

## VIEWPOINTS

## Parents need realistic approach to college

By **JOSEPH MANISCALCO**  
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In coaching youth sports, being a former recruit and going through the process personally with my daughters, the entire system is daunting.

First, many parents appear to have delusional perspectives as to their child's ability, which is further exacerbated by a theory that their child will be receiving a college scholarship. Many times, the delusions start at a young age when the sport uses a smaller ball and the distance from the pitcher is shorter. That delusion, coupled with a saturated travel softball market, creates an environment that endorses a sales model approach rather than a logic-based analysis. While logic is not always a great equalizer, a statistical approach is enlightening because it provides a dose of reality to the situation.

While athletes *do* receive athletic scholarships and the "special ones" play Division I, the statistics show the travel softball market is confused with overindulgent efforts to make money and become large profit centers. A balance of the risk/reward, financial burden and importance of academics placed on the child appears to be the better approach.

**TOO MANY** travel softball coaches are identifying athletic scholarships like it's their checkbook and practically providing guarantees to parents if they join their travel organization. Uneducated parents follow this lead blindly under some "mental spell" of success. In the end, it's simply a sales pitch that many parents buy, but don't really understand what they are buying. Like the street vendor, we must be careful what we are buying and understand the value in the product sold.

Statistically, three out of four American families with school-aged children have at least one child playing an organized sport — a total of about

45 million kids, according to the *Open Access Journal of Sports Medicine*. By age 15, however, as many as 80 percent of these kids quit their sport.

One reason appears to be the gap between the child's desire to have fun, learn, develop and mature and the misguided notion among some adults that their kids' games are a miniature version of grown-up competitions, where the only goal is to win. These adult expectations are a real problem in youth sports.

As we approach the summer, when our lives should focus on barbecues and relaxing, too many families are searching the internet for the best private batting instructor, an elite summer program, another college showcase, an expensive strength camp and that elusive coach who can get their 13-year-old child an athletic scholarship. This is a misguided attempt to accelerate a process that may not even be occurring, since most young athletes will never reach the elite level.

One of the main problems is most parents don't understand and cannot even grasp the amount of dedication necessary to become an elite athlete. But they will spend money they don't have, dedicate time they don't have, cause unnecessary stress to their lives, drink the Kool-Aid and pay for one more showcase and extra lesson.

Most parents ask how is little Jane going to get an athletic scholarship if she's *not* taking two lessons per week *and* on a winning team? If her team does not win every game, is there no way she will ever get a college scholarship?

Coaches will play lesser competition, join weaker tournaments for the trophy and never challenge the athlete. This helps with their sales model approach and satisfies their own personal ego — and that of the parent — since the logical theory is if their daughter's team wins, then she is a winner and she will get a college scholarship.

The fact is, however, approximately

one percent of high school athletes will receive a Division I scholarship. And those scholarships, on average, are worth much less than the family's investment in private lessons, sports camps and other training. Parents simply ignore this concept and don't believe the math.

Comparing the number of athletes participating in varsity sports at U.S. high schools during the 2013-2014 school year to the number of college student athletes is revealing. Overall, a little over seven percent of high school athletes (about one in 14) went on to play a varsity sport in college, and about two percent of high school athletes (one in 50) went on to play at the NCAA Division I level. For more, visit [www.scholarshipstats.com/varsityodds](http://www.scholarshipstats.com/varsityodds).

**EVEN WITH THESE** statistics, parents will still pay what they cannot afford and proceed blindly through a process they don't truly understand. One parent recently told me he spent up to \$50,000 in the last year for his daughter's travel team. She is a junior and received a scholarship to a low Division I school, with tuition slightly less than what he spent in an entire year. Knowing this, why would parents foolishly pursue this type of activity when the pure statistics reveal otherwise? Is it for the parent or the athlete?

Dan Gould, the Director for the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports, and other youth sports experts agree that sports create a great deal of positives for kids. But Gould also worries about the potential physical, psychological and emotional strain — either self-imposed or from overbearing parents and coaches, caught up in our society's outsized glorification of athletes and the desire to develop them.

"The difference between private coaching a generation ago and today is that now it is about getting a competitive edge," said Rick Wolff, a longtime adviser on sports parenting and host of



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The Sports Edge weekly talk show on WFAN sports radio in New York. He said the last time he checked NCAA statistics, less than four percent of all high school varsity athletes were good enough to make a Division I, II or III roster. "That's just to make the team, not to be a starter," he added. "That's how competitive it is."

Fred Engh, the president of the National Alliance for Youth Sports and author of "Why Johnny Hates Sports," warned against parents getting blindsided by unrealistic motivations. "I call it the weakness of parents," he said, "who see their child having this athletic talent or hoping he or she does. They spend an enormous amount of money, and the odds are so far against that happening, it becomes kind of ludicrous."

Gould said even if the kid is talented enough to get a scholarship, if the parents put the money they spent on sports into a college savings account,

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they might reap a better return on their investment.

“The literature is pretty clear,” he said. “If you get your child an academic tutor, there is more scholarship money for academics than for sports.”

Parents need to be informed consumers and not make decisions based on emotions. In most instances, looking at the average athlete scholarship balanced against better academics reveals a ratio of 2:1 for academic money, as opposed to athletic money. There is no doubt

that academic scholarship money far outweighs athletic scholarship money, especially in softball. However, when the student-athlete has excellent academics *and* is a great athlete, it becomes a college coach’s dream. This enables the college coach to put together a great financial package that becomes affordable to parents. By creating this scenario and emphasizing academics, the student-athlete is in a win-win situation.

According to the College Board, the average cost of tuition and fees for the 2015–2016 school year was \$32,405 at private colleges, \$9,410 for in-state residents at public colleges, and \$23,893 for out-of-state residents attending

public universities. It is becoming increasingly more competitive to get accepted to a more affordable state school simply based on the number of applicants. And the private school cost is enormous.

Therefore, if a parent goes through the process without an emphasis only on athletics their daughter will be left with going to a less-expensive academic school not maximizing their potential, or a school that the student is not 100 percent comfortable with because the options were limited.

In the end, I can tell you my own daughter chose to play at the Division III level and concentrate on her academics, but still play softball. The amount of

academic money she received was double the average NCAA Division I athletic scholarship and she still gets to compete and play the sport she loves in college. I am not endorsing only Division III sports here. But it’s a very good option and this worked for her, as her dream of becoming a brain surgeon far outweighed the work necessary to play at a higher level.

I urge you to understand the process, educate yourself and, above all, endorse academics to these athletes. When the dust settles and the glove needs to be put down, our student-athletes must be prepared for the world of life, obtain gainful employment and embrace the challenges that lay ahead.