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The Great myth of athletic scholarships

For most college athletes, grants don't come close to covering the full ride.

By Ted Hutton
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Nova Southeastern Athletic Director Mike Mominey calls it his "Reality of the College Scholarship" speech.

Mominey gives it when he visits local high schools to discuss how athletic scholarships are handed out.

"There is a major misconception out there that every scholarship is a full ride. That just isn't true. I tell them the majority of scholarships are partial ones," Mominey said.

On National Signing Day today, when most of the attention is focused on high-profile football players signing full scholarship offers with the colleges of their choice, there will be thousands of high school athletes in other sports accepting scholarships that could be far less than they expected.

In the majority of college sports, full scholarships are rare. Some high school athletes and their families invest years and thousands of dollars in expenses for travel teams, expecting the big payoff that never comes.

"It was a shock to my parents. They didn't understand," said Chris Eberhardt, a junior pitcher at Florida Atlantic, about discovering that Division I baseball teams have a maximum of 11.7 scholarships to be divided among a roster than can reach 30 players.

"A lot of times parents have no idea," FAU baseball coach Kevin Cooney said. "They spend a lot of time and money on their kid and then find out he might get a 25 percent scholarship."

It comes down to this: The NCAA defines each sport as "head count" or "equivalency."

Head-count sports are those in which every student-athlete gets a full scholarship. That is football and basketball for men, and basketball, volleyball, tennis and gymnastics for women.

All the other sports are equivalency, meaning coaches can divide up the scholarships any way they want, just so they do not exceed the maximum allowed.

Those limits vary, with more for women's sports due to Title IX, which mandates equal

opportunities for female athletes.

For example, in soccer, women's teams get 14 scholarships, while men get 9.9. There are usually more than 20 players on a Division I soccer team.

So after the elite athletes in the equivalency sports get the very few full scholarships offered, what is left for the other talented players? The rest get offers that can range from a couple hundred dollars to thousands, depending on their ability, if they are in-state or out-of-state, whether they qualify for academic scholarships and the money a coach has to spend.

"All the parents think their kids are the best and deserve a full ride. There is a problem with that," said FAU softball coach Joan Joyce, who has enough money for 12 full scholarships to divvy up among her 20 players.

"I have signed six kids this year, and only one got a full ride, and she is a pitcher. The rest are well under that," Joyce said.

EXPENSIVE TRAINING

Raising the stakes for parents is that in order to even be recruited, many athletes in high school need to play for travel or club teams in most equivalency sports, particularly baseball, softball and soccer.

Because college coaches have limited budgets for recruiting and are limited by NCAA rules to a certain number of contacts with athletes, most recruiting goes on at travel team tournaments, where coaches can watch multiple games and see dozens of players each day.

"It goes to efficiency," said Florida State softball coach JoAnne Graf, who is about to begin her 29th season. "I spend the summer watching travel ball teams. That is where the most talent is. Going to a high school game makes no sense anymore."

But travel teams are expensive.

Steve Nugent, coach of Team Boca's Under-18 girls' soccer team and the club's administrator, estimated each player on his team spent \$6,500 last season, and that did not include the costs for parents who wanted to travel with the team to tournaments in New York, North Carolina, Texas, Las Vegas, Houston and Washington.

Those players got exposed to college coaches around the country, but full scholarships are still rare.

"Over 200 kids have come and gone, and we have five that have received full athletic scholarships," Nugent said. "If a college coach offers 20 or 30 percent to a kid, that is a great offer."

"It's a Catch-22," Cooney said. "To be recruited, you have to have money. Then the payoff may not be as big as the parent wants or expects."

REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

Dean Camillo, who ran a travel baseball team in Palm Beach County for five years, knows how hard it is to get full scholarships.

He tells the story about one of his former players, infielder Matt Whitney, who played for Palm Beach Gardens High and Camillo's Yellow Jackets.

When he was a senior, Whitney was heavily recruited by colleges. Camillo said his best offer was an 80 percent scholarship from Clemson.

But Whitney ended up being taken in the first round of the 2002 major league draft by the Cleveland Indians and took the \$1.25 million signing bonus and is now in the minor leagues.

"So when I hear any kid say he got a full ride, I know that can't be believed," Camillo said. "But some parents just still want to believe."

When Bruce Mattson decided to have his son Mike play travel soccer, he was not thinking about a scholarship.

"We did it because he excelled at it, wanted to do it, and we liked watching him," Bruce Mattson said.

Mike Mattson played for the Weston Fury, a team that went to the national semifinals twice while he was playing.

Bruce Mattson said he was aware of the scholarship situation for men's soccer, and had no illusions that his son would get a full ride.

And while Mike Mattson did not get a full scholarship from Central Florida, because he stayed in state and had a good academic record, money from Bright Futures closed the gap.

"My out-of-pocket expenses are minimal," Bruce Mattson said.

The scholarship was a bonus, and Bruce Mattson said the money spent on his son's soccer career was worth it.

"It was a tremendous experience for the boys. They learned a strong work ethic, teamwork, and got to travel and play against the best teams in the country. That is of more benefit for their future than a scholarship," Bruce Mattson said.

"I wouldn't change a thing," said Mike Mattson. "I am so happy I played for the Fury and appreciate what my parents did because it got me where I am now."

Bruce Mattson has the attitude parents need to have, college coaches said, along with knowledge about what scholarships are available, so they can make informed decisions before spending a lot of money and time.

"The disillusion comes in when parents are looking for a monetary return on their investment. I have seen kids fall through the cracks because their parents hold out for an offer that is never going to come," said FAU women's soccer coach Brian Dooley.

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