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BUSINESS

How a Hollywood Powerhouse Built a High-School Football Factory

With tuition of \$75,200 and an \$11 million training complex, Endeavor's IMG Academy sits at the apex of the commercialization of youth sports

By Brad Reagan and Erich Schwartzel

Oct. 27, 2017 12:49 p.m. ET

BRADENTON, Fla.—The best moments of high school for 18-year-old senior Will Huggins haven't been typical rites of passage like the prom or getting a driver's license. Instead, he recites his time in the 40-yard dash, down four-tenths of a second in two years, and the 40 pounds he gained.

"Thirty-seven of that is muscle mass," he says.

Mr. Huggins is a wide receiver for IMG Academy, a high-school football program that is just four years old but has already become a fearsome, controversial powerhouse. Owned and operated by Hollywood entertainment conglomerate Endeavor, IMG Academy is an elite, for-profit boarding school—and the leading producer of top college and National Football League prospects.

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Families pay \$75,200 in annual tuition, more than the most famous prep schools in the U.S. and Harvard University, to improve their teenager's chances of making it.

Players work out at an \$11 million training complex with a high-tech weight room where each repetition is filmed and evaluated by coaches and trainers. Scientists from the Gatorade Sports Science Institute monitor hydration, body composition and other aspects of players' physical development. IMG Academy regularly flies to other states to square off against top teams in a game schedule considered the country's most difficult.

The formula works. The Ascenders haven't lost since 2014 and are ranked No. 2 in the U.S., behind Mater Dei High School in Santa Ana, Calif., according to MaxPreps, a high-school sports website.

As many as 30 members of the current team are expected to get Division I

Team members arrive for lunch after practice. Their schedules leave little time to socialize or relax.



scholarships, including from top programs Alabama, Ohio State and Florida State. Mr. Huggins, who convinced his mother two years ago to let him move 3,000 miles from northern California to IMG Academy, recently got an offer from Stanford. Recruiting experts say no other high-school team is likely to produce even 20 scholarship players.

IMG Academy sits at the apex of the commercialization of high-school sports. Purists have long bemoaned how college football has become a big business like the professional game. Now, for many of the same reasons, that phenomenon has trickled down to even younger players and has turned a Friday night ritual into a form of career development.

IMG Academy players and their parents seem happy overall with the return on their investment. Critics say the school damages football's central role in communities when it lures budding stars away from their hometowns. Many high-school teams already are losing players because of fears about concussions and brain trauma.

After IMG Academy went to Texas in 2015 and throttled one of the state's top teams, the head of the Texas High School Coaches Association advised other coaches in an open letter not to schedule games against the Florida school, which hasn't played a Texas team since.

Georgia banned its teams from playing IMG Academy, citing restrictions on schools that aren't in a state association. California has debated a similar ban.

"It is something that is scary for all of us," says Brenham High School coach Glen West, who wrote the letter. "This has turned into big money."

IMG Academy officials, noting the school isn't for everyone, say the complaints are out of step with modern-day parents, who have more high-school choices than ever before, and athletes, who require and benefit from increasingly specialized training. A robust market of affluent families sees IMG Academy as an alternative to a more-traditional high-school experience.

"We live in a different time," says IMG Academy football coach Kevin Wright, whose father has coached high-school football in Indiana for more than 50 years. "The reality is that parents want to put their kids in the best situation possible, and I don't see anything wrong with that."

Big-Ticket Boarding Schools

IMG Academy charges higher annual tuition than the most famous prep schools in the U.S.

IMG Academy (Bradenton, Fla.)	\$75,200
Lawrenceville School (Lawrenceville, N.J.)	\$63,625
St. Paul's School (Concord, N.H.)	\$58,155
Deerfield Academy (Deerfield, Mass.)	\$58,050
Groton School (Groton, Mass.)	\$56,700
Choate Rosemary Hall (Wallingford, Conn.)	\$55,780
Noble and Greenough School (Dedham, Mass.)	\$54,000
Phillips Academy (Andover, Mass.)	\$52,600
Hotchkiss School (Lakeville, Conn.)	\$52,430
Phillips Exeter Academy (Exeter, N.H.)	\$49,880
Cranbrook Schools (Bloomfield Hills, Mich.)	\$45,200

Note: IMG Academy tuition varies by sport.

Figure above is for football players.

Sources: IMG Academy;

Boarding School Review; Niche

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Players on this year's football team come from 29 states, and many were recruited to create a literal all-star team from around the country.

High-school life at IMG Academy looks nothing like a John Hughes movie or "Friday Night Lights." There is no marching band, and cheerleaders at home games are supplied by a local cheerleading program.

Started in 1978 as a training ground for tennis prodigies of famed coach Nick Bollettieri, IMG Academy is no longer a weather-beaten facility wedged between tomato fields and strip malls, as it was for decades.

In the past several years, IMG Academy has been transformed into a gleaming, 500-acre campus that includes 52 tennis courts, 24 athletic fields, two five-story dormitories and a 5,000-seat football stadium. Coming soon: a 150-room hotel for visiting parents and college coaches.

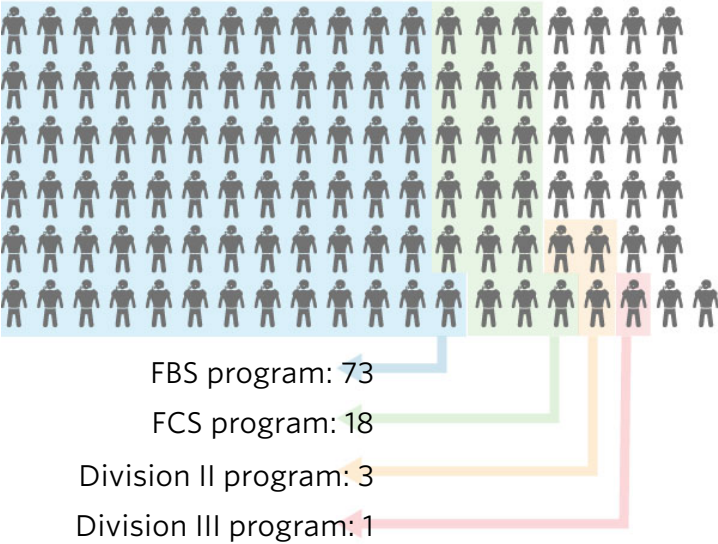
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College Football Factory

IMG Academy churns out football players who go to major colleges.

2014-17 classes

95 of the 115 players who graduated wound up at an NCAA football program.



2018 class

18 of 42 seniors have committed to 16 different college programs.



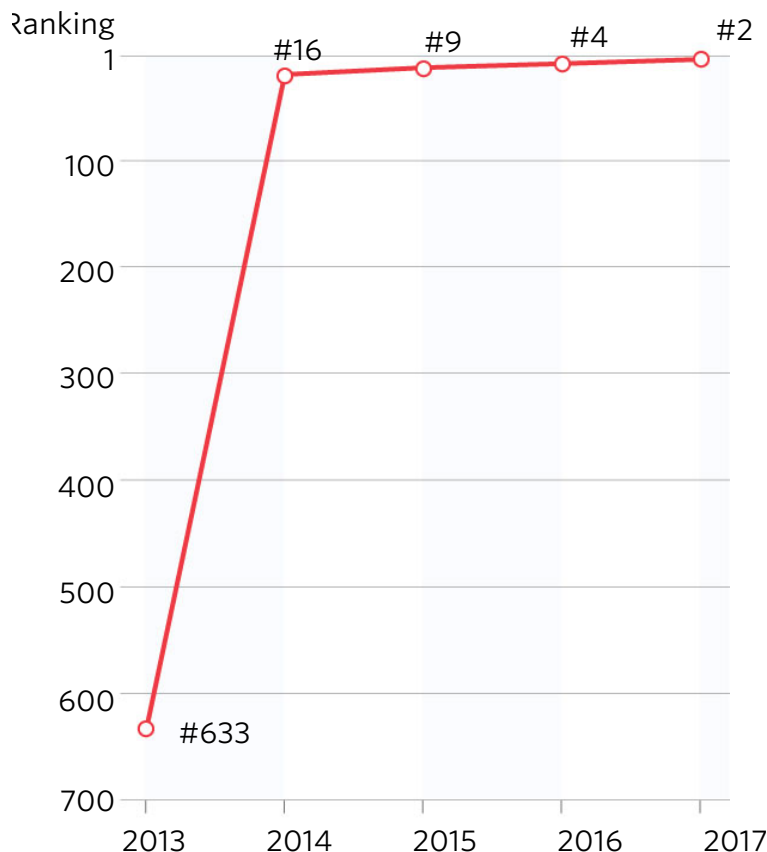
7 are bound for a college team now ranked in the Top 25



Sources: IMG Academy; NCAA

Fast Track to the Top

IMG Academy has been one of the country's highest-ranked high-school football teams since 2014.



Note: Based on each season's final ranking;
2017 ranking as of Oct. 24
Source: MaxPreps

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Those facilities are signs of a cultural shift in youth sports away from backyards and sandlots. The overall market for youth sports is expected to balloon to \$41.2 billion in 2023 from an estimated \$19.8 billion this year, according to WinterGreen Research Inc. of Lexington, Mass. Those figures include sports apparel, gear, facilities construction and travel expenses.

As families spend more on sports, though, many children feel more pressure to perform, says Travis Dorsch, a former NFL punter who now studies youth sports as an assistant professor at Utah State University. That makes them likely to enjoy sports less and abandon them as they get older.

That outcome is “probably the exact opposite of what parents are hoping for,” Mr. Dorsch says.

Elton Ndoma-Ogar of Allen, Texas, sent his son, E.J., to IMG Academy in 2016 during the second semester



IMG Academy football players at a team meeting. PHOTO: BRIAN BLANCO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



Players wait for a tram after a team workout in IMG Academy's high-tech weight room. PHOTO: BRIAN BLANCO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

ter of E.J.'s freshman year. He was 6 feet 3 inches tall, weighed 290 pounds and was attracting attention from college scouts.

The family thought E.J. would benefit from the boarding school's specialized environment. On one of his first days, he took a mental-conditioning class to help him perform under pressure. Mr. Ndoma-Ogar says his son told him: "They had us stare at a plant for 30 minutes."

Over time, E.J. got homesick. His parents noticed a strain in his voice and a change in his posture. The costs added up, too. "I went from paying \$8 a ticket to a home game to paying \$1,000 with airfare, hotel, everything" to watch E.J. play, says his father, a diversity and inclusion director at Raytheon Co.



Will Huggins moved 3,000 miles to attend IMG Academy. He recently got an offer from Stanford. PHOTO: BRIAN BLANCO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The family decided to have E.J. return to Texas during his sophomore year. He now weighs 315 pounds and has received scholarship offers from 30 colleges, including Mississippi, Penn State and Washington.

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His father doesn't think E.J. would have attracted more interest by staying in Florida. The IMG Academy works better for students who transfer there for their junior or senior years, Mr. Ndoma-Ogar says.

Parents of other players say IMG Academy gives highly motivated high-school players a one-of-a-kind opportunity to grow, improve and thrive, partly because they are surrounded by similarly driven players.

"Who would send their kid to a regular high-school drama course if they had the opportunity to go to Juilliard?" says Brenda Radley, a real-estate broker from Los Angeles.

She says her son, Brendan Radley-Hiles, wouldn't take himself out of games at his previous high school when he was hurt because he thought his team needed him.

He was being recruited by major colleges, but she contacted IMG Academy so he could play his senior season against stronger competition. The experience is helping Brendan, a cornerback, "maximize his full potential," she says. He is one of Nebraska's top signees.

IMG Worldwide Inc. bought Mr. Bollettieri's tennis academy in 1987 and expanded it to golf and other individual sports. It became a de facto laboratory for whether the talent-management agency could build a business around developing young athletes who would later sign on as clients.

That happened with tennis stars Maria Sharapova and Kei Nishikori, each of whom has generated millions of dollars in fees for the firm, according to people familiar with the matter.

In 2014, IMG was acquired for \$2.4 billion by WME, a talent agency that began in 1898 as the William Morris Agency. The deal turned the combined company into a sports and entertainment conglomerate stretching far beyond Hollywood. It changed its name to Endeavor earlier this month.



Will Huggins and Brendan Radley-Hiles adjust their uniforms before the Miami Central game on Sept. 22. IMG Academy won 24-15. It hasn't lost a football game since 2014. PHOTO: MIKE CARLSON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

At the time of the takeover, IMG Academy was generating annual revenue of about \$83 million, according to a company report.

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Launching the football program in 2013 allowed IMG Academy to accommodate a roster of as many as 100 players a year. Along with the addition of other team sports like soccer and lacrosse, that solved the challenge of increasing the talent agency's sports-related business one prodigy at a time.

While some football players get financial aid, most pay the full cost of \$75,200 a year. Getting parents to pay is a crucial part of the business model. More than 80% of IMG Academy's revenue comes from tuition, according to Greg Phillips, a co-managing director at the school.

It added a second football team this year. Enrollment has climbed to almost 1,100 high-school students from about 680 in 2011.



Alondras Strong, right, and other players warm up before a game. PHOTO: MIKE CARLSON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

“We thought we could make [football] work as a business. It worked faster than we anticipated,” says Mr. Phillips.

Mark Shapiro, co-president of Endeavor’s WME and IMG divisions, says it has invested hundreds of millions of dollars in IMG Academy. He says the company is “nowhere near” recouping its investment, but people familiar with the matter say IMG Academy is profitable on an operating basis.

Increasingly, Endeavor sees the Bradenton campus itself as a valuable revenue generator. At a sold-out fashion summer camp, teenagers spent a week constructing mood boards and holding photo shoots. Model Ashley Graham, represented by the talent agency, made an appearance.

“What about screenwriter camps?” says Mr. Shapiro. “Culinary programs with our top-name chefs that we represent? We could do esports camps. There are any number of genres we can apply.”

The firm still has many major stars as clients, such as Charlize Theron and Dwayne Johnson, but has been on a shopping spree for assets with steadier revenue streams than the topsy-turvy entertainment business.

Recent acquisitions include the Professional Bull Riders sports league, Miss Universe Organization and UFC mixed martial-arts organization. There are occasional synergies with the talent agency. One PBR rider signed modeling contracts and appeared on “Dancing With the Stars.” A UFC fighter had a cameo role in a recent “Fast & Furious” movie.

Brand-name companies are happy to pay IMG Academy for exposure to its elite athletes. PepsiCo Inc.’s Gatorade, a school sponsor since 2011, has “awesome access” to test athletes on how their bodies perform during intense training regimens, says Melissa Anderson, Gatorade’s principal scientist at the on-campus center.



Wide receiver Brian Hightower plans to play at Miami next year. PHOTO: MIKE CARLSON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

After finding that many athletes weren't consuming enough calories, the scientists recommended that they eat and drink more. Mr. Shapiro says Gatorade's main interest in IMG Academy is as a research lab where the sports-drink brand can "build products and enhance products."

The boarding school's expansion into team sports forced IMG Academy to reckon with an academic reputation that was "marginal," says Mike Stone, founder of Prep School Sports Connection, which helps match high-school athletes with prep schools.

Running back Trey Sanders has committed to Alabama, the No. 1-ranked college team.



IMG Academy's Mr. Phillips responds that its academics "are much more rigorous now." Improvements include quadrupling the size of the academic center, upgrading classroom technology and adding dozens of new teachers.

Day-to-day life for football players can be grueling, with little down time to socialize or relax. They usually wake up at 6 a.m. to be on the field by 7:45 a.m. for a four-hour block of meetings, film sessions and practice.

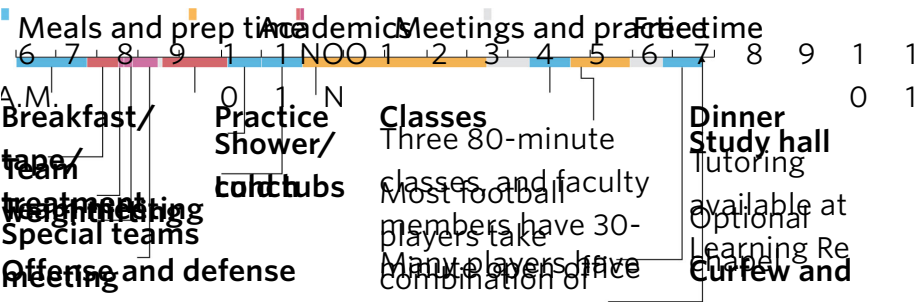
After lunch, classes and tutoring sessions run until 5:30 p.m., followed by dinner in the cafeteria. Think kale salads and protein shakes, not sloppy Joes and soda. The evening includes more team meetings and study hall before a 9:45 p.m. curfew. Mandatory lights out is at 10:45 p.m.

Other aspects of campus life resemble a college team's routine. Teachers travel with players to games, and an in-house media team helps juniors and seniors plan their college commitment announcements.

Many Ascenders games are nationally televised. Earlier this season, coaches struggled after the football team's wins in Arizona and California to get players back to the locker

Day in the Life

Sample daily schedule for students at IMG Academy during football season



room and onto the team bus.

The delays were caused by local fans asking IMG Academy players for autographs.

Source: IMG Academy



IMG Academy celebrates a touchdown against Miami Central. PHOTO: MIKE CARLSON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

