

The Rising Costs of Youth Sports, in Money and Emotion

Paul Sullivan- The New York Times

John Amaechi first picked up a basketball when he was 17, after suffering through years of playing rugby in England. He soon left for Ohio to finish high school. Six years later, he started at center for the Cleveland Cavaliers and went on to have a solid N.B.A. career.

Mike Trombley, a quarterback and a pitcher in high school, went to Duke University without an athletic scholarship. He made the baseball team and was drafted in his junior year by the Minnesota Twins, pitching for 11 seasons.

And Travis Dorsch never would have thought to play football had he not scored a goal in soccer from midfield as a boy in Montana. A friend suggested he consider becoming a kicker. He got a scholarship to Purdue University, where he earned All-American honors and went on to kick for the Cincinnati Bengals.

These men represent the dreams of many children — and more often their parents. They excelled in the three sports many children play, used that ability to play in college (and often pay for it) and then had lucrative professional careers. But these three athletes, now in their 30s and 40s and from different backgrounds, agree on one thing: The way youth sports are played today bears no resemblance to their childhoods, and the money, time and energy that parents spend is probably misplaced.

Mr. Dorsch, who is now an assistant professor at Utah State University, where his research involves parents' engagement in their children's sports, said that spending on sports has grown so high — up to 10.5 percent of gross income in his research — that it is hurting family harmony.

“A family bringing in \$50,000 a year could be spending \$5,500,” he said. “Without being judgy, I’m fine with families spending that kind of money. What’s wrong is when that investment brings out some sort of negative parent behavior. Or if the kid says mom and dad are spending \$10,000 on me a year, what are they expecting in return? Is it a college scholarship? The chances are slim to none of a kid getting a scholarship.”

With travel teams and indoor versions of outdoor sports now in full swing, some former top athletes and even the coaches who feed parents’ obsessions are encouraging caution. The willingness to spend heavily — in money, time, emotion and a childhood — needs to be looked at more carefully, they say. The financial cost is easy to see. This weekend, 135 young quarterbacks from 36 states will fly to Los Angeles for a two-day camp with Steve Clarkson, a sought-after quarterback coach. Parents of these children, from third through 12th grade, will pay about \$800 each, not including airfare, hotel and other expenses.

Mr. Clarkson, who had a limited professional career, opened his Dreammaker Academy in 1986 and has since coached top N.F.L. quarterbacks, like Ben Roethlisberger of the Pittsburgh Steelers. He also worked with the youngest quarterback known to receive a scholarship offer to a big-time football program, David Sills, who committed to the University of Southern California at 13, though he ultimately enrolled at West Virginia University this year.

In addition to camps around the country and his work with professional quarterbacks, Mr. Clarkson also offers private coaching starting at \$400 an hour. Parents pay it and their children attend, even though Mr. Clarkson acknowledges that expectations can sometimes be out of whack.

“What I hope parents understand is that there are some three million high school players and by the time they scale that down to the quarterback position there are a couple of hundred thousand starters,” he said. “Then you get to Division I and II, and there are 360 quarterbacks. When you get to the N.F.L. there are 64. When you think about the odds, that’s not very good odds.”

Even so, he said, football can provide children with opportunities they might not have had otherwise. Mr. Trombley agreed, saying he looked at baseball and football as sports that might get him into a better college than he would otherwise. “There is no question that baseball got me into Duke University,” he said. “I think I lucked out making it a profession. It just kind of happened by accident. It wasn’t all or nothing. We stress that with our kids: It’s wonderful to play a sport, but it could go away.”

Yet today, Mr. Trombley, 47, a financial adviser in his hometown, Wilbraham, Mass., laments that the highest level of youth sports may be out of reach for many children. He said the farthest he ever traveled for a game was a couple of towns over, but recently his family drove hours to a weekend-long high school tournament in New Jersey. “Some people are not in the financial situation to pay for their kid to do it,” he said. “I think sometimes kids aren’t playing multiple sports anymore because it’s just too expensive.”

Financial costs are easy to quantify. There are also the injuries and the psychological scars. Mr. Amaechi who was a reluctant athlete until he was introduced to basketball, said he thought parents were misguided when they justified spending so much time and money on sports to teach their children life lessons. “Sport teaches what we want it to teach,” he said. “If you want it to teach about teamwork you can teach that through sports. If you want it to teach about social justice it can. It just takes an awful lot of effort.”

Mr. Amaechi cited a study of 4000 British children conducted by Britain’s Child Protection in Sport Unit that found that 75 percent of the respondents reported various types of psychological harm, like feeling diminished or undermined by coaches and teammates. This was compared with 2 to 5 percent who reported sexual abuse.

Of course, plenty of adults have fond memories of playing sports. But Bob Bigelow, who was a first-round NBA draft pick in 1975 and is the author of “Just Let the Kids Play,” said many of those memories probably came from playing with friends in unstructured, playground games. The first time he was on an organized basketball team was his freshman year in high school. “I live up here in ice hockey central,” he said of Winchester, Mass. “One of the hockey coaches up here told me there is no more cynical or

delusional an adult than the parent of a 16-year-old kid who is pretty good but is not going to get a scholarship. The parents have spent all this money and they still have to pay for college.”

Mr. Bigelow, who played for the Boston Celtics and the Clippers when the team was in San Diego, reserves his greatest ire for the coaches and administrators who run the leagues and are often the parents who have the greatest stake in their children’s athletic futures. “The biggest challenge of youth sports in this country is so many of the adults who propagate the culture have no background in child development or physical education,” he said. “Their background is they played high school sports somewhere and they watch ESPN. Those are the two worst qualifications, ever.”

More qualified coaches would seem to be the answer. But despite all the money and time parents spend on sports, coaches in many communities are held to a lower standard than educators. “Coaches are allowed to be emotionally illiterate,” Mr. Amaechi said. “I’ve watched as a coach stood screaming inches from the face of a girl and the parents were in the stands and instead of being incensed they continued screaming at her when she came to them.”

“All you need to do to see what sport gets wrong is flip that scenario indoors and make that coach a French teacher,” he continued. “Your French teacher is inches away from your child’s face and screaming because she can’t conjugate a verb? Parents would stand by and allow that? No, they’d be incensed.”

Mark Hyman, an assistant professor at George Washington University who has written books on youth sports, said that parents whose goal is to give their children the best chance in life or to get them a scholarship to college were not looking at the statistics. “Parents think these investments are justified; they think it will lead to a full ride to college,” he said. “That’s highly misinformed. The percentage of high school kids who go on to play in college is extremely small. In most sports it’s under 5 percent. And the number for kids getting school aid is even smaller — it’s 3 percent.”

His advice? “What I tell parents is if you want to get a scholarship for your kids, you’re better off investing in a biology tutor than a quarterback coach,” he said. “There’s much more school dollars for academics.”