The need to star at 12

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By Erik Brady and Amy Rosewater, USA TODAY

Danny Almonte was an anonymous 12-year-old a couple of weeks ago. Now he is the biggest star of the made-for-TV miniseries that the Little League World Series has become. He throws perfect games and 70 mph heat for a team from the Bronx nicknamed the Baby Bombers.

Freddy Adu is also 12. His mother has rebuffed offers from a renowned Italian soccer club that she says reached $750,000. A club spokesman says its offer was far less but won't say by how much. But the spokesman confirms the club's interest in this pre-teen from Potomac, Md., outside of Washington.

Ty Tryon, 17, turned pro this week and hopes to join the PGA Tour. Last week he began his junior year of high school in Orlando; Tiger Woods did not turn pro until he had attended Stanford for 2 years.

Youth sports in the USA produce younger talents and bigger pressures every year. The talents of Almonte, Adu and Tryon are extraordinary exceptions. But experts say the pressures they feel are no longer extraordinary. Pressure is pervasive in youth sports now. It probably can be found at a neighborhood park near you.

The sports that have long trafficked in child stars, such as figure skating and gymnastics, have raised their eligibility ages in recent years. The irony is like an Almonte fastball — by you so fast that you never saw it. Now it isn't only tennis prodigies who move away from home at 10 who feel too much pressure too soon. It has reached grass-roots levels. You don't find it everywhere. But you find it more places than even a few years ago.

"Kids start playing organized sports now at 4 or 5, and some parents want them to specialize in one sport by 7 or 8," says Jack Llewellyn, author of Let 'em Play: What Parents, Coaches and Kids Need to Know about Youth Baseball. "Now we have all-star teams for 5-year-olds, which makes no sense. Travel teams mean huge investments in time and money for families. The culture of youth sports, in many cases, is out of control."

'Why can't they back off?'

Last summer, Adu's soccer team from Potomac, Md., traveled to Italy for a tournament and, stunningly, won it. Adu was the best player on the field. Inter Milan, the Italian soccer club that is one of the best and richest sports organizations in the world, was impressed enough to bid for his services. His mother, Emelia, turned down the offer, though she is a single mom working two jobs. An Adidas

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representative says the company wants him to wear its shoes, hoping to build a business relationship some day. Calls come in from around the world.

“I try not to talk about it,” Adu says, “but someone always brings it up.”

Adu does talk about it with Nick Scrivens, 14, his best friend. Says Scrivens: “He tells me, ‘Why can’t they just back off?’ In the end, I think he just likes to play soccer.”

The U.S. Soccer Federation has asked Adu to train with an age-group national team at an academy in Florida operated by IMG, the worldwide sports agency. It is the same agency that signed Tryon as a pro Wednesday. “Ty did not receive any money to sign with IMG,” agent Jay Danzi says. “We are pursuing some significant industry and non-industry opportunities.”

Bill Tryon, Ty’s father, says turning pro was the right move for his son: “America rewards boldness, but boldness makes a lot of people uncomfortable. It’s high risk, high reward. Ty has a nice group of support people around him to nurture him through this.”

The support group includes a golf instructor, a sports psychologist, a trainer and an agent.

“I wouldn’t advocate this for everyone, but I think Ty is emotionally ready,” says David Leadbetter, the golf instructor who teaches Tryon and oversees his development. “He’s basically a 25-year-old in a 17-year-old body because of his training. Kids are so much more advanced than they were 10 years ago with their skills, training and fitness.”

Which might be fine for Tryon, who has twice made the cut at PGA Tour events. But the emphasis on advanced training extends to many kids in many sports across the land these days. Experts such as Llewellyn, a sports psychology consultant to the Atlanta Braves, think that’s not healthy.

Llewellyn cautions that he isn’t saying sports are bad for kids. He thinks sports are very good for them — even if, in some cases, too much of a good thing. Llewellyn says the trouble is that over time youth sports have become less about fun and more about pressure.

He doesn’t just mean pressure to win. Often there is pressure to stick with a sport — and not just because so much time and money have been invested in it. “Kids who play one sport year round for years find that they don’t have friends outside of that sport,” Lllewellyn says. “If they quit, their social life is gone.”

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Unrealistic expectations

The all-consuming culture of youth sports has been evolving for years. What's new is the unreasonable expectation of a payoff down the road. Some parents dream of the riches of pro sports, a prospect not much more likely than hitting the lottery. Many other parents pine for a lesser lottery — a college scholarship as the pot of gold at the end of the youth sports rainbow.

"Sports teach kids how to deal with pressure, and that's good," says sports psychologist Christopher Stankovich, co-author of The Parent's Playbook, a how-to manual for parents with kids in youth sports. "But when the pressure is unrealistic — winning a scholarship, for instance — that's not good. Kids have a better chance to grow up to be a rocket scientist than a professional athlete."

Rick Wolff is chairman of the Center for Sports Parenting (www.sportsparenting.org). He figures the scholarship goal looks realistic to many well-meaning parents.

"They see that their kid is one of the best athletes in their small town," he says. "But there are a lot of small towns in this country. Mom and dad tell their kid to go out and have fun. But what they're really saying is, 'Go out and be a star.' "

Parents are often the villains in any discussion of the excesses of youth sports. Even parents who avoid the pitfalls themselves have witnessed other parents behaving badly. Gary Dowell is the father of Brody, 12, a first baseman on the Little League World Series team from Brownsburg, Ind.

"It's almost embarrassing to watch a parent outright yell at a kid to try to motivate him," Dowell says. "It's truly ugly for parents and coaches to demean and yell at children who already know when they've made a mistake."

Author Shane Murphy argues in his book The Cheers and the Tears that parents like that are drawn into out-of-character behavior by the jangle of emotions born of watching their children in the crucible of competition.

Adults had little involvement in child's play until the end of the 19th century, when the forces of urbanization and industrialization put clusters of kids in cities where their parents worked in factories. Organizations such as the Young Men's Christian Association stepped into the breach and offered games for kids.

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By the 1920s and '30s, competitive sports programs for boys began to appear, emulating the professional leagues that were growing in popularity. Pop Warner football was founded in 1930 and Little League baseball in 1939.

After World War II, the baby boom meant more children playing sports — and more parents running them. Girls were largely left out of the loop until Title IX became law in 1972. Today an estimated 31 million boys and girls play youth sports.

That growth, Murphy says, "has mirrored the boom in professional sports in our society. ... An outside observer of American culture would have to say that we are sports-obsessed. Sports programming saturates our televisions, and sports marketing is omnipresent."

Spike in TV exposure

This summer Little League is part of that saturation. ABC, ESPN and ESPN2 are televising 27 games, including the eight regional finals that led up to the World Series. That compares with 15 TV games last season, before the World Series field doubled from eight teams to 16.

ESPN spokesman Mike Soltys says the network expected lower ratings with an expanded field, but instead they have risen 17% on ESPN, which is attracting 635,000 households per game through Tuesday, and 10% on ESPN2, which is drawing 620,000 households.

TV is hardly alone in trying to capture the summer romance of small boys in big games. Many newspapers, including USA TODAY, cover the event every summer.

Once upon a time, just one Little League game aired on ABC each year — the World Series final on a weekend afternoon. This weekend ABC will air its games in prime time for the first time: the U.S. championship Saturday at 8 p.m. ET and world championship Sunday at 6:30 p.m. ET.

The games are compelling television. The kids are fresh-faced. The managers are miked. The venue is warmly intimate. And the production values are major league.

"There's a lot of pressure to do the best you can and hit the ball as hard as you can," says Zach Zweig, 12, a third baseman for the team from Apopka, Fla., which will play in Saturday's U.S. final. "My mom and dad are very supportive of me. If they feel I am not playing as well as I can, they tell me I'm not doing my best and that I need to pick it up a little."

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Dealing with pressure

Almonte doesn't need to pick it up at all. He has a killer smile to match his killer fastball. He throws a 70 mph slider, which equates to pitches of more than 90 mph in the major leagues given the shorter distance from the mound to home plate in Little League.

The Rolando Paulino All-Stars from the Bronx, N.Y., are the darlings of the Little League World Series, in part thanks to the perfect game Almonte pitched against Apopka, Fla., last weekend. It was the first Series perfect game in 44 years.

After throwing a one-hitter on Thursday night, the youngster has already been tabbed to pitch for the Series title on Sunday, providing the New York City youngsters beat Apopka on Saturday.

Almonte and his teammates appeared on NBC's Today this week. They hope to play before President Bush on Sunday. (Bush, the first president who played in Little League, will also be the first to attend its World Series.) And for all of that, if Almonte feels pressure, it is hard to tell.

"I don't think about the media or the televisions," he says. "I just focus on pitching and playing ball."

Tryon, the new pro golfer, likewise dismisses any notion of a loss of innocence.

"I definitely don't stay awake at night worrying about pressure," he says. "There's always pressure in golf, and athletics generally. I just have to deal with it."

So does Adu. He copes with a little help from his friends. Scrivens, a teammate on the Cougars soccer team, teases Adu about all the attention he gets.

"I joke with him and say, 'See that Lamborghini? That could be yours.' He just says, 'All in good time.' "

Time is on his side, even when it's sometimes hard to tell who else is.

"I've got a long way to go," Adu says. "I'm not in a hurry. I'm only 12."

Contributing: Harry Blauvelt, Mike Sturino in Williamsport, Pa.