

# Young Athletes Try New Coach: The Psychologist

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Scott Hobstein for The New York Times

Heather Benjamin, 10, saw a psychologist to deal with her fear.

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Steve Ruark for The New York Times

Sarah Mott, a 15-year-old swimmer, said that a psychologist "changed the way I thought about my races."



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

Jay Granat at his office in River Edge, N.J. He said that 40 percent of his

not going to leave any stone unturned if it might help them achieve," said Marty Ewing, a former president of the Association

of Applied Sport Psychology. "And obviously, we do have ways to help enrich performance."

A competitive gymnast for most of her life, Heather Benjamin has traveled the country and won her share of awards. But last year she developed a fear of jumping from one bar to the other in the uneven bars event. So she did something familiar to professional sports stars — she talked to a sports psychologist.

"It made such a difference," she said in a telephone interview from her home in Lynn Haven, Fla. "We worked through the fear, and that has let me relax. I would tell anyone that it's worth it."

Heather was 9 at the time.

For \$225 a session, Alan Goldberg counseled her during 12 hourlong telephone conversations across five months. At recent national and Junior Olympic competitions, Heather surpassed her previous scores by three ability levels.

"It was a phobia," said her mother, Donna Benjamin, who had decided Heather would benefit from the counseling. "A mental block that hindered her ability to compete."

The idea that mental coaching can help the youngest athletes has pervaded the upper reaches of the country's zealous youth sports culture. In the pursuit of college scholarships and top spots on premier travel clubs, the families of young athletes routinely pay for personal strength coaches, conditioning coaches, specialized skill coaches like pitching or hitting instructors, nutritionists and recruiting consultants. Now, the personal sports psychologist has joined the entourage.

"Parents tell me that they've put so much money into their child's athletic development that they're

of Applied Sport Psychology. "And obviously, we do have ways to help enrich performance."

But many sports psychologists, including those who see young athletes, say they wonder if the treatment is not overkill in a youth sports landscape bursting with excess.

"On the one hand, it's foolish not to teach kids mental skills they may need," said Daniel Gould, a sports psychologist who is also the director of Michigan State's Institute for the Study of Youth Sports. "On the flip side, is it just contributing to the professionalism of childhood? Because these kids aren't playing for the New York Yankees. And worse, I worry that some parents are doing it just because their neighbor did it for his kid."

Several sports psychologists said their primary work with young athletes was counseling the parents or coaches.

"The root of the problem is often the triangle of parent, coach and athlete and the conflicts created," said Jay Granat, a New Jersey sports psychologist who said 40 percent of his practice dealt with athletes ranging in age from 11 to 18. "The parents have the right intentions. They want their kid to be the next Tiger Woods. But those fantasies are getting in the way."

The trend toward specializing in one sport at an early age has also led more young athletes to seek counseling.

"If an 11-year-old is told that focusing on one sport is all that matters, it obviously puts a lot of pressure on every outcome in that sport," Dr. Ewing said. "We are asking that 11-year-old to play a game at a level that is disproportionate to his or her cognitive development. That's development you can't rush, but people try."

Dr. Gould said the parents of a 14-year-old tennis player were concerned their son was not focused all the time. His response was, "Yeah, he's 14 — that's pretty normal."

He added: "Just because we can dress up a 14-year-old like Andy Roddick, he's still not as old as Andy Roddick. He's 14, and he's going to do some dumb things."

Sports psychology is a thriving business, and not only for children. Elite professional athletes have consulted with psychologists since the 1980s, and now top college players and recreational weekend warriors also want to fine-tune their mental muscles and pay \$125 to \$250 an hour to do so. The Internet is awash with Web sites that promote sports psychologists who promise to cure choking under pressure and other competition failures.

Much of the hype, however, is focused on the youngest athletes, with psychologists offering catchy slogans for their therapy. Many sites also promote books and educational CDs costing up to \$100.

Professionals who offer sports psychology services are generally classified in two groups: educational and clinical. Many in the educational group are college professors of sports psychology. Those in the clinical group are often licensed psychologists who

treat patients besides athletes and may work in areas like depression, eating disorders or alcoholism.

What sports psychologists say they deal with most is performance problems, usually linked to pregame nerves or postgame frustrations.

Sarah Mott, a 15-year-old swimmer, said she was filled with negative thoughts before races, so much so that she contemplated quitting what had been her favorite sport since she was 4. Mott, who lives in Frederick, Md., contacted Dr. Goldberg at his office in Massachusetts on the recommendation of a teammate.

"He changed the way I thought about my races," Mott said. "He gave me techniques to relax and focus that I worked on for weeks in practices. Some of it was like homework, things I would write down to focus my goals or ways to better understand why I wanted to swim. My results got a lot better, but the best thing is I love swimming again."

The lessons, sports psychologists say, are useful beyond sports.

"Learning to concentrate, to relax and have confidence, to deal with frustration, to set goals and stay focused on the task at hand, these are life skills," Joel Fish, the director of the Center for Sport Psychology in Philadelphia, said. "They will help you take an English test, not just get a hit in a baseball game."

But Dr. Fish, like many of his colleagues, said some parents seemed to be having their athletic children see the sports psychologist too soon.

"They're coming in at 7, 8 and 9 years old, and usually I say: 'Just give it some time. This will work itself out,' " he said. "Sometimes I tell them it's O.K. to take a season off."

To Donna Benjamin, the timing was right. She recently watched Heather in a competition and marveled at the transformation.

"It's a drastic change and something that years of coaching and parenting did not accomplish," Mrs. Benjamin said. "You watch the joy she has again, and I'm just so happy for her."