

Parents Can Invest for Years in Kids' Sports, but Scholarships Are Elusive

Spending on youth sports soars as families chase scholarships and roster spots for their sons or daughters

Julia Carpenter April 21, 2019 8:00 a.m. ET

For much of the past decade, Richard Ness traveled with his son Chip, a youth wrestler, to events around the country. He estimated he spent “likely close to six figures” on his son’s wrestling career.

Mr. Ness, a financial adviser in Duluth, Ga., said the investment paid off in the way so many parents dream of: His son earned nearly a full-ride wrestling scholarship for five years to the University of North Carolina. He will graduate in May with degrees in economics and management and society.

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As the [recent college-admissions cheating scheme](#) put in stark relief, competition for spots at top colleges is fierce. In addition, many families set their sights on the Holy Grail: athletic scholarships that earn a place on the team and offer a break on tuition, too.

Parents enroll their children in sports for a variety of reasons, including to learn values like discipline, teamwork and sportsmanship. And while [participation in many youth sports is falling](#), [spending has been skyrocketing](#) as more young athletes take part in elite teams with high-cost equipment and strenuous travel schedules. But scholarships are rare.

Only 2% of high-school athletes will receive college scholarships in their sport, according to the National Collegiate Athletic Association. That includes awards well short of the “full ride” many parents covet. In some cases, athletes receive just a few thousand dollars to put toward tuition, housing and other expenses.

But in a 2019 survey on the cost of youth sports by [TD Ameritrade](#) , 40% of parents said they felt confident their child would get an athletic scholarship. They also said they were willing to cut back on spending, go into credit-card debt or delay retirement to fund their child’s sport, according to the survey of about 1,000 parents.

“It’s really a small fraction of students get recruited to play in college, and with that, the percentage is even smaller of them getting the sort of full ride, athletic scholarship people dream of,” said Kathryn Randolph, contributing editor at Fastweb, a service that helps match students with scholarships.

“They could be using that money to save for college, to be blunt,” she said, of the athletic spending.

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Families with children who take part in elite teams spent an average of \$3,167 per player in 2018, up from \$1,976 in 2013, according to WinterGreen Research, a market-research firm in Lexington, Mass.

Participation in lower-cost local leagues are declining because many of the higher priced, more competitive leagues are picking off the best players. If a child is interested in playing baseball, the pricier club and travel teams may be one of the few options, said Dev Pathik, founder and chief executive of the Sports Facility Advisory, a sports and entertainment center management consultant company.

"There's nothing else for that kid who's lit up about basketball. There's no free alternative," he said, especially for lower-income families, who may then be shut out.

Costs depend on the sport. While baseball parents spend, on average, \$4,041 per child a year, volleyball parents can spend as much as \$8,027 per child, according to 2016 research from Travis Dorsch, founding director of the Families in Sport Lab at Utah State University. An activity like volleyball, while a less popular sport, can require higher-priced travel for faraway games.

Mr. Dorsch said he had seen some parents starting to pull back.

After a year of competitive tennis play for his then-11-year-old son, Colin William, an Indiana community-college professor, sat down to calculate how much he and his wife had spent that year traveling to competitions and funding their son Aidan's tennis ambitions.

"We started out with small expenses and kept progressing in the direction his ability was taking him," Mr. William said.

They had been putting money aside for college, but still had to pay for items such as new rackets, which cost more than \$200. Clinics, lessons and one-on-one instruction set them back more than \$4,000. Mr. William realized they had sunk \$10,000 into their child's sport, all in a single year.

"It really snuck up on us," Mr. William said of the expenses.

Mr. William and his family hopped off the hypercompetitive sports ride. They started choosing tournaments more selectively, so they could budget for travel. They enrolled their son in less expensive lessons and instruction. His son is 14 now, and Mr. William says he doesn't know if his son will ultimately play in college.

The following year, their tennis spending had dropped by almost 35%. That money now goes to general savings. Two years ago, they spent some on a trip to Europe, where Mr. William and his son attended the French Open. He says he is now better able to enjoy watching Aidan play.

"I don't want to be looking at every tournament result as a leading indicator of what my investment is accomplishing," he said.



As a high-school freshman, Aidan played varsity singles. Above, he practices with friends earlier this month. Photo: Lucy Hewett for The Wall Street Journal