

# **Athletic Scholarships and the Politics of Child Rearing in Canada**

**Noel Dyck**

Simon Fraser University, ndyck@sfu.ca

## **Abstract**

Organized competitive community sports for children and youth have become popular activities in contemporary Canadian society and are eagerly supported by many parents who view these as socially appropriate pastimes for sons and daughters. Children's achievement of athletic success tends to be viewed by many parents as a sign of their relative preparedness to confront and manage the future social and economic challenges of adulthood. Athletic success at different levels is also taken to demonstrate the adequacy of parents' attempts to attend appropriately to the responsibilities of child rearing. This essay examines the particular attractions provided by the possibility of athletically accomplished children eventually winning paid athletic scholarships to attend colleges and universities in the United States. The paper asks why so many middle-class parents who are able to afford the cost of underwriting post-secondary education for sons and daughters nonetheless commit so much of their own time and resources, not to mention those of their children, to the pursuit of athletic scholarships in the USA.

**KEYWORDS:** community sports, childrearing, athletic scholarship, Canada

## **Introduction**

In Canada organized community sports for children and youth have become popular activities that garner support from many parents who view these as especially appropriate and beneficial pastimes for sons and daughters. In addition to the enjoyment and healthy exercise that sports are said to furnish, the achievement of athletic success may be regarded by fathers and mothers as persuasive evidence of their progeny's relative preparedness to confront and deal with the future social and economic demands and challenges of adulthood. What is more, victories registered by children and youth on the fields of competitive play may also implicitly be taken to exhibit the adequacy of parental attempts to attend suitably and astutely to the responsibilities of child rearing.

This article takes as its point of departure the frequently anticipated prospect of athletically accomplished Canadian children being eligible to win lucrative athletic scholarships that would enable them to attend colleges or universities in the United States. In practice, some parents of children aged ten-years old and even younger fondly contemplate and enthusiastically seek to facilitate any possibility that a son or daughter might attain this

*ANTHROPOLOGICAL NOTEBOOKS* 12 (2): 65–78.

ISSN 1408-032X

© Slovene Anthropological Society 2006

goal through participation in child and youth sports. However, the financial costs of supporting a young athlete's participation—depending upon the chosen sport—can be quite substantial. An obvious question, then, is why some middle-class Canadian parents who may be quite able to afford the cost of underwriting post-secondary education for their sons and daughters nonetheless opt to commit so much of their own time and resources, not to mention those of their children, to the pursuit of athletic scholarships in the USA?

Responses elicited from child and youth athletes, athletic scholarship holders, and parents to inquiries concerning the attractions of American athletic scholarships tend to treat this as a rhetorical question to which the answer must surely be obvious. Within the discursive frame preferred for discussions of this topic, individuals who win athletic scholarships tend to represent themselves and to be envisioned by others not merely as recipients of a valuable and prestigious education that is free of charge, but also as accomplished athletes who have earned the opportunity to pursue their sport in the highly competitive arenas of American intercollegiate athletics. But when attention shifts from stereotypical renderings of the nature and value of athletic scholarships to the particular and personal experiences of young athletes, other considerations, explanations and questions begin to emerge. Seldom-acknowledged but cogent explications of why and how child and youth athletes—generally aided and abetted by their parents—might pursue athletic scholarships so diligently begin to come into focus when we trace the movement of young athletes through venues of childhood and community sports in Canada into the thoroughly institutionalized settings of American intercollegiate athletics.

To make sense of the complicated patterns and crosscutting purposes disclosed by ethnographic investigation of the pursuit of athletic scholarships one must take account of institutional arrangements, athletic practices and social relationships that are neither simple nor readily discernible from a single vantage point. The chances of obtaining a reliable thumbnail sketch of the overall ethnographic and analytic territory encompassed by the pursuit of athletic scholarships by searching for one or another centrally located figure within this geographically and structurally expansive field of involvement remain slim, to be sure. Various participants—including child and youth athletes, parents, student athletes who obtain athletic scholarships, coaches, intercollegiate athletic directors and others—are familiar with their own zones and modes of engagement within this extensive set of linked activities. But there is no particular reason for them to pursue an understanding of these matters beyond the scope of their immediate interests and proximate concerns. The task of tracing in more comprehensive manner the articulation of these overlapping networks of associations, institutions, individuals, families, and athletic and social practices remains an ethnographic task that anthropologists are well suited both to envision and to carry out.

The research upon which this analysis is based forms part of a larger investigation<sup>1</sup> of a longstanding anthropological concern, namely the social and cultural processes

---

<sup>1</sup> The project, which is directed by Vered Amit (Concordia University, Montreal) and myself, is entitled *Coming of Age in an Era of Globalization: Achieving Cultural Distinction Through Student Travel Abroad*. It is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. We are being assisted in the research by three graduate student researchers: Meghan Gilgunn (Simon Fraser University) and Heather Barnick and Kate Rice (both at Concordia University).

that shape young people's coming of age, and examines why and how travel and movement has come to serve as a significant component of such passages. Specifically, this combined project examines international travel as an integral part of the transition to adulthood for an increasing number of middle-class youth in Canada. In an age of globalization, students in Canada, as in many affluent, industrialized countries, are being enjoined to gain foreign experience as a key to social and professional advancement in an interconnected world. The overall project, therefore, is looking into three different types of programs that offer Canadian students organized forms of international travel and experience: international university exchanges, work exchanges, and athletic scholarships taken up by Canadians in the United States.

This article makes use of the findings of that part of the investigation examining young Canadians' participation in intercollegiate athletics in the United States and is based upon field research and interviews conducted both in Canada and the United States.<sup>2</sup> Since the research and analysis is still continuing, the account offered here is necessarily preliminary in nature. Nonetheless, the ethnographic evidence gathered to date and the lines of analysis suggested by these provide encouraging signs of the capacity of anthropological analysis to provide penetrating insights into the internal workings and linkages between two prominent but often taken for granted fields of social and athletic endeavour.

## **Child and Youth Sports in Canada**

Several organizational features of child and youth sports in Canada serve inconspicuously but inexorably to channel and shape the athletic practices and social experiences that ensue from participation within this sphere of activity. To begin with, there is a fundamental division between school sports and community athletic activities that occur outside the educational sector. In addition to providing physical education classes and instruction, public and private schools typically provide a limited range of intramural and extramural team sports and competitions that are for the most part organized and supervised by teachers. Far and away the largest segment of child and youth sports in Canada exists, however, outside the school system in what is commonly referred to as 'community' sports. Although a few of the sports played in high schools—including especially basketball and gridiron (Canadian) football—tend to represent the highest level of competition within these particular sports, for the most part community sport associations enjoy more intense levels of participation and higher competitive standards than all but a few high school sport activities. School sports are generally obliged to function within the limitations of budgetary and coaching resources provided by school boards. In contrast, community sport organizations frequently exhibit a capacity to assemble quite extraordinary levels of financial and human resources with which to construct clubs, teams, and leagues for a very broad range of sport disciplines.

---

<sup>2</sup> Interviews with athletic program officials and parents have been conducted by Noel Dyck, and interviews with athletic scholarship holders have been conducted by Meghan Gilgunn.

Community sport associations for children and youth usually organize athletes from a particular locality to play a particular sport. Within each municipal area, then, there will be a patchwork of individual sport associations, each devoted to a specific sport, such as track and field, ice hockey, baseball, softball, gymnastics, skating, martial arts and so on. A few sport associations are gender specific (for instance, ringette is played only by girls; gridiron football is usually played only by boys), but most have age-graded teams or competitions for boys as well as for girls and sometimes for boys and girls together in younger age categories. As a matter of fact, children often start in one or another community sport as early as 5 or 6 years of age. These sports tend from the outset to feature at least some level of competition as distinguished from mere 'unstructured play'.

Most community sport associations provide for both 'recreational' and 'elite' levels of competition, ostensibly to satisfy the diverging levels of talent and ambition possessed by individual athletes. Recreational or 'house level' athletes are expected to play primarily for 'fun' while boys and girls completing at an elite or 'representative' level are depicted as more 'serious' and achievement-oriented athletes. Boys and girls who are past the early years of sport participation will be streamed into one or another rendering of this basic distinction. Thus 'gold' level teams are expected to emphasize competition, the pursuit of excellence, and winning rather more than the joy of participation that is usually associated with 'bronze' level teams and athletes. In practice, however, elite-level objectives and practices have a way of often seeping down into 'recreational' levels of sport, transmuting supposedly distinct modes of athletic participation into a single hierarchical system. This, of course, serves to redefine an identity of a recreational athlete from one that is supposed to be anchored by principled commitment to having fun to one that may instead emphasize its holder's relative competitive inferiority.

The large numbers of sport associations that exist within any given municipality connect beyond the local area into larger regional, provincial, and national sport associations and leagues. These organizational structures make participation in any of a broad range of sports available to any child or youth athlete, providing that he or she has the resources required to take part. Fees to register a son or daughter in a local sport association differ substantially depending upon the nature of the sport, the equipment that it requires, and the competitive level at which it is to be pursued. Soccer (as it is known in North America) is a relatively inexpensive sport for a boy or girl to play, whereas ice hockey can be expected to cost anywhere up to ten times as much (or even more) in terms of charges for fees and equipment. Parents are normally expected to provide or arrange transportation to training sessions, games and competitions as a condition of their children's participation.

In many sports, parents are also pressed to serve as unpaid coaches and assistants or, alternately, to take part in fundraising schemes designed to permit some level of paid coaching or to offset some of the costs of out-of-town travel to tournaments and championship competitions by teams or individual athletes. Parents who may manage to avoid being conscripted as a coach or organizer of a fundraising scheme are still expected to attend as many scheduled games and competitions as possible. Showing up regularly to cheer on your child and to support the team or club in whatever ways requested by

team officials tends to be interpreted as meritorious behaviour in its own right as well as clear indication that a parent is committed to keeping his or her child 'on track'. Conversely, parents who are deemed to be unaccountably deficient in their attendance risk being designated as an 'uncommitted' or indifferent father, mother, or couple.

This distinctive mode of organizing child and youth sports relies upon a high degree of parental support and involvement that is, in turn, ramified and reflected through virtually every level of community sports in Canada. Depending upon a family's financial circumstances and the comparative expense of subsidizing participation in a given sport, the decision to enroll a child in a particular club or team may well represent not simply an incidental expenditure but a carefully measured and appreciable allocation of disposable household income. Above and beyond economic costs lurk potentially voracious expectations concerning the amount of time that parents may be asked to commit to chauffeuring, fundraising, and cheering on teams and clubs, expectations that can rapidly make major inroads upon domestic schedules. For instance, it is by no means uncommon for parents to be asked to arrange (or re-arrange) family vacations so that these do not conflict with club or team training and competition schedules.

Not all parents are equally willing to entertain such demands upon their time and intrusions into the formatting of family life. But since enough usually remain willing to do so, these onerous expectations tend to be sustained, if not always satisfied. As might be expected, parents who are keenly committed to community sports often seek each other out along the sidelines of playing fields and may begin to comprise small but influential sets of activists who in due course begin to set the pace and determine timetables for parental as well as child and youth participation in specific clubs and teams. Percolating out of this milieu of parental involvement is a style of sport organization and participation that begins to blur the boundaries between athletic activities and child rearing. Engagement in community sports by girls and boys more often than not comes to constitute not so much an individual undertaking by a child or youth athlete but rather a combined domestic project of greater or lesser complexity that serves, among other things, to proclaim a given parent's or couple's commitment to their family and to child rearing.

Not surprisingly, the depiction and valorization of community sports for children and youth subtly reveal the extent to which these are adult controlled zones and activities in spite of being steadfastly fashioned as being just 'for the kids'. Rationales for parental support of children's involvement in community sports tend to be framed in terms of a well-rehearsed set of factors and considerations. Thus, sport is identified as a 'healthy' activity that is expected to provide children and youth with opportunities to obtain 'fun'. Yet by virtue of being supervised by adults, community sports are also seen as constituting 'safe' activities that serve to keep children 'off the street' and away from temptations and hazards that might otherwise lead them astray or expose them to danger. Although reckoned to be an attractive form of leisure and powerful source of enjoyment, sport is also understood to facilitate the acquisition and acceptance of discipline and the development of an ability to work with others. And by virtue of its capacities to bestow these and many other benefits upon child and youth athletes, sport is also widely spoken of as an invaluable source of 'self-esteem', a psychological property that is said to be essential

to the creation and nurturance of a complete and confident self (Dyck 2000). Together these anticipated outcomes are commonly believed to render participation in sport not merely a pleasurable pastime, but also a potent social medium for preparing Canadian children and youth for successful lives and careers as adults.

Elsewhere I have examined the manner in which children's athletic performances may be watched closely by parents and other onlookers and studied in minute detail for signs of not merely current athletic standing (e.g., is a son or daughter improving his or her athletic performances vis-à-vis other competitors?) but also as indicators of growing social maturity and competence (Dyck 2003). However promising (or discouraging) these prospects may seem on any given day, there nonetheless always remains a distance between today's athletic and social performances and the future transformation of boys and girls into adults. In contrast, fathers' and mothers' public renderings of their parental roles and responsibilities are conducted here and now and can be subjected to immediate scrutiny and more or less discretely expressed assessment by other parents.

The stereotypical figure of the father or mother who lives vicariously through the on-field victories of a son or daughter is well known in Canada, and no parent would wish to be identified thus. A more prudent form of parental deportment within these environs is one that quietly highlights the consistency and depth of a mother or father's commitment to support their child's endeavours, whatever his or her level of athletic proficiency. The accomplishments of an individual competitor or of a team may be generously noted and politely attributed at least in part to the support, assistance and guidance provided by parents. By the same token a parent's absence from a number of games or even from a single key competition might be interpreted by some onlookers as a factor that contributed to some degree to a sub-par performance turned in by an otherwise 'talented' child or youth athlete.

Inevitably certain young athletes as well as particular teams and clubs register greater levels of competitive success than do others. Details concerning their triumphs, championships and trophies tend to be promptly submitted to community newspapers for inclusion in their sports sections. Especially proficient child and youth athletes may have feature articles (complete with photographs) published concerning their athletic 'careers' and future prospects. Depending upon the sport played by an athlete and the opportunities available within it for future advancement, newspaper accounts may even speculate about the possibility that, for instance, an exceptionally accomplished hockey player may soon attract the attention of scouts employed to discover athletes with the potential to become professional players.

Child and youth athletes familiar with the news media's fixation with Canadian professional athletes such as Sidney Crosby (National Hockey League), Steve Nash (National Basketball Association), Justin Mourneau (Major League Baseball), and Owen Hargreaves (Bundesliga) can all too easily slip into imagining that athletic success might just lead to a lucrative professional career. But parents of youngsters competing in these sports are frequently reminded by commentators of the rather long odds against even a highly proficient player making it into the professional ranks. To encourage one's son to commit himself solely to the pursuit of a professional career is generally reckoned to be

foolhardy. The principal risk associated with failing in such a venture is the possible or even likely neglect of educational training, an outcome that is judged to constrain severely the future life prospects of admittedly outstanding but still not necessarily professional caliber athletes. Cautionary stories about the sad outcomes of ‘kids’ who ‘almost made it to the big leagues’ are legion.

It is within this context that the manifest attractions of athletic scholarships to American universities and colleges become apparent. To begin with, there are vastly more openings for student athletes in intercollegiate athletic programs in the USA than exist within professional sports. Moreover, scholarships are awarded for a broad range of sport disciplines that reach far beyond those featured in professional sport leagues; athletic scholarships are offered for rowing and field hockey as well as for ice hockey and American football. Girls as well as boys are eligible to win athletic scholarships; in fact, Canadian women are just as likely (and perhaps even more likely) to be recruited to attend universities in the USA than are their male counterparts due to American gender equity guidelines. Most of all, athletic scholarships endeavour to combine high level sport competition with post-secondary education, thereby side-stepping the risk of athletic participation jeopardizing one’s education. Accordingly, the ideal outcome for many would be to receive a ‘full ride’ scholarship (that will cover the full costs of tuition, books, subsistence, accommodation, and equipment) at a ‘prestigious’ American university. To accomplish this is interpreted as converting athletic excellence into a form of continuing prestige, not to mention the acquisition of a ‘free’ education. Whenever a local athlete is ‘being recruited’ to attend one or another US college or university on an athletic scholarship, this is a matter for discussion in the venues of community sport long before and after news of it appears in community newspapers.

## **Scholarships and Intercollegiate Athletics in the USA**

Intercollegiate athletics in the United States constitute a vast and complex system of highly competitive sport programs and activities that have a prominent but in some respects quite controversial place within American post-secondary education. A summary account of the nature and features of this densely constructed and diverse athletic establishment falls beyond the scope and objectives of this paper, but it should be noted that there exists a growing scholarly and polemical literature on the merits of intercollegiate athletics. What is vigorously debated are the advantages and disadvantages, costs and benefits of intercollegiate athletics both for the educational institutions within which these are housed as well as the athletes and other personnel employed by these programs.

The titles of works found within this genre announce the framework and tenor of discussion: for instance, *Major Violation: The Unbalanced Priorities of Athletics and Academics* (Funk 1991); *Unsportsmanlike Conduct: Exploiting College Athletes* (Byers and Hammer 1995); *The Hundred Yard Lie: The Corruption of College Football and What We Can Do to Stop It* (Telander 1996); *College Athletes for Hire: The Evolution and Legacy of the NCAA’s Amateur Myth* (Sack and Staurowsky 1998); and *Football U.: Spectator Sports in the Life of the American University* (Toma 2003). Two former presidents of major American universities (Bok 2003; Duderstadt 2003) have provided detailed

and thoughtful accounts of certain particularly problematic impacts of high profile athletic programs upon essential university teaching and research functions. Social scientists such as Gumprecht (2003) have created finely crafted accounts that underline not only the significant economic impact of intercollegiate athletic programs upon colleges and university towns but also the manner in which the scale and intensity of these programs may serve to shape the social ambience and even the architecture of host communities.

Tagged by some observers with the sobriquet of ‘the peculiar institution’—a term employed in antebellum nineteenth century America to refer to slavery—intercollegiate athletics are generally agreed to constitute a very substantial and expensive set of activities. Depending upon one’s point of view, these programs may be depicted as making positive and strategic contributions to the universities and colleges that sponsor them as well as to the young athletes who compete within them. Supporters of athletics programs argue that universities’ efforts to recruit students and obtain donations from alumni are decisively enhanced by the operation of high profile, successful athletics programs. Alternately, critics charge that big-time college sports have become parasitic ‘businesses’ involving major television contracts and the commoditized sale of athletic wear that exploit the myth of the student athlete, not to mention actual student athletes who may have precious few educational benefits or accomplishments to take away with them when their eligibility as college athletes comes to an end. Even ‘Ivy League’ universities are accused of having a much deeper dependence upon intercollegiate athletics programs than they might readily acknowledge.

What is interesting about this literature from a non-American perspective is how little it says about the recruitment of foreign athletes, including Canadians, into these programs through the administration of athletic scholarships. Bale’s (1991) study remains one of the very few even to measure the extent of foreign participation in these programs. And while Bales found that Canadians made up the highest proportion of foreign student athletes in intercollegiate athletics programs, he did not interview either Canadian or other non-American student athletes to learn more about the nature of their athletic or educational experiences in the USA.

Prior to commencing our own inquiry into this topic we were aware of the paucity of research conducted on this particular aspect of intercollegiate athletics. We were also familiar with the burgeoning literature concerning the problematic and much debated status of intercollegiate athletics programs in the USA. What we have been surprised by as our investigation has proceeded is just how little Canadian youth athletes, their parents, and community sport coaches seem to know or care about the conflicting concerns being argued so passionately south of the border. What they seem especially interested in and knowledgeable about is how Canadian athletes go about the business of obtaining athletic scholarships that take them away from their homes to American colleges and universities.

Ethnographic interviews and field research conducted in 2006 with athletic program officials and Canadian student athletes enrolled in relatively well-known universities located in and around a major east coast American city afford fascinating insights into the processes by which these young Canadians have become ensconced in intercollegiate



athletics. The remainder of this paper examines various aspects of their recounted experiences that, when juxtaposed to commonplace notions about athletic scholarships that circulate within Canadian community sports circles, raise as many new issues regarding this social and athletic sector as they answer. Reduced to its essentials, the rendition favoured within community sports concerning how Canadian youth win athletic scholarships seems quite straightforward: they must possess markedly superior athletic ability and sufficiently acceptable academic grades and aptitudes to satisfy the admission requirements of American universities. Young men and women who demonstrate these abilities in abundance are said to be ‘recruited’ by institutions anxious to bring them to the USA and to reward them for their athletic and academic prowess. Nevertheless, the personal accounts offered by individual student athletes suggest that actual processes of recruitment may be more circuitous and less automatic than community newspaper stories about athletic scholarship winners ever acknowledge.

Matthew<sup>3</sup> is a hockey player from western Canada who obtained a ‘full ride’ scholarship at an academically well-regarded university in the United States. Yet as he explains, there was rather more involved in this than simply being approached by the university that he eventually ended up attending. During his second year of playing Junior A level hockey in Canada he had a particularly good season.

And I started trying to obtain a scholarship pretty aggressively. I came up with a resume. And I [...] got a book of all the NCAA<sup>4</sup> teams. I figured out which teams I would most likely want to go to and I sent them cover letters and faxes with my resume [...] I got calls back from about five or six schools and most of them [said] [...] ‘We saw you play, [but] unfortunately we have committed to someone else’. Or, ‘We’re trying to get someone else right now, but if that falls through we’ll talk to you’, or ‘We’ll keep you in mind for later seasons’.

Eventually Matthew heard from a university that had also learned of him from a respected coach who had seen Matthew play quite well in a particular playoff series. Matthew entered into protracted negotiations with officials from this university, who had identified him as one of three possible recruits for a single position in their program. But before he received an offer from them, the officials at another American university that had heard about him from the same source got in touch. This second university had discovered that a player whom they had planned to recruit for the position that Matthew played had turned out to be ineligible to enrol in their program. After viewing a tape that Matthew submitted of one of his games, he was invited to visit their campus in June, which, as Matthew noted, was very late for a NCAA regulated ‘official visit’ by a potential student athlete to a university. Thus, at the end of a long and complicated process initiated by

---

<sup>3</sup> Pseudonyms are used in the remainder of this article to respect the right of research participants to confidentiality.

<sup>4</sup> The National Collegiate Athletic Association is the largest and most powerful organizational body for intercollegiate athletics in the United States.

Matthew, his solid grades from high school, respectable SAT (scholastic aptitude test) scores and impressive game tape—not to mention the failure of another recruit to achieve eligibility—resulted in him obtaining a ‘full ride’ scholarship, even if it was finally offered rather late in the ‘recruiting’ season. Yet except for another recruit’s misfortune, Matthew might just have easily ended up attending the other university, an academically mediocre institution that is best known for its hockey program.

When asked about relations on the team between athletes who are in receipt of full or partial scholarships and teammates who are not on scholarship, Matthew indicated that this issue had not come up:

I think that if it’s ever been an issue with somebody, it’s kind of between them and [the team coach]. I think it would be if they’re on half scholarship and they think they’ve performed well enough [...] [to receive a full scholarship]. They kind of take it up with coach. It’s not really a tension between us. You know, we’re just guys on the team. [...] I still don’t know who’s on full ride and who’s not. I just found out there’s a guy, I thought he was on full ride, but I guess he’s on [...] a three and a half year [scholarship]. So his last semester he was actually paying his way.

When players on a team do not openly discuss amongst themselves the precise level of scholarship support that they are or are not receiving from their university, one can only wonder about the extent of the reliability of that great volume of second-hand claims exchanged within community sports conversations concerning the amount and extent of scholarship support that is, in fact, being received by any given athlete. Actual scholarship arrangements may not always be what these might be assumed to be or even said to be.

Although a number of American universities do not, strictly speaking, formally offer athletic scholarships, this is seldom noted in parental discussions in Canada that may explicitly make mention of one or another of these institutions in speculative discussions about where one’s son or daughter might one day go on an athletic scholarship. Indeed, this confusion is understandably compounded by the fact that many of these institutions, including some Ivy League universities, work diligently to recruit top-ranked athletes. Recruited athletes are not only offered admission to these institutions but are also eligible to apply through the standard financial aid process that distributes scholarship grants to students depending upon their ‘individual circumstances’. Ursula, a hockey player from eastern Canada explained how this system and her Canadian coach’s advice brought her to the USA.

I don’t think that I had considered Ivy League schools because I didn’t think that I was smart enough [to be admitted]. And then he definitely put the idea in my mind, which definitely helped because [otherwise] [...] I might not have sent my information here. [...] But he was saying, ‘Okay, you should send your information out now and make sure you get noticed [...] people should know that you’re looking to go to college in the States and then hopefully good things will happen’. He was definitely right. But no one pushed me to go any particular way; even

my parents were just supportive and said ‘whatever you decide is [...] [fine with us]’.

When asked how the funding system operates in a university that ostensibly offers no athletic scholarships, Ursula explained that her parents have to submit all of their Canadian tax information to the university each year so the amount of financial aid that she will be awarded can be calculated. Although Ursula’s admission to this university was expedited by her athletic abilities, her parents are still required to pay a very substantial amount for her to attend it. Moreover, given the demands of the hockey program within which she participates, Ursula is not able to engage in part-time work even during the hockey off-season to offset some of the costs of her education. Ursula’s hockey-playing skills may have made her parents proud but have also obliged them to submit to detailed scrutiny of their financial circumstances and to pay rather more for their daughter to be a student athlete at this American university than would have been the case had she attended a Canadian university without any scholarship whatsoever.

Many of the student athletes interviewed for this project said that a primary factor in deciding to leave Canada to attend university was the access that it provided to high level competition in their chosen sports as well as to a ‘free’ education. Yet the demands made of student athletes can be onerous. Heather, a rower from eastern Canada, is almost finished a degree program in engineering that has frequently conflicted with her responsibilities as an athletic scholarship holder. Several courses in biomechanics that Heather needed to take in order to earn a particular minor concentration in engineering were effectively unavailable to her because they were scheduled at 8.00 am, an hour when she took part in rowing practice sessions. Noting that, ‘It gets frustrating for professors and classmates [...] if you’re constantly rowing’, Heather acknowledges that she was likely not viewed as an ideal candidate for inclusion in student group projects due to the temporal demands imposed by her athletics regimen. There are also social costs encountered in high performance sport with which Heather is all too familiar:

No student athlete can claim to be a normal college kid [...] If you go to a party, it’s maybe once a month. You don’t see as many movies, you don’t see friends as much. You will be a bit of a social outcast.

Heather points to the physical toll that her sport takes upon disciplined and dedicated athletes, something that is viewed with some alarm by younger rowers in Canada:

What scares a lot of high school kids, in my opinion, is [that] they see these great athletes leave for college and come back to the town and never row again. And, everyone talks about being a ‘burn-out’. [...] I’ll admit, by the time I was finished my four years, I was ready to be done. My back was killing me. I had spent almost every day in the trainers’ [room] for four years because of knee problems, ankle problems, and back problems.

While Heather expresses pride in her now finished rowing career, she wonders whether she might not have registered better academic results ‘[...] if I had been as disciplined [in my classes] as I am in rowing’.

## **Conclusions**

The ethnographic materials presented above comprise limited excerpts drawn from just a few of the interviews conducted for this project. Nonetheless, the specificities of even these selected aspects of the situations of Matthew, Ursula or Heather do serve to demonstrate why the stylized and simplistic popular discourse within Canada concerning the nature and import of athletic scholarships needs to be examined critically and ethnographically.

The prominent pursuit of American athletic scholarships by Canadian youth and their parents needs to be examined and understood within the broader institutional structure of amateur athletics in both countries as well as within the context of domestic life and the politics of child rearing. In some respects the taking up of an athletic scholarship in the USA by a son or daughter may represent as much a continuation of previous domestic practices and patterns as an abrupt shift in either their lives or those of their parents. While these young athletes leave their homes and country for at least four years, in doing so they remain engaged in amateur athletic activities that possess the same basic properties and attractions that make community sport activities so popular amongst middle-class parents in Canada. But as well as maintaining for a while longer a smoothly functioning symbiosis between a son's or daughter's athletic pursuits and the responsibilities of parenting, the considerable prestige accrued when a young Canadian 'wins' an athletic scholarship to an American university continues to reflect positively upon his or her parents, whatever the nature of actual experiences and outcomes that that son or daughter encounters in the course of his or her college years.

There is, in truth, not much more than conjectural evidence to support commonly encountered claims within community sport circles that winning an athletic scholarship will 'set you up for life'. Nor is it by any means clear that another claim often heard within community sports discussions—that American degrees have special value—is well founded. Indeed, there is scant information available about or even informal discussion of the eventual outcomes for those who win athletic scholarships except for those few individuals who manage to go on to professional athletic careers or to represent their country at the Olympics. But in these cases, the fact that an athlete once held an athletic scholarship at one or another university becomes an incidental aspect of reports of their subsequent athletic triumphs. Occasionally, one hears of uncelebrated cases where a young man or woman who had obtained a scholarship returns home after only a year or so away. These cases are never reported in newspapers unless retrospectively, when the athlete in question revives his or her career and wins another scholarship to another university that is identified as having a program that is better suited to his or her interests and talents.

But for the most part the discourse about athletic scholarships remains remarkably positive and uncomplicated. The swirling, controversial American debate about the problems that are said to engulf intercollegiate sport in the USA is rarely if ever a part of the discourse of athletic scholarships conducted by community sports officials and parents in Canada. Short of an athlete dropping out of his or her university program prematurely and returning home, there is little basis within this realm of amateur sport and child rearing for publicly doubting the extravagant assertions made and exchanged about ath-

letic scholarships. The interviews conducted for this project typically end with affirmations on the part of student athletes that they have 'no regrets' concerning their decision to move to the USA for their university education. But how could it be otherwise? For to move beyond the rhetoric of athletic and parental accomplishment that makes up this discourse might potentially throw into question not only the prestige that has been enjoyed but also the particular domestic lives, performances of astute parenting, and youthful athletic careers that have been constructed and lived around this premise for so many years.

## References

- Bale, John. 1991. *The Brawn Drain: Foreign Student-Athletes in American Universities*. Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Bok, Derek. 2003. *Universities in the Marketplace: The Commercialization of Higher Education*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Byers, Walter & Charles Hammer. 1995. *Unsportsmanlike Conduct: Exploiting College Athletes*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Duderstadt, James J. 2003. *Intercollegiate Athletics and the American University: A University President's Perspective*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Dyck, Noel. 2000. Parents, Kids, and Coaches: Constructing Sport and Childhood in Canada. In: Noel Dyck (ed.), *Games, Sports and Cultures*. Oxford and New York: Berg, pp. 137-161.
- Dyck, Noel. 2003. Embodying Success: Identity and Performance in Children's Sport. In: Noel Dyck and Eduardo P. Archetti (eds.), *Sport, Dance and Embodied Identities*: Oxford & New York: Berg, pp. 55-73.
- Funk, Gary D. 1991. *Major Violation: The Unbalanced Priorities of Athletics and Academics*. Champaign: Leisure Press.
- Gumprecht, Blake. 2003. Stadium Culture: College Athletics and the Making of Place in the American College Town. *Southeastern Geographer* 43(1): 28-53.
- Sack, Allen L. and Ellen J. Staurowsky. 1998. *College Athletes for Hire: The Evolution and Legacy of the NCAA's Amateur Myth*. Westport: Praeger.
- Telander, Rick. 1996. *The Hundred Yard Lie: The Corruption of College Football and What we Can Do to Stop It*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Toma, J. Douglas. 2003. *Football U.: Spectator Sports in the Life of the American University*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

## POVZETEK

Organizirani tekmovalni javni programi športa otrok in mladine so postali priljubljena dejavnost v sodobni kanadski družbi, ki jo mnogi starši goreče podpirajo, saj v teh programih vidijo družbeno sprejemljiv način zabave svojih sinov in hčera. Otrokov doseganje športnih uspehov mnogi starši vidijo kot znak njegove relativne pripravljenosti na bodoče družbene in na ekonomske izzive v odrasli dobi. Športni dosežek otroka na različnih ravneh je dojet tudi kot pokazatelj, da starši ustrezno prevzemajo odgovornosti vzgoje lastnih otrok. Pričujoča razprava proučuje določene privlačnosti, ki jih športno izurjenim otrokom ponuja potencialna možnost pridobitve športne šolnine in posledičen vpis na visoke šole in univerze v Združenih državah. Prispevek poskuša najti odgovor na vprašanje, zakaj tako veliko staršev srednjega razreda, ki bi si lahko privoščili stroške šolnin svojih sinov in hčera po srednji šoli, vseeno posveča toliko svojega časa in sredstev, če sploh ne omenjamo časa in sredstev njihovih otrok, da bi slednji pridobili športno šolnino v ZDA.

**KLJUČNE BESEDE:** javni programi športa, vzgoja otrok, športne šolnine, Kanada