon?'" said Farrey, who spoke at Bridgewater College on Tuesday on topics from his book "Game On: The All-American Race to Make Champions of Our Children."

Farrey chronicled his DNA testing experience in a story for ESPN The Magazine. That led to him write "Game On," which investigates the world of youth sports.

During his talk on Tuesday, Farrey discussed the consequences of the increasing competitiveness in children's sports. He says parents are becoming pushier, children are



Tom Farrey, an ESPN correspondent and author of "Game On: The All American Race to Make Champions of Our Children," speaks at Bridgewater College Tuesday night. Farrey was a guest of the W. Harold Row Endowed Lecture Series. (Photos by Michael Reilly / DN-R)

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getting burned out faster and obesity is still on the rise, in part as a result of nonathletic children being pushed out of team sports altogether.

“How do we get more kids playing sports into their teen years?” Farrey said. “That’s really our challenge.”

Youth And Sports

Farrey said the average salary in 2010 for an NBA player was \$5.4 million, \$3 million in Major League Baseball and \$1.4 million in the NFL.

The exponential rise in salaries in U.S. professional sports in recent years, he said, has led some overzealous parents to put their kids through tougher training routines in an attempt to turn them into superstars.

“Parents think, ‘Maybe I can invest in his athletic future and there’s going to be a payoff down the road,’” he said. “We began to try to aggregate the very best athletes at younger and younger ages.”

Sixth-graders are on NCAA scouts’ radar, second-graders are in national basketball championships and eighth-graders are getting scholarship offers.

Farrey said the focus on competition and performance instead of participation in sports has led to less active youth.

Also, he said, because of costs associated with participating in sports year-round on travel teams, kids from low-income or single-parent homes are left out of participating in physical activity.

Children are burning out quicker, sustaining serious injuries and quitting sports because of the pressure to achieve, with little payoff, Farrey said.

Out of more than 7,600 children who have played in the Little League World Series, 34 have made it to the major leagues.

“Early success rarely leads to adult success,” he said.

In 2011, Farrey became director of the Aspen Institute’s Sports and Society Program. The institute gathers leaders in different fields and fosters dialogue about various community issues, such as economics, health care and politics.

“We’re building a national, inclusive conversation that will begin to address these problems and hopefully produce innovative solutions,” Farrey said. “We’re going to essentially try to rethink American sports.”

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Deion Nabors, a Bridgewater College freshman and threesport athlete at Waynesboro High School, listens to Tom Farrey as part of the W. Harold Row Endowed Lecture Series at Bridgewater College.

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