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HOMES

Wealthy Parents Help Child Athletes Go Pro in Their Own Backyards

Rich families are building gyms, soccer fields and baseball batting cages at home to develop their student-athlete skills

By *Katy McLaughlin*

Aug. 16, 2018 10:30 a.m. ET

Sam Schoensee, a 14-year-old in Cape Coral, Fla., has a hectic soccer schedule packed with club practices, tournaments, and one-on-one coaching. But his thrice-weekly, 7:30 a.m. training sessions before school are a breeze.

That's because they take place in his backyard, where his parents, Kevin and Nicole Schoensee, spent roughly \$120,000 to build a 93-by-40-foot professional-quality turf soccer pitch behind their 8,135-square-foot home, purchased in 2013 for \$713,000 and renovated for another \$700,000. There, a professional youth soccer coach leads Sam and about five other players his age in drills and other training.

For the Schoensees, the turf field has not only helped Sam become “a ridiculously talented soccer player,” according to his dad, it has become a cornerstone of their social life. After training, Sam and his friends all walk to school together. In the evening, “the parents have cocktails while the kids play on the field,” said Mr. Schoensee, the 55-year-old owner of an equipment-repair company and commercial real-estate investor.

The Schoensees are part of a trend in youth sports in which wealthy parents build quasi-



Rod Brind'Amour, shown in red T-shirt, with his family on the athletic court of his Raleigh, N.C., home. PHOTO: ANDREW SHERMAN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Homes With Pro-Caliber Sports Facilities



Mason Phelps shoots hoops in the gym in his Chicago home while his wife, Abby, and three kids watch from the playroom. BOB STEFKO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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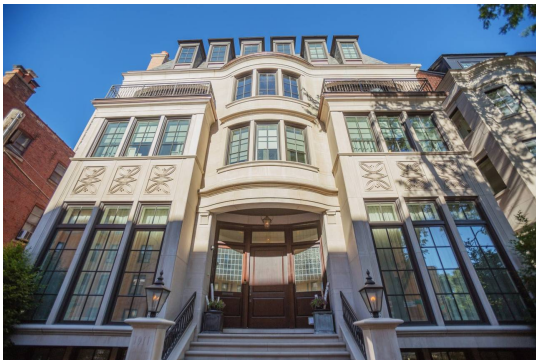
professional sports facilities at their homes—in some cases because they believe their children have the potential to become college or professional players and they want to do everything they can to help them get there. While tennis courts and swimming pools have long been de rigueur in high-end real estate, more families are building gyms, rinks and courts to help advance their child-athlete's aspirations. Parents say their backyard training facilities cut down on driving young athletes around and give them the extra opportunities for development they need to be on top of their game.



Mr. Brind'Amour with one of his sons practice indoors. The home is on the market for \$3 million. PHOTO: ANDREW SHERMAN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

It’s happening at a time when celebrities, executives and pro athletes are increasingly vocal about their ambitions for their children in sports. Technology executive Scott McNealy listed his Palo Alto, Calif., estate for nearly \$100 million in June, touting the home’s enclosed ice-hockey rink, 110-yard golf green and indoor gym that he says helped develop his four sons into top college and professional athletes.

Rod Brind’Amour, head coach of the Carolina Hurricanes who played 20 seasons in the NHL, spent roughly \$80,000 to install a volleyball/basketball/hockey facility—with a baseball batting cage and small putting green—in the backyard of his custom home in Raleigh, N.C., about 10 years ago.



The Chicago home of Mason and Abby Phelps has a gymnasium. PHOTO: BOB STEFKO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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ed for his daughter, Briley, who is now 20 and plays volleyball at James Madison University. A hockey portion has synthetic ice—no freezing arenas here—and allows Mr. Brind’Amour’s oldest son, Skyler, to practice shooting when he is home. (Skyler Brind’Amour, 19, was selected by the Edmonton Oilers in the 2017 NHL draft.) The youngest child, 6-year-old Brooks, horses around on all the equipment. Only 17-year-old Reece is not into sports, said Mr. Brind’Amour, who is 47.

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The Brind’Amours are looking to downsize as the older children leave home, and they listed the 11,884-square-foot house in May for \$3 million. In their next home, Mr. Brind’Amour said “100% we will do a facility like this again,” geared to whatever sports Brooks becomes interested in.

Youth sports facilities spending in the U.S. and Canada hit \$3.6 billion in 2017, with \$320 million of that spent on private facilities in private homes and residential communities, according to WinterGreen Research, a market-research firm in Lexington, Mass.

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“This is a huge, huge thing for rich people to build for their kids,” said WinterGreen’s president Susan Eustis.

Demand for at-home practice facilities has created a lucrative niche for brands like UltraBaseSystems in St. Petersburg, Fla. These permeable, interlocking panels create a shock-absorbing base under turf. President David Barlow said in the past couple of years, he has provided panels for roughly 12 private homeowners building soccer or lacrosse pitches. One of his designers, Joe DeShayes, owner of DeShayes Dream Courts in Cherry Hill, N.J., builds about 55 courts and 12 golf greens a year. Another designer built a \$150,000, 2,000-square-foot golf green for a client’s 12-year-old son, he said.

Custom Ice in Burlington, Ontario, said some customers have spent \$2.5 million to \$4 million to build enclosed, regulation-size hockey rinks at their homes. “I call sports today ‘high-school pro,’” said vice president Glenn Winder.



The Cape Coral, Fla., home of Kevin and Nicole Schoensee. They bought the home specifically so they could build a soccer pitch in the backyard. PHOTO: ALEXIA FODERE FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Real-estate agents often say that owners who put highly individualized or specialty features in their homes risk losing money when it comes time to sell. Abby and Mason Phelps thought about this while including a basketball gym in their roughly 12,000-square-foot home in Chicago's Lincoln Park neighborhood.

"We made sure the dimensions of the court are bigger than a racquetball or squash court so it can be reformatted," said Mr. Phelps, 39, a derivatives trader who played volleyball in college.



The Schoensees' pool and deck, where soccer players' parents hang out while the kids train. PHOTO: ALEXIA FODERE FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Jill Silverstein, a real-estate agent who specializes in luxury homes with Dream Town Realty, said that a family friendly feature like the gym could actually help at resale in this neighborhood. Elissa Morgante and Fred Wilson, the architects who designed the Phelps home, said the gym accounted for roughly \$350,000 of construction costs in 2014. Ms. Silverstein, who has not been inside the Phelps house, estimated that a comparable home could sell for roughly \$6.5 million and \$7 million if it were listed today.

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The couple didn't even have children when they began designing the home, but today they have three. Ms. Phelps, 38, who owns two Pilates studios, said sports are important to both her and her husband, but it remains to be seen if their children will embrace them.

"When we first put our 2-year-old down there, she walked to the free-throw line and read a book," said Mr. Phelps with a chuckle. "But we're still hoping that they grow into athletes."

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