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The Scholarship Divide

Expectations Lose to Reality of Sports Scholarships

By **BILL PENNINGTON**

Correction Appended

At youth sporting events, the sidelines have become the ritual community meeting place, where families sit in rows of folding chairs aligned like church pews. These congregations are diverse in spirit but unified by one gospel: heaven is your child receiving a college athletic scholarship.

Parents sacrifice weekends and vacations to tournaments and specialty camps, spending thousands each year in this quest for the holy grail.

But the expectations of parents and athletes can differ sharply from the financial and cultural realities of college athletics, according to an analysis by The New York Times of previously undisclosed data from the [National Collegiate Athletic Association](#) and interviews with dozens of college officials.

Excluding the glamour sports of football and basketball, the average N.C.A.A. athletic scholarship is nowhere near a full ride, amounting to \$8,707. In sports like baseball or track and field, the number is routinely as low as \$2,000. Even when football and basketball are included, the average is \$10,409. Tuition and room and board for N.C.A.A. institutions often cost between \$20,000 and \$50,000 a year.

“People run themselves ragged to play on three teams at once so they could always reach the next level,” said Margaret Barry of Laurel, Md., whose daughter is a scholarship swimmer at the [University of Delaware](#). “They’re going to be disappointed when they learn that if they’re very lucky, they will get a scholarship worth 15 percent of the \$40,000 college bill. What’s that? \$6,000?”

Within the N.C.A.A. data, last collected in 2003-4 and based on N.C.A.A. calculations from an internal study, are other statistical insights about the distribution of money for the 138,216 athletes who received athletic aid in Division I and Division II.

¶ Men received 57 percent of all scholarship money, but in 11 of the 14 sports with men’s and women’s teams, the women’s teams averaged higher amounts per athlete.

¶ On average, the best-paying sport was neither football nor men’s or women’s basketball. It was men’s ice hockey, at \$21,755. Next was women’s ice hockey (\$20,540).

¶ The lowest overall average scholarship total was in men’s riflery (\$3,608), and the lowest for women was in bowling (\$4,899). Baseball was the second-lowest men’s sport (\$5,806).

Many students and their parents think of playing a sport not because of scholarship money, but because it is stimulating and might even give them a leg up in the increasingly competitive process of applying to college. But coaches and administrators, the gatekeepers of the recruiting system, said in interviews that parents and athletes who hoped for such money were much too optimistic and that they were unprepared to effectively navigate the system. The athletes, they added, were the ones who ultimately suffered.

Coaches surveyed at two representative N.C.A.A. Division I institutions — [Villanova University](#)

outside Philadelphia and the University of Delaware — told tales of rejecting top prospects because their parents were obstinate in scholarship negotiations.

“I dropped a good player because her dad was a jerk — all he ever talked to me about was scholarship money,” said Joanie Milhous, the field hockey coach at Villanova. “I don’t need that in my program. I recruit good, ethical parents as much as good, talented kids because, in the end, there’s a connection between the two.”

The best-laid plans of coaches do not always bring harmony on teams, however, and scholarships can be at the heart of the unrest. Who is getting how much tends to get around like the salaries in a workplace. The result — scholarship envy — can divide teams.

The chase for a scholarship has another side that is rarely discussed. Although those athletes who receive athletic aid are viewed as the ultimate winners, they typically find the demands on their time, minds and bodies in college even more taxing than the long journey to get there.

There are 6 a.m. weight-lifting sessions, exhausting practices, team meetings, study halls and long trips to games. Their varsity commitments often limit the courses they can take. Athletes also share a frustrating feeling of estrangement from the rest of the student body, which views them as the privileged ones. In this setting, it is not uncommon for first- and second-year athletes to relinquish their scholarships.

“Kids who have worked their whole life trying to get a scholarship think the hard part is over when they get the college money,” said Tim Poydenis, a senior at Villanova receiving \$3,000 a year to play baseball. “They don’t know that it’s a whole new monster when you get here. Yes, all the hard work paid off. And now you have to work harder.”

Lack of Knowledge

Parents often look back on the many years spent shuttling sons and daughters to practices, camps and games with a changed eye. Swept up in the dizzying pursuit of sports achievement, they realize how little they knew of the process.

Mrs. Barry remembers how her daughter Cortney rose at 4 a.m. for years so she could attend a private swim practice before school. A second practice followed in the afternoon. Weekends were for competitions. Cortney is now a standout freshman at Delaware after receiving a \$10,000 annual athletic scholarship.

“I’m very proud of her and it was worth it on many levels, but not necessarily the ones everybody talks about,” Mrs. Barry said. “It can take over your life. Getting up at 4 a.m. was like having another baby again. And the expenses are significant; I know I didn’t buy new clothes for a while.

“But the hardest part is that nobody educates the parents on what’s really going on or what’s going to happen.”

When they received the letter from Delaware informing them of Cortney’s scholarship, she and her husband, Bob, were thrilled. Later, they shared a quiet laugh, noting that the scholarship might just defray the cost of the last couple of years of Cortney’s youth sports swim career.

The paradox has caught the attention of [Myles Brand](#), the president of the N.C.A.A.

“The youth sports culture is overly aggressive, and while the opportunity for an athletic scholarship is not trivial, it’s easy for the opportunity to be overexaggerated by parents and

advisers,” Mr. Brand said in a telephone interview. “That can skew behavior and, based on the numbers, lead to unrealistic expectations.”

Instead, Mr. Brand said, families should focus on academics.

“The real opportunity is taking advantage of how eager institutions are to reward good students,” he said. “In America’s colleges, there is a system of discounting for academic achievement. Most people with good academic records aren’t paying full sticker price. We don’t want people to stop playing sports; it’s good for them. But the best opportunity available is to try to improve one’s academic qualifications.” The math of athletic scholarships is complicated and widely misunderstood.

Despite common references in news media reports, there is no such thing as a four-year scholarship. All N.C.A.A. athletic scholarships must be renewed and are not guaranteed year to year, something stated in bold letters on the organization’s Web site for student-athletes. Nearly every scholarship can be canceled for almost any reason in any year, although it is unclear how often that happens.

In 2003-4, N.C.A.A. institutions gave athletic scholarships amounting to about 2 percent of the 6.4 million athletes playing those sports in high school four years earlier. Despite the considerable attention paid to sports, the select group of athletes barely registers statistically among the 5.3 million students at N.C.A.A. colleges and universities.

Scholarships are typically split and distributed to a handful, or even, say, 20, athletes because most institutions do not fully finance the so-called nonrevenue sports like soccer, baseball, golf, lacrosse, volleyball, softball, swimming, and track and field. Colleges offering these sports often pay for only five or six full scholarships, which are often sliced up to cover an entire team. Some

sports have one or two full scholarships, or none at all.

The N.C.A.A. also restricts by sport the number of scholarships a college is allowed to distribute, and the numbers for most teams are tiny when compared with Division I football and its 85-scholarship limit.

A fully financed men's Division I soccer team is restricted to 9.9 full scholarships, for freshmen to seniors. These are typically divvied up among as many as 25 or 30 players. A majority of N.C.A.A. members do not reach those limits and are not fully financed in most of their sports.

Ms. Milhous, whose Villanova field hockey team plays in the competitive Big East Conference, must make tough choices in recruiting. The N.C.A.A. permits Division I field hockey teams to have 12 full scholarships, but her team has fewer.

"I tell parents of recruits I have eight scholarships, and they say: 'Wow, eight a year? That's great,'" she said. "And I say: 'No, eight over four or five years of recruits. And I've got 22 girls on our team.'"

That can mean a \$2,000 scholarship, which surprises parents.

"They might argue with me," Ms. Milhous said. "But the fact is I've got girls getting from \$2,000 to \$20,000, and it all has to add up to eight scholarships. It's very subjective, and remember, what I get to give out is also determined by how many seniors I've got leaving."

Two Brothers, Two Stories

Joe Taylor, a soccer player at Villanova, received a scholarship worth half his roughly \$40,000 in college costs when he graduated from a suburban Philadelphia high school three years ago.

He had spent years on one of the top travel soccer teams in the country, F.C. Delco, and had several college aid offers.

“It was still a huge dogfight to get whatever you can get,” Mr. Taylor said. “Everyone is scrambling. There are so many good players, and nobody understands how few get to keep playing after high school.”

In 2003-4, there was the equivalent of one full N.C.A.A. men’s soccer scholarship available for about every 145 boys who were playing high school soccer four years earlier.

“There’s a lot of luck involved really,” Mr. Taylor said. “I can pinpoint a time when I was suddenly heavily recruited. It was after a tournament in Long Island the summer after my junior year. I scored a few goals. The Villanova coach was there, and so were some other college coaches. Within a couple of days, my in-box was full of e-mails. I’ve wondered, What would have happened if didn’t play well that day?”

Mr. Taylor has a younger brother, Pat, who followed in his footsteps, playing on the same national-level travel team and for the same Olympic developmental program.

“He did everything I did, and in some ways I think he’s a better player than me,” Joe said. “But you know, I think he didn’t have the big game when the right college coaches were there. He didn’t get the money offers I did.”

Pat Taylor is a freshman at Loyola College in Baltimore. Though recruited, he did not make the soccer team during tryouts last fall.

“I feel terrible for him — he worked as hard as I did for all those years,” Joe Taylor said.

Their father, Chris Taylor, said he once calculated what he spent on the boys' soccer careers.

“Ten thousand per kid per year is not an unreasonable estimate,” he said. “But we never looked at it as a financial transaction. You are misguided if you do it for that reason. You cannot recoup what you put in if you think of it that way. It was their passion — still is — and we wanted to indulge that.

“So what if we didn't take vacations for a few years.”

Pat Taylor, who started playing soccer at 4, said it took him about a month to accept that his dream of playing varsity soccer on scholarship in college would not happen. He looks back fondly on his youth career but also wishes he knew at the start what he knows now about the process.

“The whole thing really is a crapshoot, but no one ever says that out loud,” he said. “On every team I played on, every single person there thought for sure that they would play in college. I thought so, too. Just by the numbers, it's completely unrealistic.

“And if I had it to do over, I would have skipped a practice every now and then to go to a concert or a movie with my friends. I missed out on a lot of things for soccer. I wish I could have some of that time back.”

Griffin Palmer contributed reporting to this article.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: March 11, 2008

A front-page article on Monday about the unrealistic expectations of families in the pursuit of college athletic scholarships omitted a reporting credit. Griffin Palmer analyzed college and high school statistics for the article.

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