

Families Who Relocate for Sports Prodigies

Parents who move around the world to advance their child's future in sports are taking big risks in real estate.

By Katy McLaughlin

Plenty of parents drive kids to soccer tournaments, fork out fees for tennis lessons and travel to lacrosse camps. JoAnn and Ike Moradshahi have them all beat: The couple has moved across state lines three times in as many years so that their 16-year-old son Bryon can play ice hockey.

"I don't exactly like packing and moving, but it's part of the game," said Ms. Moradshahi, who is 55.

Three years ago, Bryon made the top-tier 14-and-under team with the Arizona Bobcats, a youth hockey club that has developed a number of top college prospects and one NHL player. So Bryon's parents sold their 8,300-square-foot "dream house" in Beaverton, Ore., for \$800,000—at a \$25,000 loss—and moved to Scottsdale, Ariz. There, they rented a two-bedroom apartment for \$1,290 a month, Ms. Moradshahi said.

The following year, Bryon was cut from the Bobcats but earned a spot on the San Jose Junior Sharks. So the family moved out of their Scottsdale place and bought a \$772,000 house in Morgan Hill, Calif. Last year, the Bobcats wanted Bryon back, so the family leased the Morgan Hill house and returned to Scottsdale, where they currently rent a house for \$2,100 a month. Meanwhile, Mr. Moradshahi, an engineer, was asked to return to his company's home office in Oregon, so he moved into a \$1,365-a-month one-bedroom apartment in Hillsboro, while the rest of his family stays in Scottsdale.

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Bryon said he is sick of "packing and moving," and that switching schools frequently has been "really hard." But his goal since the second grade—playing Division 1 hockey for Boston College—"is a possibility" he said. "There is a lot of pressure. But I like what I do."

Moving to advance a child's future in sports can involve financial sacrifices. As a child gets picked for or cut from teams, parents may be forced to sell property at a loss or face penalties to break a lease. On the flip side, some sports parents are delighted with bargain real-estate prices in the locations they end up calling home, especially since they're also paying substantial sums for school tuition, club teams, one-on-one instruction and gear.



JoAnn and Ike Moradshahi with their son, Bryon, in Scottsdale, Ariz.



Bryon before a youth hockey game



The Moradshahis' \$2,100-a-month rental home



Bryon in uniform for the Arizona Bobcats

PHOTOS: MARK PETERMAN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Last year, Peter and Jackie Hunt moved to Bradenton, Fla., to enroll their two sons, Ethan, 13, and Conrad, 9, in IMG Academy, a sport-oriented boarding and day school where they play soccer. The school, formerly known as the Nick Bollettieri Tennis Academy, touts tennis stars Andre Agassi and Maria Sharapova as alumni. It has 16 soccer fields, four baseball diamonds, three football fields and 57 tennis courts. It costs roughly \$50,000 a year for day students.

Mr. Hunt, a real-estate investor, was living with his family in the Bahamas for a few years abroad from their home in Weybridge, England, when friends told them about IMG. Mr. Hunt said specialty sports schools can provide a competitive edge.

“That could help you get into a better university than you would through your regular schooling,” said Mr. Hunt, 48.



Peter and Jackie Hunt's home in Bradenton, Fla.



The couple with their sons Ethan, 13, and Conrad, 9.



The family in their \$9,000-a-month rental apartment

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IMG introduced the Hunts to Adam Cuffaro, a real-estate agent with Michael Saunders & Co., the school's broker of choice, whose office is located on campus. Mr. Cuffaro helps IMG families rent or buy one of the 142 units on campus—where prices range from \$300,000 to \$1.2 million to buy a home, and from \$3,000 and \$5,000 to rent a furnished apartment. Mr. Cuffaro can also help families find off-campus properties.

The Hunts rented a large, four-bedroom apartment on campus for \$9,000 a month. Delighted by how much less expensive Bradenton property is compared with the Bahamas and their hometown in England, they purchased a \$310,000 house near campus in October. They are going to spend \$300,000 to “completely gut” and rebuild it into a British West Indies-style house, said Mr. Hunt. They plan to stay there until their kids graduate from high school, he said.

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A look at some families who relocated to Arizona, Colorado, Florida and Spain so their kids could train at elite sports academies and clubs.



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Not all sports schools provide real-estate services. In Barcelona, Spain, ES International School has 104 students from 32 different countries, 80% of whom train at the Academia Sanchez-Casal tennis academy; both schools are owned by Emilio Sanchez-Vicario, a Spanish tennis star who also founded a sister program in Naples, Fla. Nearly all of the remainder participate in other sports programs around the city, including soccer, basketball and water polo, said Carlos Lizardi, director of admissions.

If families ask, Mr. Lizardi refers them to real-estate agents. But most parents find their own places located near the school and wherever their child trains, he said.

Charles Doherty took the DIY approach. While living in Fullerton, Calif., Mr. Doherty was searching for a development program in water polo for his daughters, Kelly, 17, and Alison, 14. He discovered the Barcelona International Water Polo Academy, which offers intensive training and competition. The only problem: They had never been to Barcelona.

So in spring 2015, Mr. Doherty took a plane there, found a real-estate broker online and asked to see apartments in the \$3,200-a-month range—a figure he guessed he would need to spend.

“I studied the map of Barcelona and the subway map, and spent about 10 hours driving around the city,” said Mr. Doherty, 54, an operations manager for a construction company. He was happy to find a three-bedroom, two-bathroom apartment about 10 minutes by bus from the water polo center for about \$1,500 a month, well below what he had budgeted.

Still, the plan has required some sacrifices: Last year, Mr. Doherty's wife, Kathleen, moved with both girls to Barcelona, while he moved to New York, where his company is based. He shares a house with four other men on Long Island and visits Spain every few months. The girls started in a public school, but both have since transferred to ES International School.



Alison Doherty, 14, moved with her family from Fullerton, Calif., to Barcelona to train with the Barcelona International Water Polo Academy. *PHOTO: CATERINA BARJAU FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*



Kelly Doherty, 17, also trains with the Academy. The sisters share an apartment with their mother, Kathleen. Their father lives in New York and visits frequently. *PHOTO: CATERINA BARJAU FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

In November, Kelly signed a letter of intent to accept a water-polo scholarship with the University of California, Berkeley. Both girls are now fluent in Spanish and speak some Catalan, and love living in Barcelona so much they will stay for a second year, Mr. Doherty said.

Relocating for kids' sports can be controversial. In the U.S., most public schools and some private schools forbid switching schools or districts for athletic reasons. Thus, parents who want to prioritize sports often turn to private schools and clubs without these restrictions.

Even then, they're taking a risk in buying real estate. Kofi Nartey, director of the sports and entertainment division of Compass, a national real-estate brokerage, often recommends leasing over a purchase. "If you have no other compelling reason to be somewhere in the off season, we don't advise buying," Mr. Nartey said. Any athlete's position on a team is subject to risks, such as an injury or being traded. Closing costs and the sudden need to sell during a downturn in the market or at the wrong time of year can eat into equity, Mr. Nartey said.



Dana, Hunter and Abby Brackett hit the slopes in Telluride, Colo.



Hunter and his dad unload gear



The family, including Hunter's twin sister, Haley, in the hot tub



The family's \$2.2 million home PHOTO: DAVID CLIFFORD FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Abby and Dana Brackett took the ultimate risk and built a home in Telluride, Colo., so their 11-year-old son, Hunter, could train with the Telluride Ski & Snowboard Club. Before the move, they took a loss on the sale of their home in Hallowell, Maine, and did just “OK” on the sale of a condo they owned in Sugarloaf, Maine, said Ms. Brackett, a 45-year-old executive recruiter.

The Bracketts bought a lot in the spring of 2015 and spent 15 months building their own 4,100-square-foot ski-in, ski-out home for a total of about \$2.2 million. Mr. Brackett, 45, a small-business owner who has a background in construction, oversaw the project himself.

Kiki Froberg, their real-estate agent at Telluride Properties, did lots of hand-holding for the family—which also includes Hunter's twin sister, Haley, who also skis but not on the competitive level of her brother. Ms. Froberg helped them learn about schools, a drama program, ski opportunities, where to swim and even a cool spot for ice cream, Ms. Brackett said. Today they love the small-town vibe in Telluride and plan to live there the rest of their lives, she said.

“If we hadn’t pursued this for Hunter, we might not have made this drastic change that turned out to be so great for us,” Ms. Brackett said.

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