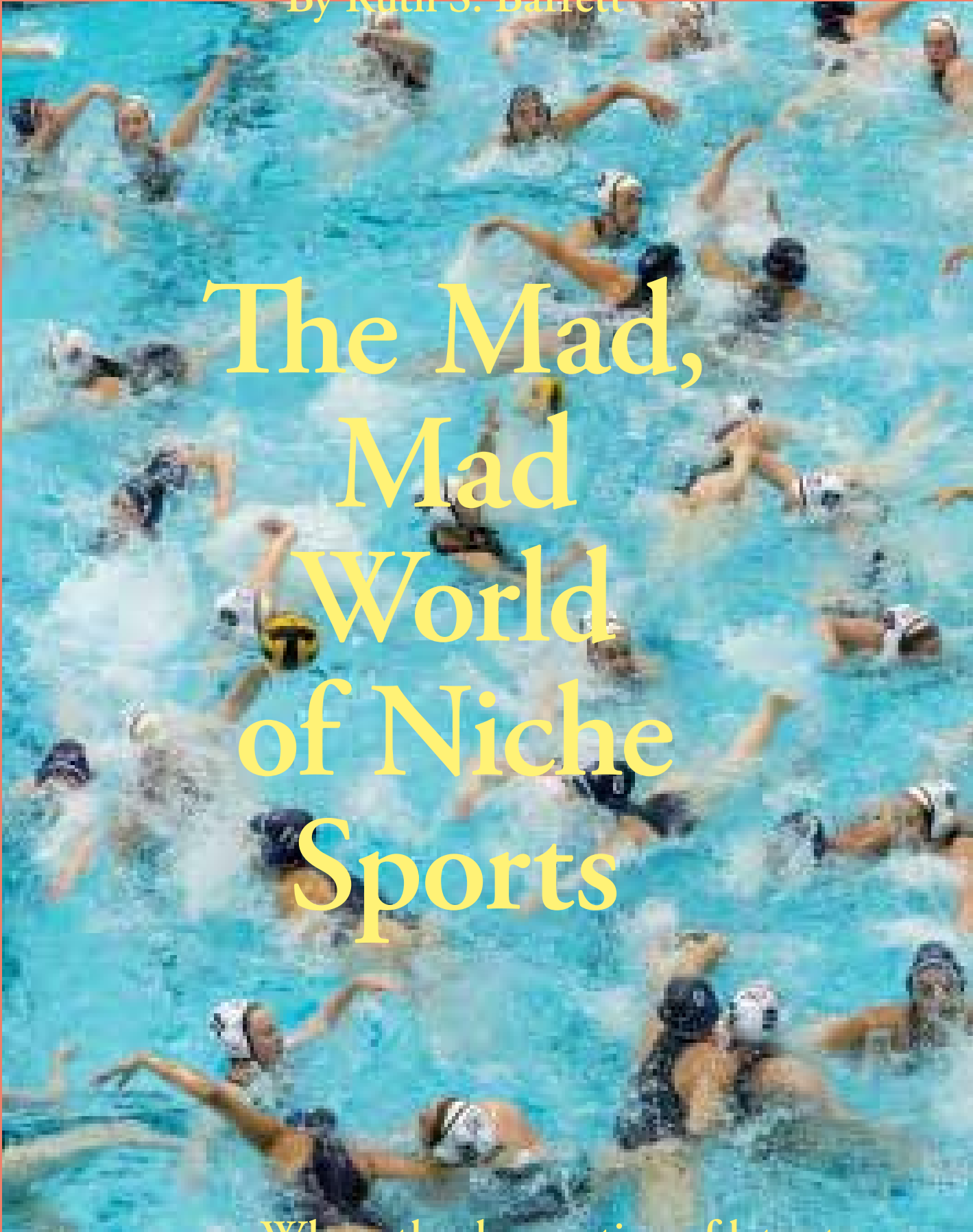



By Ruth S. Barrett

A large group of swimmers in a pool, splashing and competing. The water is a vibrant blue, and the swimmers are in various stages of their strokes, creating a dynamic and energetic scene. The swimmers are wearing dark-colored swimwear and caps, and their arms and heads are visible above the water. The overall atmosphere is one of intense competition and physical exertion.

The Mad, Mad World of Niche Sports

Where the desperation of late-stage

Photo Illustrations by Pelle Cass

A high-angle, wide shot of a swimming pool filled with many swimmers. They are all in various stages of a stroke, creating a lot of white water splashes. The water is a vibrant blue. The swimmers are wearing dark swim caps and dark swimsuits. The overall scene is one of intense activity and competition.

Among Ivy League— Obsessed Parents

meritocracy is so strong, you can smell it

On paper, Sloane, a buoyant, chatty, stay-at-home mom from Fairfield County, Connecticut, seems almost unbelievably well prepared to shepherd her three daughters through the roiling world of competitive youth sports.

She played tennis and ran track in high school and has an advanced degree in behavioral medicine. She wrote her master's thesis on the connection between increased aerobic activity and attention span. She is also versed in statistics, which comes in handy when she's analyzing her eldest daughter's junior-squash rating—and whiteboarding the consequences if she doesn't step up her game. “She needs at least a 5.0 rating, or she's going to Ohio State,” Sloane told me.

She laughed: “I don't mean to throw Ohio State under the bus. It's an amazing school with amazing school spirit.”

But a little over a year ago, during the Fourth of July weekend, Sloane began to think that maybe it was time to call it quits. She was crouched in the vestibule of the Bay Club in Redwood City, strategizing on the phone with her husband about a “malicious refereeing” dispute that had victimized her daughter at the California Summer Gold tournament. He had his own problem. In Columbus, Ohio, at the junior-fencing nationals with the couple's two younger girls and son, he reported that their middle daughter, a 12-year-old saber fencer, had been stabbed in the jugular during her first bout. The wound was right next to the carotid artery, and he was withdrawing her from the tournament and flying home.

She'd been hurt before while fencing—on one occasion gashed so deeply in the thigh that blood seeped through her pants—but this was the first time a blade had jabbed her in the throat. It was a Fourth of July massacre.

“I thought, *What are we doing?*” said Sloane, who asked to be identified by her middle name to protect her daughters' privacy and college-recruitment chances. “It's the Fourth of July. You're in Ohio; I'm in California. What are we doing to our family? We're torturing our kids ridiculously. They're not succeeding. We're using all our resources and emotional bandwidth for a fool's folly.”

Yet Sloane found that she didn't know how to make the folly stop. The practices, clinics, and private lessons continued to pile up, pushing everything else off the calendar (except for homework; Sloane knew her girls had to be outstanding athletes *and* outstanding students to get into the right school). “We just got caught up in it,” she said. “We thought this is what good parents do. They fight for opportunities for their kids.”

In 1988, the University of California sociologist Harry Edwards published an indictment of the “single-minded pursuit of sports” in Black communities. The “tragic” overemphasis on athletics at the expense of school and family, he wrote in *Ebony* magazine, was leaving “thousands and thousands of Black youths in obsessive pursuit of sports goals foredoomed to elude the vast and overwhelming majority of them.” In a plea to his fellow Black people, Edwards declared, “We can simply no longer permit many among our most competitive and gifted youths to sacrifice a wealth of human potential on the altar of athletic aspiration.”

Thirty years later, in a twist worthy of a Jordan Peele movie, Fairfield County has come to resemble Compton in the monomaniacal focus on sports. “There’s no more school,” a parent from the town of Darien told me flatly. (She, like Sloane and several other parents, did not want to be identified for privacy and recruitment reasons.) “There’s no more church. No more friends. We gave it all up for squash.” She says she is working on a memoir that she intends to self-publish, titled *Squashed*.

A story published last fall by *The Daily Princetonian* found that the Gold Coast of Connecticut pumps more athletic recruits into Ivy League schools than any other region in the nation. Kids’ sports look a little different here—as they do in upscale neighborhoods across America. Backyards feature batting cages, pitching tunnels, fencing pistes, Olympic-size hockey rinks complete with floodlights and generators. Hotly debated zoning-board topics include building codes for at-home squash courts and storm-drainage plans to mitigate runoff from private ice rinks. Whereas the *Hoop Dreamers* of the Chicago projects pursued sports as a path out of poverty and hardship, the kids of Fairfield County aren’t gunning for the scholarship money. It’s more about status maintenance, by any means necessary.

Or, as the Darien parent told me, they’re using athletics to escape “the penalty that comes from being from an advantaged zip code.” She continued: “Being who you are is not enough. It might be enough in Kansas. But not here.”

The special boost for recruited athletes, known as preferential admission, can be equivalent to hundreds of SAT points. According to *The Washington Post*, Harvard, which typically admits approximately 5 percent of its applicants, reports acceptance rates as high as 88 percent for athletes endorsed by its coaches. “Parents see the numbers,” says Luke Walton, an Olympic rower and the founder of Rower Academy, a San Diego-based recruiting consultancy for high-school crew athletes. “They see that if their child can get the backing of a coach, they are likely to get in. That’s a shiny object—a fishing lure for parents. They look at that and say: ‘That’s the answer. Sports is the answer.’”

Except now it isn’t, and maybe it never quite was. Even before the coronavirus pandemic brought all sports to a halt, a pall was settling over the phthalate-free turf fields of Greenwich, Connecticut, and Palo Alto, California. Over the past decade, the for-profit ecosystem that has sprouted up around athletic recruiting at top-rung universities has grown so excessively ornate, so circular in its logic, that it’s become self-defeating. More and more entrants are chasing an unchanging number of prizes. The Varsity Blues scandal exposed how hedge-funders and Hollywood B-listers were turning their progeny into football kickers and coxswains through the magic of Photoshop. But more commonly, alpha sports parents followed the rules—at least those of the meritocracy—only to discover that they’d built the 80th- or 90th-best lacrosse midfielder in the country. Which, it turns out, barely qualifies you for a spot at the bottom of the roster at Bates.


Dan Walsh, a two-time Olympian who runs a crew consultancy in Norwalk, Connecticut, says the upward spiral of competitiveness in recherché sports like fencing, squash, crew,

water polo, and lacrosse has been remarkable to witness. “If you’re trying to figure out what it takes to get in wherever you want, no matter what, don’t be a cusp athlete,” he says. “Be a Clark Dean. Be a once-in-a-generation rower who won the junior world championship as a 17-year-old and missed his sophomore year at Harvard to train for the Olympics.”

But not every kid can be a Clark Dean. That may seem obvious, but as a water-polo mom from Stamford, Connecticut, told me, her fellow parents have refused to accept it. Racked by admissions anxiety and the perceived injustices of “environmental dashboards” and “adversity scores”—two methods colleges use to increase racial and economic diversity—they’ve ignored, or failed to grasp, the concept of what this mother, an economist by training, calls “fixed constraints.”

In March, COVID-19 arrived—the ultimate fixed constraint. The rackets were put away, the fencing blades sheathed, all tournaments canceled. There would be no Easter Extravaganza, no Beak of the Chick, no Lax by the Sea. Squash on Fire went down in flames. Nobody could schmooze, outwit, or buy their way around the virus.

For a time, Sloane fought it. She reconfigured the basement so that her younger two could fence. She created a fencing strip using floor-marking tape, bought headless dummies to give the girls a target. She reached out to a friend with a private squash court so



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that her eldest daughter could work on her ground strokes. Her husband dusted off the beach-house blender and began making vitamin-packed smoothies. “We all started drinking the shakes with the spinach,” she told me. “We were going to start working out as a family. Weights, pull-ups, all of it. We were trying to keep the girls engaged.”

Eventually, though, she gave up. “The girls didn’t want to fence against headless mannequins, and they didn’t want to fight each other,” she said. “There was no one to ref it. They were suffering, snapping at each other. One morning I woke up and I said, ‘This stops right now.’”





THE PANDEMIC HIT the high-school class of 2021 quickest and hardest. Student athletes struggled to process it all, as their college plans blew up and their beloved squash courts were redefined as boxes of super-spread, their fields blocked by yellow police tape. “They’ll always wonder what would’ve happened—and who they could have wowed,” *Inside Lacrosse* CEO Terry Foy told me, referring to the high-school seniors. “To have that opportunity lost . . .” His voice trailed off, before he picked up again, mournfully: “The kid who would have gone to Yale now goes to Georgetown. The kid who would have gone to Georgetown now goes to Loyola. On and on. And then eventually you get down to Wentworth. And then you just don’t play college sports.”

The bad news got worse as spring turned into summer. In May, Brown announced the permanent elimination of fencing and squash. In July, the Ivy League conference officially canceled fall sports and warned that the spring season could be next. In a press release, Harvard said its department of athletics, a sprawling fiefdom that includes 42 varsity sports, would temporarily pivot to “wellness programming.” Soon after, Stanford dropped 11 varsity programs, including fencing, squash, and men’s crew, citing factors such as gender equity, potential savings, and fan interest.

That was disheartening enough, but the bigger worry, says David Poolman, the executive director of the College Squash Association, is that “the door is now open for other athletic directors to do the same.” Taken to the extreme, the fear is that the coronavirus will become a mass-extinction event for squash and fencing and their ilk. But in truth, these niche sports passed their saturation point long before the pandemic hit. There are simply too many kids competing for too few spots.

Within the past decade, the number of high-school participants in U.S. Squash-accredited tournaments more than tripled, while the spots available on college teams barely budged. On the girls’ side, there were 383 openings in 2008; 10 years later, there were 436. For the boys, the comparable figures are 464 and 487. Not to mention the fact that last year at Harvard, for example, two-thirds of the squash roster was made up of international players.

In water polo, high-school participation has risen from 36,000 to 45,000 kids over the past five years. During that same time, 21 men’s college spots were added, for a total of 1,072, while the number of women’s spots increased by 16, to 1,217. As with squash, many dominant teams fill out their rosters with international players—from countries as disparate as Australia and Montenegro. Dan Sharadin, the commissioner of the Collegiate Water Polo Association, matter-of-factly sums up the state of affairs: “If every varsity program has an incoming class of 10 water-polo athletes, that leaves about 9,000 high-schoolers with no place to go.”

But, he told me, he’s got this. Pre-pandemic, he was barnstorming the country, setting up meetings with the athletic directors of small, midwestern Division II and III schools. He came armed

To make the images that appear in this story, the photographer Pelle Cass locked his camera onto a tripod for the duration of an event, capturing up to 1,000 photographs from one spot. The images were then layered and compiled into a single digital file to create a kind of time-lapse still photo.

with sheaves of data on the elevated socioeconomic status of the typical high-school water-polo player, along with a rebranding campaign and a catchy new slogan: “Just add water polo.”

“I got a few bites,” Sharadin said. “They can see that these families will pay full freight. For tuition-driven schools, adding water polo can actually be a revenue increase. What’s great is that water-polo athletes tend to graduate at a much higher rate than the average college student.”

And the schools like that because it shows that water-polo kids are serious, committed students?

“Yes,” Sharadin said. “And it’s also like, *Hey, this means we’re going to be certain of four years of tuition payments.* As opposed to two or three.”

Will the swanky water-polo families, who may be holding out hope for Harvard, Stanford, USC, go along with any of this?

“Parents need to open their minds,” Sharadin said. “They’re not likely to be as excited about Millersville University or Bloomsburg as Penn or Columbia. I get that. But that’s something that these families will have to come to grips with.”

“Sorry, but there’s no way in hell,” said the water-polo mom from Stamford. “What parent wants to have a child who’s going to be playing for a bottom-tier school with bottom-tier academics in the armpit of the United States? I want to be polite. But there’s no way in hell.”

Look at fencing or crew, and the trends are the same: a doubling of junior players, and flatlining collegiate openings. For lacrosse, the situation is perhaps worse, if only because the absolute number of kids playing the game is higher. Lacrosse has topped the list of the most-added high-school sports for the past seven years, according to the National Federation of State High School Associations, but again, its growth at high-status colleges has been anemic.

Before the pandemic, determined lacrosse families from New Canaan, Greenwich, and Darien had put their heads together to try to address the dearth of college-lacrosse spots, with a twist on Sharadin’s approach to water polo. Their inspiration: the JetBlue founder and New Canaan resident David Neeleman, whose \$15.6 million donation helped establish a Division I lacrosse team at the University of Utah—his son Seth is a star defender and team captain. “We’ve been looking into what is the ticket price to start a men’s [varsity lacrosse] program” at Stanford, one parent told me. “We could create lacrosse at Stanford with \$20 million. If we could just find \$20 million, we could make this work.”

One Greenwich parent told me she believes that, far from being a glide path to the Ivies, lacrosse had actually hurt her older son’s college prospects. As team captain and a straight-A student with stellar test scores, he would have been a credible applicant to NYU or Columbia—but these schools lack varsity-lacrosse programs, and he’d fallen in love with his sport. “There were eight or 10 strong academic schools we couldn’t even look at, because they didn’t have varsity lacrosse,” she said.

Her kid just completed his freshman year at a not-so-fancy college in the South, and, according to his mom, he’s happy enough. But she feels bitter, and wonders if her younger boy should quit club lacrosse. “The guys who get recruited to the

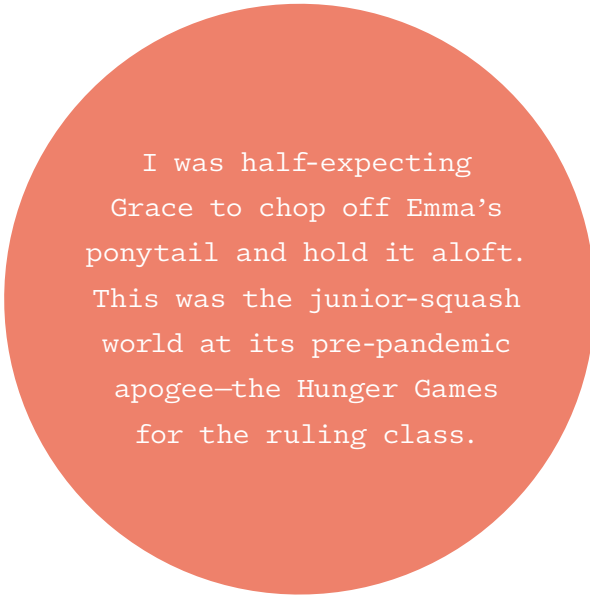
Ivies—it turns out these guys are beasts,” she said. “I saw them at showcases. They were like stallions.”

She and her husband feel hoodwinked by the directors of her son’s club-lacrosse program, which happily stoked her fantasies while stockpiling her money: \$10,000 a year for 11 years. “They were talking Notre Dame for him,” she said. “Our eyes were glistening ... We went to 16 showcases last year. I can’t believe the money we spent to see our son rejected 16 times.”

Similar tales of woe flowed through neighborhood gossip channels and chat boards across Fairfield County. The junior-Olympic fencing champion and straight-A student who was recruited by Notre Dame and signed a National Letter of Intent, only to have his application rejected at the last minute because he didn’t take enough AP classes. A top-25 squash player with a perfect SAT score who didn’t even get a reach-out from Amherst. The rower who committed to Yale without properly decommitting from Brown—and was dropped by both. Were elite youth sports working out for anyone? Or was it all a regatta to nowhere?

“I understand the frustration,” says Jeff Brameier, who is entering his 36th year as the lacrosse coach at Darien High School, consistently one of the highest-ranked public-school lacrosse teams in the country. “I’ve had a few team captains who were among my best defensive kids ever. Near-perfect GPAs. I couldn’t get them into an Ivy. I tried.”

Amid the shifting norms, there’s a growing sense of unease among suburban parents in niche-sport hubs—a dread that they went too far, failed to read the room. And they’re not wrong. “It’s easy to stereotype the Fairfield County player,” says Lars Tiffany, the men’s varsity-lacrosse coach at the University of Virginia. “The Fairfield County player is the rich kid who still has his umbilical



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for the ruling class.

cord connected: the kid who doesn’t really have to take ownership of his mistakes or actions.” Tiffany insists he doesn’t buy in to such broad-brush stereotypes. “We try not to care where they’re from,” he says. And yet, “if they’re from a hotbed, there’s an expectation level.”

He elaborates: “Do I hold the Fairfield County lacrosse player to a higher standard? Of course. You just know he’s been coached up. So flash-forward to me watching a [high school] junior on the lacrosse field. The thought is going through my brain that I like his skill set but there’s room for growth. But then I think, *Wait*. He’s already had a lot of people working on these things. He’s a little tapped out. Maybe I’ll take a player from Northern California or Texas. Someone who hasn’t been exposed to such elite coaching. Someone whose best lacrosse could be ahead of him. You try to tell yourself not to overanalyze, but you do.”

UPPER-CRUST SPORTS such as rowing and fencing have a storied tradition at the Ivies, dating back to the 1852 Harvard-versus-Yale regatta held at Lake Winnepesaukee, New Hampshire, considered to be the first intercollegiate sporting event in the United States. Recent cutbacks notwithstanding, Ivy League schools are top-heavy with athletic recruits. Of Princeton’s 5,300 undergraduates, approximately 930—or 17.5 percent—are recruited players; by comparison, 650—or less than 2 percent—of the University of Alabama’s 33,000 students fall into that category.

Steve Dittmore, a sports-management professor at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, told me that the proliferation of relatively obscure sports at prestigious schools harkens back to the classical-Greek model of the scholar-athlete, a person expected to seek excellence in both body and mind. “In the past, schools like Brown and Dartmouth have offered more athletic opportunities because they believe that athletics are a key part of the growth of students,” Dittmore said. “But, of course, not every school is obligated to provide squash and fencing.”

Indeed. And as spots dwindle—as Clark Dean fantasies are dashed on the rocks of scarcity and austerity—the culture of these formerly genteel sports has frayed. “In small sports, the parents figure out quickly whom their child is competing with for college positions,” says Tim Morehouse, an Olympic silver-medal fencer and the founder of the Tim Morehouse Fencing Club, in the New York metro area. “Instead of letting their child develop, you have parents trying to compete behind the scenes, to the point of trashing other athletes.”

Morehouse knows of a situation in which a fencer received a “likely” letter from an Ivy. Shortly thereafter, the university’s admissions department began to get letters saying that the athlete was a bad person and had faked competition results. The fencer’s high-school guidance department contacted the university to correct the falsehood—and what the department heard back was jarring, Morehouse told me: “They said, ‘You have nothing to worry about. This actually happens all the time.’”

Morehouse and his coaches now advise junior fencers to keep their lips zipped. “I tell my kids, ‘Let’s keep it close to the vest. Don’t talk to anybody about where you are applying. People might try to get you.’”

A squash parent told me that he worries the kids are “starting to hurt each other” during matches. “I’ve noticed that my child and another player have a suspiciously high accident rate. The director knows not to put them on the court together. It must be subintentional resentment.”

This ethos of spirited competition was on full display at the Connecticut Junior Championships, held at Chelsea Piers in Stamford in January. The squash complex was toward the back of the building, past the hockey rink and snack shack. There were two parallel rows of transparent glass boxes. Inside each box, sweaty young squash players competed in front of a viewing area of parent spectators. It was like Foucault’s panopticon, except for private-school kids in Dri-Fit.

On an adjacent practice court, a dad warmed up his daughter. “Do you love your sport?” he yelled. “Then give me 500 straight rails hit along the line, toward the back.”

On a black-leather sofa in the lounge, another player moaned and clutched his side. “Did you move the wrong way?” his coach asked. “Any pain when you breathe in and out?”

Inside the complex, tournament play had already commenced. On Court 6, two high-school juniors in flippy skirts dashed around, waving their rackets like wands.

“That’s it, Emma!” shouted a tall, slender blond woman in a quilted Moncler puffer jacket, rising to her feet.

“Keep up the tempo, Grace,” hollered a stout man in the front row wearing a grape-purple polo shirt.

The two girls played with determination, smashing shot after shot, muscling the ball out of the corners and slicing it back and forth with brutal force. Improbably, both were perfectly tan in the dead of winter, their whipping ponytails the same shade of buttered-toast blond. They collided, bumping hips, but played through the interference, pausing only to glower at each other and raise a hand in mute warning.

From the bleachers, parents swiveled their heads left and right. “Why did she make that shot?” a dad said. “It was a well-executed dumb shot.”

“Great eyeball control,” another dad observed.

“She doesn’t move well, but her hands are amazing,” said a third.

Between games, the players were allotted 90 seconds for swigs of water and a quick check-in with a coach or parent. “I don’t care how tired and freaked out you are!” Emma’s coach told her. “She’s more tired and freaked out! Remember that.” Flush-faced, Emma gulped her water and nodded vigorously.

When the break was over, the conversation in the bleachers turned to college prospects. “Georgetown has gone cold,” a parent said. “But he may get the last spot at Columbia.”

“Did you see that kid Mohammed? . . . No, the *other* Mohammed. His academics aren’t strong, but his squash is unbelievable.”

Grace ultimately won the match. Afterward, the woman sitting next to me filled me in. “Okay, so that was not typical. Emma and Grace were both playing tight. Making uncharacteristic mistakes. It’s because this was a big match. Both girls are uncommitted. And, obviously, they have their eye on the same college spots.”

The two girls met at center court and shook hands. Grace tilted her head back and stared at the ceiling, breathing hard. The vibe was primal and strange. I was half-expecting Grace to chop off Emma’s ponytail and hold it aloft. This was the junior-squash world at its pre-pandemic apogee—the Hunger Games for the ruling class.

TO PROGRESS THROUGH the U.S. Squash pipeline, the families of young players shell out up to \$400 for a 45-minute lesson with a top pro at least once a week, and in many cases two or three times a week during the off-season. Participants are expected to fly all over the country—sometimes with only a week’s notice—to compete in age-group invitationals that cost \$125 to \$250 to enter, not including airfare and hotels. Then there are the extras. In 2018, Natalie Grainger, who at the time was the director of squash at Chelsea Piers, put together an optional two-week trip to South Africa for its junior athletes. The kids played tournaments in Johannesburg and Cape Town, then decompressed with a three-night luxury safari and shark-diving off the coast of Gansbaai. Cost: \$9,000, flights not included. She had 15 takers.

The ultrarich squash families go even further, installing pros off tour in their guest homes or in-law suites, to be available for private instruction on demand. “We’ve emptied out the U.K. of all their squash coaches,” one parent told me. “They all live here in Fairfield County, in people’s homes, teaching their kids on their private courts.”

Home courts—and even what one Greenwich squash mom calls “architecturally significant” home courts—no longer provoke gasps of amazement. “It’s really just a simple box,” she says. “Our court was actually not a huge expense. Of course, there is this beautiful structure around it that was rather costly.”

To manufacture an Ivy-recruitable squash athlete, some families devise “a long-term plan, almost like a business plan,” says the pro Egyptian player Wael El Hindi, a former World No. 8 and the 2010 U.S. Open winner, who now works as a private instructor for American juniors. Not that he’s opposed to this approach: “If a kid learns squash the right way, it will build strong character. When you deliver a kid to Harvard at the end of the day, what matters is their character.”

El Hindi now lives in Palm Beach, Florida, where he works as the personal coach for the teenage daughter of the billionaire asset manager Chris Shumway. The founder and managing partner of Shumway Capital, Shumway sold his Greenwich home for \$48 million in 2019 and decamped to South Florida—in part, one acquaintance speculated, because he wanted to lift his daughter’s squash game and “was completely exhausted by Connecticut’s nonsense.”

Although Florida has not traditionally been known as a seedbed of squash, Shumway moved quickly to create a microclimate around his child: snapping up El Hindi, and embarking on a project to build a premier squash facility in the area. “He’s been a risk-taker all his life,” El Hindi says. “He’s passionate. He thinks it’s not fair to have squash centered in one place . . . He knows exactly what this is going to take.” (Shumway declined to comment.)

Before the Shumways, El Hindi worked as the private coach for the daughter and son of former American Express CEO Jim Robinson and his wife, Linda Robinson, a PR maven and board member of U.S. Squash, as well as of the Harlem-based StreetSquash. “Linda was really involved in her kids’ squash,” El Hindi says. “She wanted to make sure everything was done the right way. Maybe you take risks in business, but you don’t take risks with your kids.”

In 2015, El Hindi was joined at the Robinsons’ by Imran Khan, a 39-year-old former top-10 pro-squash player who hails from a legendary Pakistani squash family. Khan’s job: part-time tournament coach. “For me, it was anthropology,” Khan told me. “It was an experiment I undertook in order to understand this kind of family.” The money





was good, too. “The whole thing was like a paid vacation at a five-star hotel,” he said. “I lived large.”

Khan accompanied the family to competitions and for about half a year gave the children twice-a-week lessons on a small court squirreled away on the 54th floor of a residential building in Midtown Manhattan. The fact that the Robinsons lived in New York City and Khan lived in Philadelphia wasn't a problem, Khan says. His employer covered the cost of his round-trip train ride from Philly to NYC on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and his car service to and from the squash court.

The scene on the 54th floor was high-pressure, Khan says. If the kids had a lot of homework, or a big test the next day, they'd hit the books during the breaks in practice. “The nannies would be waiting with an equation or a math problem for them to solve while they drank their water,” Khan recalled. “They needed to solve the equation before they headed back onto the court. I couldn't believe it.” The nannies also sometimes ferried meals in coolers to the 54th floor, he says. “I'd ask what was inside, and the nannies would say, ‘This is the kids' dinner.’”

In March 2017, Khan accompanied Linda and her children on a private-jet trip to a squash tournament. “We flew out of Teterboro to San Diego,” he said. “I'd never flown private. I was excited. I thought I was going to kick back, maybe listen to some music, enjoy a drink.” Instead, a half hour into the flight, “I saw a plethora of paperwork come out of the nannies' bag.” The Robinsons had instructed the nannies to compile opposition-research dossiers for the upcoming tourney. “They had other coaches in other cities find out details on the other kids,” Khan said: Did they have an attacking style or a defensive style? Were they physically fit, or could you run them around and wear them down? Khan says that while it's not unheard-of to do informal intelligence-gathering for an upcoming match, it was unusual to assemble these sorts of exhaustive portfolios. “I was supposed to go through it all and then sit down with the kids and explain the game plan. I was like, *Are you out of your fucking mind?* It all seemed so unfair.” (Linda Robinson declined to comment on behalf of herself and her children.)

Nevertheless, Khan continued to work with the Robinsons on and off for another six months. His stint with the family ended in late 2017, when the family brought on Shaun Moxham, the former coach of the two-time world champion David Palmer. The Robinson kids were both recruited by Ivy League schools.

THERE IS A NAME for the youth athlete who has too many coaches, too much training, and who treats sports as a full-time job: the overserved athlete. And many of the players in this category are suffering physically and emotionally.

Ann Kitt Carpenetti, who runs operations for U.S. Lacrosse, says that when a consortium of college-lacrosse coaches recently asked her organization for a closed-door meeting, she assumed that they wanted to discuss the rules for a large tournament. “They said, ‘No, we're trying to help our student athletes navigate life.’ They're not equipped. Growing up, they had everything organized for them, and now they don't know how to take initiative.” Another topic raised by the coaches: the latest NCAA survey documenting binge-drinking, marijuana use, and other drug abuse. “The

lacrosse rates are currently off the charts,” Carpenetti told me. “This is how our students are choosing to cope with physical and mental strain. It's gotten so much worse. It makes me tear up.”

Mike Way, the Gregory Lee '87 and Russell Ball '88 Endowed Coach for Squash at Harvard, agrees that these days, the student athletes he brings in to assess and interview seem to lack things that he called “concerning.” “I get kids every year who withdraw from competition at my camps because they lose a match to a kid whom they beat last time. Of course, this triggers an SOS from Mom and Dad: *Does he need a sports psychologist? Does he need a new private coach?*”

Way, a wiry, elegant British man in his mid-60s, rises from his Herman Miller chair and begins pacing the floor of his office, talking further about Mom and Dad. “I don't care if they're well-meaning. I don't care if the bad parenting is accidental! They take the passion and enthusiasm out of it for the kid. It depresses the crap out of me. And you know what? It backfires.”

Way says that burnout is the No. 1 reason he passes on a recruit. “Now, the interesting thing is that many of these kids think they can hide it. But they can't. We see right through the masquerade. We can see burnout, and we can smell it.”

Way's radar isn't perfect. He always ends up with a few overserved souls in his program: “We have to get mental-health services to help them.” He points to three names scrawled in green ink near the top of his giant dry-erase board. “These are the students who are having a hard time currently. I check in on them first thing, middle of the day, and last thing at night. Multiple touchpoints throughout the day.”

Katie Andersen, who runs an Orange County, California-based college-advising company called College Fit, says that among the moral dilemmas the families she works with face is whether to come clean with a college coach about their kids' multiple concussions. “Parents will be sitting in my office debating whether it makes sense to tell, and I want to scream.” Instead, she tries to play nice: “I say, ‘Can we please step back and think about your child? He's had three concussions, multiple overuse injuries, multiple surgeries—and he's playing soccer in college? There's not even a question of him *not* playing?’”

Ben Prentiss, the go-to strength and conditioning trainer for Fairfield County's adolescent-athlete set, gets similarly incensed as he talks about the young clients who visit his facility in Stamford. “We've rehabilitated high-level rowers who couldn't walk because of back problems,” he says. “We see herniated disks. Soft-tissue overuse. Overuse patterns in the hip flexors and lower back. These kids are hurting. Meanwhile, the parents have this crazy, beady-eyed look. They're not even really listening to me.

“We say to the rowers, ‘You've got to get out of the rowing position. You need relaxation techniques; you need diaphragmatic stretching.’ And the dad says, ‘Well, we have to get her back on the [rowing machine]. We need to shave three seconds off her erg time or Georgetown doesn't want her.’”

IN JUNE, Sloane told me her family was reveling in a sense of restored balance and peace. “Last night the girls were lying on the trampoline, finding shapes in the maple trees. I realized that I'd

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never seen them doing that—just lying down on the trampoline together, giggling about different things. I think they're going to look back on this period as one of the happiest times of their youth. It feels so good to get off that hamster wheel."

But by late July she was back on again—contemplating one daughter's switch from saber to foil fencing; installing another on a secret bunker court secured ahead of time by a far-seeing coach who prophesied that someday, a global pandemic would come along and shut down the squash world. "It's very under the radar," she told me. "I can't say too much more about it. We have to park down the block. If people find out, they'll get really mad."

It's a haunting vision: the ponytailed girls in hidden glass boxes training harder and harder, hitting straight rails along the line, faster and faster, even as the college spots melt away and the cultural sands shift beneath their feet.

"Let's be honest, there's no way Stanford's decision was financial," a Darien squash mom confided to me after the university cut the sport. "I have a sinking certainty there are other strong invisible forces at work." She was referring to something the *Wall Street Journal* reporter Melissa Korn noted in an article in July, though it's hardly a mysterious plot. The "optics" of "country-club staples" such as squash and golf help explain why these sports got slashed. "At a time when racial justice and diversity have become a more open national conversation," Korn wrote, "the sports being eliminated are the ones that tend to draw overwhelmingly white, often wealthy players."

The squash establishment is trying to fix this. The first so-called urban-squash program, SquashBusters, was founded 25 years ago in Boston, with the aim of connecting "two seemingly different worlds." Since then, the sport has been brought to more than 20 inner-city enclaves, including New York City, Baltimore, Oakland, and Detroit—hooking up 2,500-plus public-school kids with tutoring, training, camps, travel subsidies, and scholarships. The \$20 million annual budget for these programs sluices in mostly through private donations, and top squash families like the Robinsons are fixtures on the urban-squash gala circuit.

And yet, according to figures compiled by the Squash and Education Alliance, an umbrella group for these programs, each year only approximately 50 of their students play on college varsity teams. Although several graduates of squash-access programs have reached the pinnacle of the sport—Reyna Pacheco of Access Youth Academy in San Diego became a top-100 world pro; the Bronx player Jessenia Pacheco (no relation) was a two-time All-American at Cornell—no player from an SEA program is currently represented among the top 30 juniors at any age level. Bryan Patterson, the director of CitySquash in the Bronx, says the odds are stacked against his athletes. "My kids have the talent, but they don't have the means," he told me. "These wealthy kids are getting a minimum of an hour and a half, five days a week. That's verging on a pro schedule. We can only do things in groups. We don't have the ability to do things one-on-one." In other words, the same squash luminaries who underwrite squash-access programs have installed training regimens for their own children that make it difficult for regular kids to crack the system. There may be no better allegory for our era.

The stampede of the affluent into grim-faced, highly competitive sports has been a tragicomedy of perverse incentives and social evolution in unequal times: a Darwinian parable of the mayhem that can ensue following the discovery of even a minor advantage. Like a peacock rendered nearly flightless by gaudy tail feathers, the overserved athlete is the product of a process that has become maladaptive, and is now harming the very blue-chip demographic it was supposed to help.

It's hard not to feel at least a jot of sympathy for these parents who earnestly believed they were doing right by their children, and especially for the young athletes—who, like Lewis Carroll's oysters, were brought out so far, and made to trot so quick—and who now must think that the world is conspiring against them. Sports wasn't the golden ticket after all. As the summer gave way to fall, and the Greenwich Academy squash courts were repurposed as math classrooms, the desperation of late-stage meritocracy was so palpable that, in the words of Harvard's Mike Way, you could smell it.

Sloane is still trying to figure it out. As an insurance policy, she's decided to add rowing to her oldest girl's sports schedule. "My daughter is 5 foot 11," she said. "That's not the optimum body for squash. She has the frame for rowing. I've always had it in the back of my head. Rowing moves the needle way more."

In July, she put the girl in a single scull. "When she gets to a regatta, that's when the other shoe will drop," Sloane told me cheerfully. "She doesn't know that she's going to row so hard that she throws up. She doesn't know that she's going to have to train twice a day and that she's going to give up a lot. This sport has some intensities and some struggles that are unreal.

"All she knows is that it's a beautiful day. We found this coach, a lovely dynamo, who's interested in her. The sun is shining on the water. She's in heaven." *A*

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