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## Spending big bucks? Saving money on equipment

By Jean Murphy

Equipment is necessary if your child wants to explore almost any sport. And some sports require more than others.

Ice hockey, for instance, requires ice skates, helmet, mouth guard, stick, multiple pads, special pants and more, while soccer only requires shin guards, soccer shoes and a ball. Likewise, football requires lots of pads and special protective equipment, while baseball requires considerably less — a bat, ball, mitt, cap and special shoes (unless, of course, your child wants to play catcher).

Parents starting down this road need not feel discouraged, however. Many used pieces of equipment can be purchased at a substantial savings from garage sales, equipment sales sponsored by sports organizations and through specialized stores like Play It Again Sports, which sells both new and used sports equipment for children and adults.

Some sports organizations also allow newcomers to borrow used equipment from the organization until they see if they like the sport enough to invest in their own equipment.

Ed Wong has been a Play It Again Sports franchisee in the Chicago area for 22 years. He owns stores in Schaumburg, Northbrook, Villa Park and Oak Lawn.

"This is definitely a 'feel good' business because people are happy to come in and tell you all about their lives and their sports aspirations," Wong said.

Sales have been way up the past several years as the difficult economy has encouraged people to clean out their garages and basements and take equipment they are no longer using to convert it into cash or a store credit.

On the other end of the equation, parents are bringing their children into stores at a record pace to try to find a good deal on used equipment in the next size, according to Wong.

"People are searching us out these days and they are so happy to get a good deal that we often



MARK WELSH

Play It Again Sports owner Ed Wong talks with Nick Rodriguez, 13, of Hoffman Estates about a catcher's mitt.

get letters afterward telling us how their child fell in love with the sport that they were able to try because we sold them discounted equipment," he said.

On the other hand, Wong added, if the child ends up not liking the sport as much as they had hoped, there isn't as much regret because the parent didn't spend a fortune on equipment.

Play It Again Sports is part of the Winmark Corporation's family of companies, based in Minneapolis, according to Pat Quinn, director of the Play It Again portion of the business. Its other franchises also sell used items — Plato's Closet and Once Upon A Child for clothing and Music Go Round for musical instruments and equipment.

Play It Again Sports sells both new and used sports and fitness equipment and has 330 stores throughout the United States and Canada. There are 13 in the Chicago area.

"Sales at Play It Again Sports stores nationally have grown in the double digits in the last few years, thanks to the economic downturn and to people being more aware of the environment," Quinn said.

"Recycle by taking sports equipment that you and your kids are no longer using to a nearby Play It Again Sports store. Sell it for cash or trade it in for equipment you have been wanting. It just makes good sense," he said.