

LI life



Very little leaguers

They can't read or write, but these toddlers already have goals **G4**

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KID FRIENDLY

Where to take them for fun

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Brian Bechtle, 3, jumps over a cone at Pro Soccer Kids in Rockville Centre as he runs back to the starting position during the first practice of the season.

ON THE COVER

Gianluca Stornello and Ethan Ayami, both 2, await their coach's instructions at Pro Kids Soccer in Rockville Centre.



PHOTO BY YANA PASCIVA

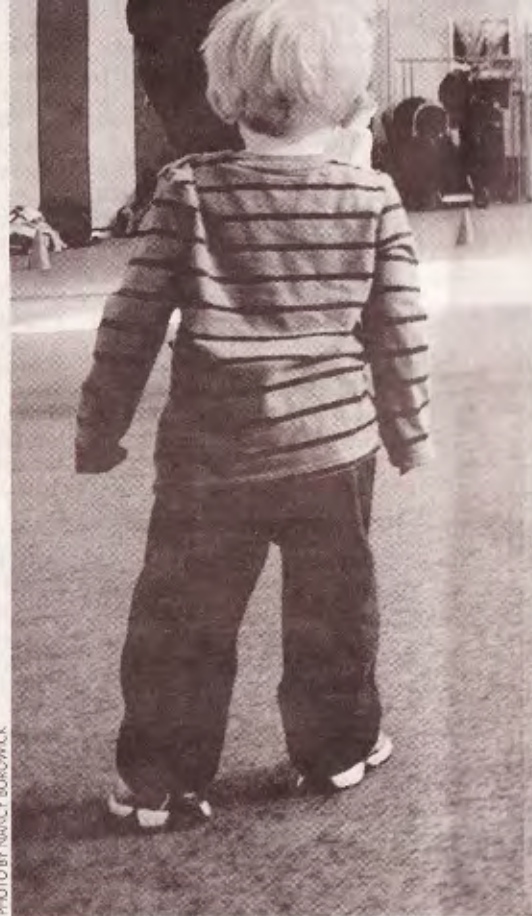


PHOTO BY NANCY BOROWICK

Athletics can be child's play

The youngest of the young are suiting up for martial arts, skating and team sports

BY BARBARA GERBASI
Special to Newsday

A Saturday morning at Two Worlds gym in Greenvale: Weights clang, treadmills hum and a trainer shouts, "Just three more reps." In an alcove a personal trainer and martial arts specialist holds a pair of boxing pads within arm's reach of a 4-year-old.

"Punch right, left, now duck," trainer Spencer Gee says as he claps the pads together just above the boy's head. His parents cheer, and the smile never leaves the youngster's face.

A growing number of parents have sought Gee's services to hone a child's coordination and agility, he said. Some hope to give their children a leg up in sports.

Still others are interested in self-defense, like Rob Mulligan of Amityville, who takes his 5-year-old daughter, Keena, to study martial arts with Gee.

"I brought Keena to Mr. Gee when she was 4 because I wanted her to be able to defend herself," Mulligan says.

"Mr. Gee slips self-defense moves into a regular workout, and kids just think they're having fun. However, it's real martial arts tailored lower for kids."

Gone are the days when a

child's first foray into sports coincided with kindergarten. Judging by the number of programs currently offered by businesses, recreation centers and Y's for children younger than 5, toddlers and preschoolers appear to be spending less time in the sandbox and instead dashing straight for the playing fields.

Kids get in the swing

At SoccerTots in Huntington, the Lil Sluggers class — baseball for 3- and 4-year-olds — is in full swing. SoccerTots, with nine locations on Long Island, offers multiple sports for children 18 months to 6 years old.

In a training facility that

resembles an airplane hangar, six boys sporting matching Lil Slugger T-shirts line up inside batting nets, each clutching an oversized plastic baseball.

"OK, guys, remember," says coach Bill Millikin, as he demonstrates. "Point, step, throw."

A second later, six balls fly though the air toward Millikin and assistant coach Jeremy Cummings. Next Millikin asks, "How do we field?"

"With alligator hands," the young voices shout. Then each Lil Slugger puts his wrists together, one atop the other, and opens his hands wide.

A group of parents and a few grandparents watch. "It's a nice afternoon outing," said Diane Weber, who was there with her grandson, Mathew



ON THE COVER
Gianluca Stomello and Ethan Ayami, both 2, await their coach's instructions at Pro Kids Soccer in Rockville Centre.

Weber, 4. "It doesn't depend on the weather, and it exposes him to different sports. Last year, he tried soccer."

Where the ice is nice

At the Port Washington Family Skating Center, ice skaters wearing Windbreakers and gloves glide around the rink, some practicing turns and jumps in the center. Daphene Huang of Albertson is hurrying to tie the laces on her daughter Ella Zhong's skates, a task made difficult by the cold. This is the third lesson for the 3-year-old, who is bundled into a purple parka and sporting a purple-and-yellow helmet. The rink requires all preschoolers to wear helmets.

Ella gives a shy smile as

coach Corinne Raile Heilbrunn swoops her up and skates to the end of the rink. Ella takes a seat in a blue plastic chair as Heilbrunn explains what they'll do next; she then places a cone about 3 feet from the chair and hands Ella a small rubber ring to drop onto it. Grasping the instructor's hand tightly, Ella skates toward the cone and bends, swaying a bit. Then, they turn around and skate back. By the end of the 30-minute class, Ella tries to skate on her own, and after a few tentative steps, her mother and coach applaud.

Elsewhere on the rink, 4-year-old Nicole Kurzrock is a bundle of energy and assurance as she

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TINY ATHLETES: PROS & CONS

What activities are appropriate?
 According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, soccer, dance, swimming, basic tumbling, gymnastics, martial arts and skating are appropriate for preschoolers.

Does early athletic training provide a head start?
 The academy says research has shown that sports programs in the toddler years do not give any advantage to future sport performance.

What are the values of such programs?
 "Making sports part of a child's routine goes a long way toward preventing" obesity, said Dr.

Andre Broussard, a pediatric sports medicine specialist in Manhattan.

Is there a potential downside?
 "The only downside is if a parent becomes too competitive and puts pressure on a child," Broussard said.

What about the child who doesn't want to participate in sports?
 "Some children don't like sports because they may have trouble doing things that the other kids are doing," according to "Sports Success Rx" author Dr. Paul Stricker, a specialist in pediatric and adolescent sports medicine.

And he cautioned that whether a child can catch a softball "has far more to do with the maturation of his eyesight than talent or motivation."

Some parents don't want to enroll young children in a structured sports program. Are they wrong?
 The academy has good news for parents who choose not to enroll their children in sports programs: It strongly encourages unstructured play, such as tag, and advises that the primary goals of any sport activity for young children should be playfulness, experimentation, exploration and, most of all, having fun. — **BARBARA GERBASI**



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN. FROM LEFT: JESSIE BARNETT, JESSIE BARNETT, JESSIE BARNETT, JESSIE BARNETT, JESSIE BARNETT, JESSIE BARNETT, JESSIE BARNETT, JESSIE BARNETT, JESSIE BARNETT, JESSIE BARNETT.

Athletics is child's play

By [Name] | [Location]

For many young athletes, the love of sports begins in childhood. It's a time of discovery, where the joy of movement and competition is often the primary motivation. This early exposure to athletics can shape a child's identity and set the stage for a lifelong passion. Whether it's running, swimming, or team sports, these experiences provide valuable lessons in teamwork, discipline, and resilience. As children grow, their skills and interests evolve, but the foundation of physical activity remains a key component of their development. The early years are crucial for building a positive relationship with exercise, one that can last a lifetime.

While the benefits of childhood sports are well-documented, it's important to ensure that the experience remains fun and supportive. Parents and coaches play a vital role in fostering a healthy environment where children can thrive. Encouraging participation without excessive pressure or criticism is key. The focus should be on the joy of the activity and the personal growth it offers. As children progress, they may face challenges, but with the right guidance, they can overcome them and continue to enjoy the benefits of athletics. The goal is to instill a love for the game that transcends the competitive aspect, ensuring that sports remain a source of joy and fulfillment throughout their lives.