

ONE Outside Class

A HISTORY OF AMERICAN CHILDREN'S COMPETITIVE ACTIVITIES

Middle-class children's lives are filled with adult-organized activities, while working-class and poor children fill their days with free play and television watching.¹ This is one of the central observations of Annette Lareau's ethnographic study of families raising third-grade children around Philadelphia.² Lareau's findings about the way children from middle-class families use their time is consistent with popular conceptions of overscheduled American kids who are chauffeured and schlepped from activity to activity on a daily basis.³

Of course the overscheduled children of the middle class not only participate in myriad after-school activities; they also compete. These elementary school-age kids try out for all-star teams, travel to regional and national tournaments, and clear off bookshelves to hold all of the trophies they have won. It has not always been this way. About a hundred

years ago, it would have been the lower-class children competing under nonparental adult supervision while their upper-class counterparts participated in noncompetitive activities, often in their homes. Children's tournaments, especially athletic ones, came first to poor children—often immigrants—living in big cities.

Not until after World War II did these competitive endeavors begin to be dominated by children from the middle and upper-middle classes. In the 1970s American children witnessed an explosion of growth in both the number of participants and the types of competitive opportunities available to them. This growth crowded out many who could not pay to play.

Today it costs a lot to participate in a diverse set of competitive circuits and tournaments that are now big business. For future Michelle Wies there is a youth PGA; for future Dale Earnhardts there is a kids' NASCAR circuit; and for future Davy Crocketts there are shooting contests.⁴ There is even a Junior Bull Riders circuit that starts children as young as three in mutton-busting contests, trying to stay on a lamb as long as possible. These competitive activities charge participant fees and give out ranked awards at events where young kids risk injury to be number one.⁵ The forces that have led to increasing inequality in education, the workplace, and other spheres have come to the world of play. This means that Competitive Kid Capital is unequally distributed.

What are the social forces that have shaped the evolution of these children's competitive activities from roughly the turn of the twentieth century up to the present? The answer is linked to major changes in three social institutions: the family, the educational system, and the organization of competition and prizes. This chapter provides a history of the development of competitive children's activities in the United States. To illustrate this history, I examine the evolution of the three case study activities: chess, soccer, and dance.

COMPETITIVE AFTER-SCHOOL HOURS OVER TIME

Beginning in the late nineteenth century compulsory education had important consequences for families and the economy. With the institution

of mandatory schooling children experienced a profound shift in the structure of their daily lives, especially in the social organization of their time. Compulsory education brought leisure time into focus; since “school time” was delineated as obligatory, “free time” could now be identified as well.⁶

What to do with this free time? The question was on the minds of parents, social workers, and “experts” who doled out advice on child rearing. The answer lay partly in competitive sports leagues, which started to evolve to hold the interest of children, the first phase in the development of children’s competitive activities. Overall we can identify three key periods of development: the first runs from the Progressive Era through World War II; the second moves from the postwar period to the 1970s; and the third takes us from the 1980s into the present.⁷

Seeds of Competition: Progressive Era to World War II

The Progressive Era, with its organizational and reform impulses, inevitably focused on children’s lives.⁸ These impulses gave rise to some of the earliest organized competitive events among American children. For example, reformers concerned about the health of babies started “better baby” contests in 1908 as a way to teach primarily immigrant and lower-class mothers the values of hygiene and nutrition.⁹ The contests were often held at state fairs, where judges evaluated children along several dimensions, including measurements and appearance, in order to find the “healthiest” or the “most beautiful” baby.¹⁰ These contests required little more of the baby than to submit to being poked, prodded, and put on display; the competition was really among adults.¹¹

Reformers didn’t forget older children. With the simultaneous rise of mandatory schooling and laws restricting child labor,¹² worry mounted over the idle hours of children, which many assumed would be filled with delinquent or self-destructive activities. Urban reformers were particularly preoccupied with poor immigrant boys who, because of overcrowding in tenements, were often on the streets.¹³

Reformers’ focus was less on age-specific activities and more generally on “removing urban children from city streets.”¹⁴ Initial efforts focused

on the establishment of parks and playgrounds, and powerful, organized playground movements developed in New York City and Boston.¹⁵ But because adults “did not trust city boys to play unsupervised,” attention soon shifted to organized sports.¹⁶

Sports were seen as important in teaching the “American” values of cooperation, hard work, and respect for authority. Progressive reformers thought athletic activities could prepare children for the “new industrial society that was emerging,”¹⁷ which would require them to be physical laborers. Organized youth groups such as the YMCA took on the responsibility of providing children with sports activities.

In 1903 New York City’s Public School Athletic League for Boys (PSAL) was established, and formal contests between children, organized by adults, emerged as a way to keep the boys coming back to activities, clubs, and school. Formal competition ensured the boys’ continued participation since they wanted to defend their team’s record and honor. Luther Gulick, founder of the PSAL, thought, “Group loyalty becomes team loyalty, and team loyalty enhances school loyalty, for the spirit of loyalty and morality demonstrated publicly spreads to all the students, not just those who compete.”¹⁸

A girls’ league within the PSAL was founded in 1905, though many of the combative and competitive elements present in the boys’ league were eliminated.¹⁹ In 1914 the New York version became part of the city’s Board of Education. By 1910 seventeen other cities across the United States had formed their own competitive athletic leagues modeled after New York City’s PSAL. Settlement houses and ethnic clubs soon followed suit. The number of these boys’ clubs grew rapidly through the 1920s, working in parallel with school leagues.

The national spelling bee, a nonathletic competitive activity for children, also grew in popularity at this time. Spelling bees, known historically as spelling fights or spelling parties, are an American folk tradition. Throughout the eighteenth century they were part of the typical Colonial education, and by the nineteenth century they had developed into community social events.²⁰ By the turn of the twentieth century spelling bees had evolved into a competitive educational tool. In her history of American childhood from 1850 to 1950 Priscilla Ferguson Clement explains,

"Individual competition was also a constant in [late] nineteenth-century schools. In rural areas, teachers held weekly spelling bees in which youngsters stood in a line before the teacher (toed the line) and vied to be at the head of the line rather than at the foot."²¹

Around the turn of the twentieth century a social movement formed to promote a national student-only bee. The first nationwide student bee was held on June 29, 1908. But due to racial tensions (after a young black girl won), the next national student spelling bee was not held again until the 1920s. By 1925 the national student spelling bee as we know it, complete with corporate sponsorship, had taken shape.²²

Other community-based competitions, such as Music Memory Contests and mouth organ contests, were also popular at this time.²³ Additionally, in 1934 the organization that would become the National Guild of Piano Teachers' National Piano Playing Tournament was formed.²⁴

During this time children from wealthier families generally received a variety of lessons thought to enhance their social skills and prospects. In a history of children from different class backgrounds in the United States, Harvey Graff wrote of one new upper-middle-class, turn-of-the-century family, the Spencers: "The Spencer children went to dancing school, dressing the part and meeting their peers of the opposite sex. The girls were given music lessons, with varying degrees of success."²⁵ These activities were organized and overseen by adults but were not yet competitive. (This was especially true for dance, as I discuss below.)

By the 1930s this pattern began to shift as a consequence of the Great Depression and as educational philosophies changed. During the Depression, many clubs with competitive leagues suffered financially and had to close, so poorer children from urban areas began to lose sites for competitive athletic contests organized by adults. Fee-based groups, such as the YMCA, began to fill the void, but usually only middle-class kids could afford to participate.²⁶

At roughly the same historical moment athletic organizations were founded that would soon formally institute national competitive tournaments for young kids, for a price. National pay-to-play organizations, such as Pop Warner Football and Little League Baseball, came into being in 1929 and 1939, respectively.

At the same time, many physical education professionals stopped supporting athletic competition for children because of worries that leagues supported competition only for the best athletes, leaving the others behind. Concerns about focusing on only the most talented athletes developed into questions about the harmfulness of competition. Historian Susan Miller explains: "Basketball, like all team sports, came under fire for a flaw that no amount of rule changes could rectify; critics charged that they inherently encouraged unnecessary and potentially harmful competition. . . . Critics argued that team sports put too much focus on winning at the expense of good sportsmanship and thus encouraged the rise of star athletes instead of fostering full participation by all team members."²⁷

In the end this meant that much of the organized youth competition left the school system. But it did not leave American childhood. "By allowing highly organized children's sport to leave the educational context," Jack Berryman, a medical historian, explains, "professional educators presented a golden opportunity to the many voluntary youth-related groups in America."²⁸ The concatenation of concerns about competition and the financial realities of the Depression created an environment wherein organized, competitive, pay-to-play activities for kids would flourish outside of the school system in places like Pop Warner and Little League.

Overall during this "seeds of competition" period a transformation occurred both in the time spent in organized competition and in the types of children who participated in these activities. Earlier in the century, affluent children participated in personal growth activities where they did not encounter much organized competition, as the activities were more than anything a form of social grooming. But with the development of national compulsory schooling there had to be a way to distinguish the achievements of children from different classes. (Not surprisingly the 1930s also saw the development of gifted programs, and in 1941 the Hunter College Campus for the Gifted was founded in New York City.)²⁹ As school became more competitive, so too did the time children spent outside of school—particularly for those from upwardly mobile families.

Growth of Competition: Postwar to the 1970s

During this period competitive children's activities experienced "explosive growth" in terms of the number of activities available and the number of participants.³⁰ In the decades following World War II a variety of competitive activities began to be dominated by children of the middle class. As the activities became more organized, competition intensified within the middle class.

One of the first children's activities to become nationally organized in a competitive way, and certainly one of the most well-known and successful youth sports programs, is Little League Baseball. After its creation in 1939 the League held its first World Series only a decade later, in 1949. In the ensuing years Little League experienced a big expansion in the number of participants, including participants from around the world. As this model of children's membership in a national league organization developed, fees to play increased.³¹

With the success of these fee-based national programs it became more difficult to sustain free programs. Most elementary schools no longer sponsored their own leagues due to concerns over the effects of competition on children, similar to concerns voiced in the 1930s. The desire to dampen overt competition in school classrooms was part of the self-esteem movement that started in the 1960s.³²

The self-esteem movement focused on building up children's confidence and talents without being negative or comparing them to others. As the movement did not reach outside activities, such as sports, private organizations rushed to fill the void. Parents increasingly wanted more competitive opportunities for their children and were willing to pay for it.

By the 1960s more adults had become involved in these organizations, especially parents. Parents and kids spent time together at practices for sports that were part of a national structure: Bidy basketball, Pee Wee hockey, and Pop Warner football. Even nonteam sports were growing and developing their own formal, national-level organizations run by adults. For example, Double Dutch jump-roping started on playgrounds in the 1930s; in 1975 the American Double Dutch League was formed to set formal rules and sponsor competitions.³³

An often overlooked event in the history of children's sports, and especially competitive sports, is the passage of the Amateur Sports Act in 1978. This congressional bill established the U.S. Olympic Committee, largely taking away the function of the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU). Born out of the Cold War and the desire to defeat the USSR in sports, the U.S. Olympic Committee brought together the national governing bodies for each Olympic sport.³⁴ The AAU had to find a new function; over the next two decades they transformed themselves into a powerful force in the organization of children's competitive sports, serving as a national organization overseeing a variety of children's competitive sports, such as swimming and volleyball.

Nonathletic competitions for children also began to take off in this time period. One example is child beauty pageants. The oldest continuously running child beauty pageant in the United States, Our Little Miss, started in 1961. This pageant was modeled on an adult system, the Miss America Pageant, with local and regional competitions followed by a national contest. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s child beauty pageants began "mushrooming at an unbelievably fast rate."³⁵ By the late 1970s there was even a media-recognized "pageant circuit." A 1977 *Chicago Tribune* story reported, "Youngsters who travel the circuit learn how to fill the bill wherever they are, acting naïve and spontaneous here and knocking them dead with vampiness there."³⁶

Whether the yardstick was academics, athletics, or appearance, by the 1970s parents (mostly those who were educated and upwardly mobile) wanted their children to "be better than average in all things, so they tried to provide them with professionally run activities that would enrich their minds, tone their bodies, inculcate physical skills, and enhance their self-esteem."³⁷ National organizations went along with this impulse to be better than average by instituting national guidelines and contests. Even programs that had a philosophy of "everyone plays," such as the American Youth Soccer Organization (discussed more below), joined the competitive fray by hosting elimination tournaments where there was only one victor. These competitions began to be geared to children of younger and younger ages.³⁸

Some observers have argued that the rise of these adult-organized competitive activities for children can partly be explained by the decrease

in safe areas for children to play on their own.³⁹ While there is some validity to this argument, as safe play space for children in both urban and suburban areas was declining, this argument does not explain the trend toward increased competition because there was an alternative to the competitive path. As upwardly mobile parents clamored to have their children involved in competitive activities that would brand them as “above average,” adults involved with less advantaged children focused on inclusiveness. Those involved with “preventing such youngsters from being lured into gangs, drug use, and other antisocial behavior, steered children into organized activities sponsored by churches, schools, YMCAs and YWCAs, and Boys’ and Girls’ clubs.”⁴⁰ In these inclusive clubs, participation and not competition was the norm.

So the same YMCAs and Boys’ clubs that had been the first movers in organized competition several decades before now moved in the opposite direction. The activities provided were still organized by adults, but little of the tournament impulse remained. Instead, these children’s better-off peers were now the competitive ones, working to ensure their privileged positions in numerous activities organized at a national level. As the price of such competitive success continued to increase—even for young children—many less advantaged children were pushed out of the competitive space.

EXPLOSION OF HYPERCOMPETITIVENESS: 1980S TO THE PRESENT

Since the 1980s it is not only the costs of participation in competitive children’s activities that have grown, but also the level of professionalization. As more children compete in more activities for more money at higher levels, the result over the past three decades has been the growth of hypercompetition. In addition, the distance between middle-class children and others continues to grow within the same activities as middle-class families become ever more competitive.⁴¹

Many explanations for the continued growth of organized activities during this time focus on increases in maternal employment: with both

parents outside of the home in the after-school hours, children need to be supervised. But competitive activities—particularly the most common ones for elementary school-age kids, which take place outside of the school system—actually create additional work for parents and take time away from other household tasks.⁴² Parents have to make sure uniforms and other equipment are clean and ready and shuttle kids to various lessons, practices, and tournaments. (This is especially true in the suburbs, where children's play space is largely physically limited to areas reachable by car, but it is also true in many urban settings as parents worry about children's safety if they play alone, even though kidnapping rates are down.)⁴³

Competitive activities not only produce more work for parents; they also create many work-like elements for children.⁴⁴ Parents and children often use work language to describe kids' participation. For example, it is common when a successful child quits an activity to say that he or she has "retired."

It is not a stretch to say that many young athletes and performers are now young professionals. There are three specific ways in which children's competitive youth sports have become professionalized since the 1980s:⁴⁵ (1) the development of highly hierarchical divisions within youth activities, (2) the rise of the full-time paid coach, and (3) the ascendancy of the year-round season.

The development of elite programs (which includes travel, select, premier, all-star, and Olympic development programs) across activities intensified during the 1990s.⁴⁶ There are now many stratified categories of organized play, ranging from recreational up to elite.⁴⁷ Children usually have to work their way up through these divisions, with the goal being the top level team or organization in their geographic area. This system often tries to model itself on professional sports leagues, with club owners seeing recreational leagues as farm systems for the development of elite or pro players. Needless to say, these programs exist outside of the school system. This is true even for activities like spelling bees, which would seem to have to exist within the school system, but between homeschooled children and kids looking for their version of mental athletics, private bees are beginning to develop as well.⁴⁸

The AAU illustrates the recent development of more and more hierarchical, competitive activities. Currently there are over a million participants in AAU sports. In 1995 the AAU had about 100 national championships, most for kids over twelve. By 2008 it held more than 250 national championships in which “a total of 1900 group champions are crowned, starting around age 6. More often, these tournaments begin at age 8.”⁴⁹ Less than twenty years ago eight was the age when kids started participating in recreational youth sports. Now kids routinely vie for national titles at that age.

Of course these kids need coaches with high levels of expertise to help them reach those national championships. Enter the paid youth sport coach and other specialized trainers, who reinforce the professionalization of youth sports and activities.⁵⁰ Parent and volunteer coaches now often exist only in recreational leagues, and some elite clubs and organizations explicitly forbid parents from having any coaching responsibilities. When a team must pay for full-time coaches or trainers, who often charge over \$20,000 for a season, the costs outstrip the budgets of all but the wealthiest families. And of course, now that adults can make a living from youth sports, they must continue to justify their employment, so they strive to increase the number of professional markers for these children’s activities.

One such marker is the third way youth sports have become professionalized: the rise of the year-round season.⁵¹ In the past, for example, soccer dominated the fall, basketball the winter, and baseball the spring. Now, at the competitive level, teams practice all year—much like the pros—often requiring a permanent annual commitment from families.⁵² With indoor training facilities and specialized camps held during school vacations, children are asked as early as age eight to commit to a single sport. This has the consequence of forcing children to specialize early.

At the same time the number of competitors at the highest levels has increased, especially in the 1980s and 1990s, as the rewards for winning have also increased. Gymnastics and figure skating are good examples, as detailed by Joan Ryan in her 2000 book *Little Girls in Pretty Boxes*, which describes the efforts of young girls and their families to fight time and puberty in an attempt to reach the Olympics in their respective sports.

Ryan details how more and more families pushed their daughters into elite competition, often moving across the country to work with particular coaches. She describes one father, Bill Bragg, who actually gave up custody of his daughter to her figure skating coach, hoping that would help young Hollie become an Olympic ice princess. Ryan explains his motivation:

Bragg himself had been a swimming coach, but swimming held no magic. It couldn't turn milkmaids into princesses. To him, skating was more than a sport. To succeed in skating was to succeed in life. It was a road to riches and recognition, and perhaps more important, it was a road to respectability. Skating offered a life of restaurants with cloth napkins, hotels with marble lobbies, a life where a girl from the wrong side of the tracks could be somebody.⁵³

Other competitive sports and activities also come with promises of riches and recognition, particularly in the form of endorsements. This is another reason hypercompetition has started to permeate children's activities and promoted competition for younger and younger children. A 2003 *New York Times Magazine* piece focused on four-year-old champion skateboarder Dylan, who already was being touted as the "next big little thing" by promoters, merchandisers, and his parents.⁵⁴

Even in historically established sports, such as golf, young children who succeed competitively garner publicity, attention, and hence money. Twelve-year-old Alexis "Lexi" Thompson made headlines in the summer of 2007 when she became the youngest qualifier ever for the U.S. Women's Open in golf. Touted as the next "pre-teen prodigy," Alexis began fielding endorsement deals. At age sixteen, in December 2011, she became the youngest ever winner of an LPGA tournament—while wearing sponsor attire.

This proclivity for naming children prodigies, another element of hypercompetition, happens even more often in music. In a 2000 book that highlights the young string students who attend Julliard's Saturday pre-college program, music writer Barbara Sand explains that parents and students are so anxious to get and keep a "prodigy" label that they will often lie about a child's age.⁵⁵ Being named a prodigy (defined as a child

who displays “talents that are only supposed to be the province of gifted and highly trained adults”) confers status, but also money and attention.⁵⁶

With so many competitive circuits available, high performers almost expect to be declared prodigies. By the 1980s, middle-class parents presumed their children to be above average,⁵⁷ and expectations have only increased since then. Indeed since the 1980s we have seen the development of complex, competitive circuits in a variety of activities that previously had a much smaller competitive element.

Cheerleading is a good example of the growth of complex, competitive circuits. Cheerleading has a long history in this country, starting with men as the first participants in the late nineteenth century. Women became cheerleaders in the 1920s and have dominated the activity since then, with a few exceptions (for example, yell leaders at Texas A&M are still all male). Cheerleading has often been associated with small-town local pride, national patriotism, and school promotion.⁵⁸ A few scholastic-based competitions were held for older cheerleading squads—at the high school and collegiate level—in the growth-of-competition period. In 1981 a national organization, the United Cheer Association, organized its own private cheerleading competition.⁵⁹ But in the 1990s private, competition-only squads, tied to neither scholastic nor civic identities, began to emerge as a variety of private cheer competitions started. Now such teams as “The Hotties, The Firecrackers and The Flames . . . [compete] at [events like] the American Showdown, a giant, ‘Bring It On’-style tournament where more than 60 of the top cheerleading teams from Kindergarten–12th grade vie for cash and prizes.”⁶⁰

Competitive cheer is but one example of the hypercompetition that began in the 1980s and 1990s and characterizes competitive kids’ activities today, along with many other activities, such as skateboarding, golf, figure skating, and gymnastics. But what about the three case study activities of chess, soccer, and dance?

Chess

Chess prodigies have emerged fairly often over time, which is not surprising given the game’s long history. Chess has been part of the West-

ern repertoire of games since the eighth century, when Arabs brought it to southern Europe.⁶¹ In the United States it's been played since Colonial times. The first American chess prodigy was Paul Morphy, who is said to have beaten General Winfield Scott twice as a nine-year-old. Morphy famously went crazy and died in a bathtub at age forty-seven in 1884—not exactly an auspicious precedent for American chess prodigies.

Despite Morphy's success as the unofficial World Champion, there was not much youth chess development in the United States in the early twentieth century. Instead growth in chess for children occurred in other parts of the world. The USSR, which focused on developing children's chess after the 1917 Revolution, was the real center of chess excellence. There chess became as popular as soccer and ice hockey. Clubs were formed and children as young as four were tutored in strategy.⁶²

The United States Chess Federation (USCF) was not even founded until 1939, the same time as Little League (though the USCF was not limited to children). The organization soon began to sponsor tournaments and clubs, and in less than two decades it helped develop the best American chess player and the most famous chess prodigy: Bobby Fischer. Fischer taught himself how to play at age six and achieved the status of National Master at twelve. He won the U.S. Junior Chess Championship in 1956. A year later, at age fourteen, he became the youngest-ever U.S. champion (a record that still stands). Before Fischer, the USSR had been certain of its global dominance in chess, especially because it had started teaching chess in school classrooms in the 1950s.⁶³

The idea of teaching children scholastic chess finally began to take hold in the United States in the 1960s, as Fischer's star rose. But it was not until the Fischer-Spassky match of 1972 that American scholastic chess really took off. The phenomenal success of Fischer during the World Championship inspired moms to pull their sons out of Little League that summer and enroll them in chess lessons.⁶⁴ After 1972 it became possible for some chess players to make a career out of teaching chess in the United States as parents eagerly signed their young children up for lessons.⁶⁵

As with other competitive children's activities, chess grew steadily over the course of the twentieth century and then exploded in the 1970s. Over the next three decades scholastic chess became more organized

and competitive. The first national chess championship run by the USCF specifically for young children, also known as the Elementary Championships, was held in 1976.

In the early 1990s, the book and movie *Searching for Bobby Fischer*, about another young chess prodigy, Josh Waitzkin (the book was written by his father, Fred), helped scholastic chess reach a bigger audience. Chess journalist Dan Heisman wrote that the movie “was a phenomenal success, and served as a catalyst for the growth of scholastic chess in North America. In 1990, only about 10 percent of tournament chess players in the U.S. were under 19; today [in 2002], over half are.”⁶⁶ The depth of this chess mania is reflected in the fact that parents were banned from tournament rooms in the 1980s, as they were all too willing to help their kids cheat.

Along with *Searching for Bobby Fischer* another type of chess story garnered media attention in the late 1980s and 1990s. This narrative focused on the success of chess teams from poor, mostly African American urban communities like Harlem and the Bronx. In 1991, a school from an impoverished section of the Bronx won the national championships, showing that kids from all class backgrounds could compete in chess.⁶⁷

Children from poor urban areas could not afford the private coaches used by children from private schools, like Waitzkin, but they did have nonprofits in their corner. The most prominent of these programs is Chess in the Schools, based in New York City. Founded in 1986 as the American Chess Foundation, Chess in the Schools provides chess teachers for schools in impoverished areas all around New York City. Another organization, The Right Move, sponsors free tournaments where children can play without paying a fee—and these are some of the most competitive events for children in New York City.

Competitive chess is unusual in that it has refocused itself on helping children from less-advantaged backgrounds, in much the same way that settlement houses and boys’ clubs did in New York City at the turn of the last century. This is partly because of the game’s low cost, but also because there are many perceived benefits to chess, including academic outcomes (some say math scores increase, though the scholarship in this

area is difficult to accurately assess) and developing life lessons (such as learning to make a plan before making a move). Many major cities now have a chess program serving underprivileged youth, sponsored by a not-for-profit organization.

In addition to urban programs, the rise of Internet play has enabled children from rural areas to find regular chess competition and instruction. The development of better chess software has also made a difference. Grandmaster Maurice Ashley (the first, and only, African American Grandmaster) claims that there is “an accelerated growth of prodigies,”⁶⁸ clearly a phenomenon with which chess remains preoccupied. Scholastic chess has become so prominent and vital to the success of the USCF that in April 2006 they started a bimonthly chess magazine just for their scholastic members, entitled *Chess Life for Kids*.

Soccer

While scholastic chess has grown in the past two decades, it cannot match the explosion of youth soccer in America. Today, according to soccer experts, more kids play soccer than any other organized youth sport.⁶⁹ Of course, this has not always been true.

Soccer came to the United States from Europe, particularly the United Kingdom, during the nineteenth century as immigrants brought the game with them.⁷⁰ As there were already sports considered “American,” particularly baseball and basketball, soccer did not garner much of a following in the United States for most of the first half of the twentieth century. The same immigrants who brought soccer here, and their children, are the ones who kept soccer “alive in the United States until the 1970s [through] ethnic leagues, private schools, and colleges.”⁷¹ Colleges began offering soccer scholarships in the 1960s, helping to establish the legitimacy of the sport.⁷²

As more and more competitive athletic activities established their own youth leagues and national organizations after World War II, soccer followed suit with the American Youth Soccer Organization (AYSO) in 1964. AYSO’s guiding philosophy of “everyone plays”—which is essentially noncompetitive—along with Pele’s popularity during that time helped

soccer become the fastest growing youth sport in the United States by 1967.⁷³

But by the mid-1970s many families were frustrated by AYSO's egalitarian philosophy; they wanted to challenge their children to be above average. Resistance from AYSO and other recreational organizations to the increased competitive impulse spurred parents to develop their own private clubs. As these private clubs developed, with their higher participation fees, many children from the European immigrant and working-class families who had previously kept soccer alive in the United States, along with an increasing number of Latino immigrants, were excluded.

By the end of the 1970s there were about three thousand of these private clubs.⁷⁴ Most were connected to U.S. Youth Soccer (USYS), which was founded in 1975 as the competitive parallel to AYSO. USYS explicitly focused on organizing leagues and tournaments for what are known as elite or travel soccer club teams. Such teams are easily distinguishable from recreational, or "rec," teams that AYSO sponsors, as they have year-round seasons, they sometimes play multiple league games each week that require travel, and they almost always have paid trainers and/or coaches.⁷⁵ These traits are characteristic of the professionalization seen in various children's athletic activities.

Another way youth soccer has tried to professionalize, which is noteworthy among kids' activities, is that they require all coaches—even volunteer parent coaches in recreational leagues—to get a license to coach. This rule is mandated by the national organizations. Such licenses go from A to F, with A being the most advanced, certifying someone to coach at an international level. Most youth coaches have only an E or F license, the lowest, and while these licenses simply require a few hours of training, the fact that they are required highlights the professional attitude many within the world of soccer have toward youth programs in the United States.

Soccer America, the monthly publication for soccer fans in the United States, also devotes at least one article each month to issues affecting youth soccer, illustrating its salience in the wider soccer community. Jim Haner writes in his 2006 memoir on being a soccer dad and coach that soccer is now simply a part of American childhood, at least for those

from a particular class: "Soccer is now one of the defining experiences of childhood in suburbia—like Boy Scouts or Little League two generations ago, only much bigger—but it barely existed in most places as recently as twenty years ago."⁷⁶

While youth travel teams did exist in the 1980s, many soccer writers are quick to point out that they barely resemble the teams of today, with their names, uniforms, and "highly evolved infrastructure."⁷⁷ Given that organized competitive soccer developed so recently, it is all the more remarkable how professionalized and organized the competitive landscape already is for kids in the twenty-first century.

Dance

Dance has long been considered a classic childhood experience, the way soccer is for many kids today. And as with soccer, the contemporary dance landscape is quite different than it was thirty years ago. It is now filled with hundreds of dance competitions run by private companies. "Competitive dance" refers to for-profit dance competitions that organize regional and national competitions for all forms of dance, as opposed to dance that is competitive only for admission to companies and programs or for roles in specific productions.

The history of dance education in the United States spans the twentieth century, though formal instruction outside of the home began in the nineteenth century. Dancing academies, such as the Dodworth Academy, started in the 1840s in New York City.⁷⁸ These academies helped mold upper-class American children in the image of upper-class European children, teaching them social dances.⁷⁹ The Dodworth Academy reached the height of its popularity in the 1890s as the *nouveau riche* wanted their children to acquire the proper cultural capital; on Saturdays they offered classes to children as young as age three. But by the 1920s the Dodworth Academy had closed due to economic difficulties and family politics.

By that time ballet schools had stepped in to fill the void in dance education. One of the first formal ballet schools opened in 1909; it was affiliated with the Metropolitan Opera in New York City. Before schools like

this developed, teachers would hold lessons in their homes.⁸⁰ Dance schools and studios developed and expanded over the next few decades. Dance teachers' organizations, including Dance Masters of America (DMA), organized in 1948, helped to legitimate the field and promote dance education. In the 1960s these teachers' organizations began to hold national conventions where teachers could take workshops and bring their students to show off their skills and compete.

Dance competitions did not arise for the first time in the 1960s, however. They were preceded in the nineteenth century by a tradition of mostly informal dance competitions among children and adults. For example, "challenge dancing" was common in African American communities, and Irish step dancing competitions (at fairs, pubs, and even in homes) were common both in Ireland and in the Irish diaspora.⁸¹ What distinguished the new competitions of the 1960s is that they were organized, and the organizers earned money for their efforts.

DMA held its first competition for individual dancers in 1963, and another dance teachers' organization, Dance Educators of America, also started competitions in the early 1960s. These competitions awarded scholarships to winning dancers, supporting them in their continuing dance education. Dance competition expert Pam Chancey explains that the goal of the competitions of the 1960s "was to challenge professionals and add prestige to the art of dance. At that time, many people criticized dance competitions for attempting to turn dance, an art form, into a 'sport.'"⁸²

But comparisons to sport likely helped establish dance competitions, at least in terms of the way parents viewed the value of participating. Private competitions, eager to jump into this competitive space and thinking of dance competitions as a different form of athletic contest, started to pop up in the late 1970s.

Showstopper National Championships was one of the first to enter the field, and today it remains one of the largest competitions. Showstopper held its first event in 1978, claiming it was the first of its kind. The founder, Debbie Roberts, explained her motivation for starting the competition: "It was my son's participation in organized soccer that inspired me to start Showstopper. I saw how excited and challenged he

was to play each week. When he would lose, he would leave the game saying, 'I'll try harder next week.' He learned to practice and work hard to achieve all he knew he was capable of accomplishing."⁸³

Another form of competitive dance—though not the focus of this book—is ballroom dancing, which has also relied on similarities to athletics to aid growth. Social ballroom dancing had been popular since the time of academies like Dodworth. But social ballroom dancing steadily lost popularity through the first half of the twentieth century. By the time of Chubby Checker and nightclub dancing, social ballroom dancing was at its lowest point. Interestingly, this is the moment when the competition system for ballroom dancing started to develop in the United States, around the 1960s.⁸⁴ By the 1980s this style of competitive ballroom dancing had been labeled DanceSport to “designate a competitive and more athletic form of ballroom in order to set it apart from its more recreational and social counterpart, which is often stereotypically visualized as dancing by seniors.”⁸⁵

Just as ballroom dancing became more competitive from the 1960s to the 1980s, so too did the dance competitions that are the focus in *Playing to Win*. The early years of private competition were far less competitive than they are today. One dance teacher reflects, “My studio began competing around 1985. . . . Then probably in the early '90s, some of the stronger studios started coming alive.”⁸⁶ This teacher went on to explain that today the costs of participation (entry fees, costume costs, etc.) is much, much higher than in the 1980s and 1990s and that in some areas of the country a lot of the camaraderie that used to exist between teachers and studios has been replaced by animosity. The proliferation of dance competitions, “sparse thirty years ago,”⁸⁷ has also fueled the proliferation of thousands of dance studios, which explicitly train students to participate in the competitive events.

There is continued growth in competitive dance in the twenty-first century as some of the major competitions attempt to organize themselves into a dance competition federation. Popularity and growth has been reinforced by such TV shows as *So You Think You Can Dance* and *Dance Moms*, which feature many “competition kids” and their tricks. These tricks, such as triple turns performed by nine-year-olds, are a sign of

the hypercompetitive atmosphere. To win, children have to perform feats that were rare twenty years ago and certainly not expected of children of their age.

Also unimaginable twenty years ago is the behavior of some adults involved with dance competitions. For example, some teachers and parents have been known to lie about the age of the competitors. Because of such misbehavior competitions now often require proof of age. This type of misconduct by adults highlights the current state of children's competitive activities and how much is at stake for the adults who are involved.

CHANGES IN FAMILIES, EDUCATION, AND PRIZES

What factors explain why competitive activities like chess, dance, and soccer have developed in the way they have over the past century? In addition to the trends described above, I have identified three more macrohistorical trends to help clarify how we got to the point where adults lie about the age of children: changes in the American family, the American educational system, and the organization of prizes and competitions in American culture. Class is an important factor as well, overlaying the historical narrative and influencing the contemporary situation and its outcomes.

In *Busier Than Ever!*, their study of why American families are so busy in the early twenty-first century, anthropologists Darrah, Freeman, and English-Lueck suggest, "Smaller family sizes, the reluctance of parents to permit unsupervised children's play, and preferences for structured, formalized children's activities require adults to transport and supervise their children. Many parents have also become more involved in their children's education and recreational activities reflecting shifting norms of good parenting."⁸⁸ Embedded in these reasons for the increase in busyness are some of the reasons for the increase in competition in children's lives.

Demographic changes, such as fewer children in each family, profoundly affect the tenor of parenting. Parents can devote more time and

attention to their children in smaller families; this also means that there is even more parental anxiety since there are fewer chances to see children succeed.⁸⁹ More mothers now work outside the home as well, which affects child care arrangements. For many mothers, employment can produce parental guilt, as some delegation of socialization tasks must occur. This in turn may lead parents to indulge children in their competitive or organized activities more than they might have otherwise or to overcompensate for less physical time at home by being overinvolved in other ways.

Likely the most significant demographic change that has affected competitive children's activities is the population booms: the Baby Boom and its Echo Boom. While Baby Boom parents have been the best-educated and wealthiest generation ever seen in the United States, that enormous cohort has overwhelmed every social-sorting institution it has come in contact with, from preschool classrooms to retirement homes.⁹⁰ Hence the cultural experience of competition, of an insufficient supply of spots for the size of the group seeking them, has predisposed Boomers to see life as a series of contests. With their children's cohort, the Echo Boom, if anything the competitive landscape is getting more crowded than it was in the Boomers' formative years, and the stakes are even higher.

This is especially true when it comes to higher education. The 1960s saw "a growing competitive frenzy over college admissions as a badge of parental fulfillment."⁹¹ Parental anxiety reached a new level because the surge in attendance by Boomers had strained college facilities, and it became increasingly clear that the top schools could not keep up with the demand, meaning that students might not be admitted to the level of college they expected, given their class background. This became even more problematic with the rise of coeducation and the nationalization and democratization of the applicant pool,⁹² fueled by the GI Bill, recruiting, and technology that produced better information for applicants. Parents took on the responsibility of ensuring that their children were successful in the college admissions process.

Interestingly, the competitive frenzy over college admissions did not abate in the 1970s and 1980s, when it was actually easier to gain admission to college, given the decline in application numbers after the

Baby Boomers. Instead, more aware of the stakes, families became more competitive.⁹³

With the Echo Boom in the late 1990s and early 2000s, it once again became harder to get into a “top” college.⁹⁴ It is not just that there has been an increase in the college-age population, expected to have peaked in most areas by the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century,⁹⁵ but there have been record numbers of applications to the most elite colleges and universities. The years 2009–2013 brought record applicant pools for Harvard, Princeton, Yale, Dartmouth, and Brown.⁹⁶

This reality, combined with the existing tension around college admissions, has created an incredibly competitive atmosphere for families, which starts at younger and younger ages now, as parents start earlier and earlier in their children’s lives on the long march to college admission. How early one starts seems to be related to class position. In some parts of the country some parents with higher class standing start grooming their children for competitive preschool admissions, setting their children on an Ivy League track from early on.⁹⁷

After-school activities are a crucial supplement to in-school achievement and test scores. Performing well in activities that many parents perceive as integral to, but not entirely synonymous with, the formal educational system is seen as crucial. Why? Children can develop Competitive Kid Capital through their participation, which can be translated into the currency of credentials. Certain sports, such as squash and fencing, are especially helpful, as they signal elite status in the college admissions process.⁹⁸

For those who wonder just why competitive children’s activities are so much more developed and organized in the United States than in other parts of the world, look no further than this admissions practice. While American society’s cultural attitude toward competition is more developed as well, the best structural explanation is that universities take participation in organized activities into account when making admissions decisions. Most of the other top systems of higher education in the world (in Japan, South Korea, China, India, and France, for example) rely on standardized test scores to determine admissions. It is a purely numeric enterprise. Of course, this carries its own stresses

and problems for students, but academic performance is the main focus.

Parents know that academic credentials matter. Sociologist Randall Collins explained their importance this way: "The rise of a competitive system for producing an abstract cultural currency in the form of educational credentials has been the major new force shaping stratification in twentieth-century America."⁹⁹ As I previously mentioned, this new stratification connected to existing inequalities based on class.

The rise of competitive activities for children is tied to another major change in the educational system: the rise of compulsory education. As Viviana Zelizer carefully details in the classic *Pricing the Priceless Child*, the rise of compulsory education coupled with the eradication of child labor coincided with a cultural shift in how children were viewed. Even as they became less economically vital to families, children became emotionally priceless.¹⁰⁰ Starting in the early twentieth century, parents began to invest more and more in their children, just as they started to have fewer kids, which made the children they did have even more important. This sacralization of childhood helped contribute to the fetishization of childhood and childhood accomplishments.

In many ways it is no coincidence that during this time America experienced a fetishization of awards and prizes in general. The winner-take-all prize frenzy that characterizes American culture started around the same time. For instance, the late nineteenth century saw the establishment of several different types of competitions that still exist today. In 1874 the first Kentucky Derby was held, and 1877 witnessed the inaugural Westminster dog show.¹⁰¹ More than animals got in on the act: in 1913 the first rose competitions were held in the United States.¹⁰²

The early twentieth century also saw the development of organized American sporting culture. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) was established in 1910, and a variety of professional sports leagues grew during this time. Less popular sports also developed their organized, competitive infrastructures in this historical moment; for example, the first synchronized swimming competition in the United States took place in 1939.¹⁰³ Social scientists Andrei Markovits and Steven Hellerman note that sports foster Americans' predilection for rankings

and quantifications, a huge part of the sporting culture: “America’s fetishism and obsession with rankings have made two ostensibly conflicting, yet essential, American values comparable: that of competition and fairness.”¹⁰⁴

The emphasis on competition, and rankings in general, intensified in the second half of the twentieth century. James English describes the 1970s as the most intense period of prize creation, with tremendous growth in every field, including the addition of even more prizes to certain fields, as in film and literature.¹⁰⁵ Music competitions saw similar growth in this time period.¹⁰⁶ Even offbeat activities, such as competitive eating, developed their own competitions and award structures in the 1970s.¹⁰⁷

Since the 1970s prizes have become increasingly fashionable. They are broadly publicized in a variety of fields, including sports and literary awards,¹⁰⁸ along with children’s activities. Competitive children’s activities need to be contextualized in the development of the broader organized, competitive spirit of the United States.

Today the sheer number of competitive opportunities for kids has implications for children’s long-term development and for class inequality. Competitive children’s activities have evolved since they began in late nineteenth-century America. Now there are more activities, a greater number of competitions, and a change in the class backgrounds of competitors. These changes can be understood in terms of changes in families, the educational system, and prizes.

While there is an opportunity to once again involve less advantaged children in competitive activities—as is occurring with scholastic chess in Harlem, the Bronx, and other urban centers that have nonprofits supporting gifted children financially so they can train and travel¹⁰⁹—it is clear that the middle class still dominates these activities. As paid coaches and fees for participation in activities and competitions continue to proliferate, those who are not able to pay are largely pushed out of the system, especially when they are in elementary school. There are opportunities for participation in school-sponsored activities in middle school and high school, but without specialized training at a young age, it is difficult to compete with those who have had such training.

Understanding the historical evolution and context of these activities is a first step. But we must also understand how parents and children conceptualize the place of these activities in their contemporary lives as they develop the Competitive Kid Capital needed to succeed in various educational tournaments through childhood and early adulthood.