Reality Check: What You're Paying For
By Mike Barr

There is a young team, within a premier club recognized for its past successes, which is taking things to the extreme in regard to cost, matches, and the player's total involvement in the sport. This team is currently playing more than 80 games per year and practices at least two times per week.

Remember, these are children 12 years old and younger. Examine the costs to parents of each player in order for them to participate per year:

- Uniforms and equipment: $200 to $750
- Coaching salaries, coaches' travel expenses: $1,000 to $1,800
- Indoor field rental: $200 to $300
- Outdoor field rental: $300 to $500
- Referee fees: $200 to $300
- Tournament fees: $200 to $1,500
- Banquet: $30 to $60
- Gas and means for matches and practices: $750 to $1,400

These costs do not include the extra costs to parents who decide to go with their children to tournaments or matches. The estimated total costs are probably on the low end, according to an article from the New York Times titled, "The Scholarship Divide Expectations Lose to Reality of Sports Scholarships."

Even with a robust economy, these costs seem ridiculous, but in light of our country's plight, I can't see how anyone can justify the financial sacrifice needed to support a child's involvement in soccer -- or any sport -- to this extent, especially at this age.

Burnout

Elena Delle Donne, from Ursuline Academy in Wilmington Del., was the 2008 Naismith High School Basketball Player of the year. She was recruited by every Division I college in the United States but lasted only 48 hours at Connecticut that fall. She admitted to being burned out at 13 -- all the success and accolades she received did not make a difference. Rather than be a college basketball superstar at UConn, Delle Donne transferred to the University of Delaware and is now playing volleyball.

I am seeing the same thing in soccer, both at early and later stages of players' careers. Elite players come home from four-year college, stop playing the sport and have no involvement in coaching. They are tired, and finally have a chance to relax, enjoy life and move ahead with their careers. Many never pick up a soccer ball again.

The Myth

"Switch to our club or play with my team. Eighty percent of the players on our U17 team received scholarships. Our club is exposed to the collegiate coaches. We have the coaches who can get you to the next level." This is the sales pitch made to players and parents alike, but what are the true experiences of players who play at the top level of club soccer in regard to college or professional soccer?

First and foremost, the average athletic scholarship, excluding football and basketball, for all athletes, is only between $7,000-$8,000 per year. Tuition plus room and board runs anywhere from $20,000-$52,000 per year. In 11 of the 14 Division 1 sports that feature both men and women's teams, women receive a higher average amount.

The truth is, almost no soccer players ever receive a full athletic scholarship. Take into consideration a player who receives a scholarship of 25 percent from a college with tuition rates of $40,000 per year. This scholarship, over four years, is worth $40,000, but the total cost to the parents and student is still $120,000.

Coaches in some men's Division I programs have the maximum 9.9 scholarships over a four-year period, and are forced to divide them up in order to maintain continuity. If you know of a student who is on a full ride, it is because he most likely received money academically or through a financial aid package. Though some Division I women's soccer programs have up to 14 scholarships, their coaches must also use a full-ride sparingly.

My good friend Lew Atkinson, Director of Coaching in Delaware, likes to explain to parents, "If you are looking for your son or daughter to receive a scholarship to college, I suggest you spend the money directed to soccer toward an academic tutor. The cost is less expensive and the financial awards are greater."

Professional Soccer

"Our club coach told us our son or daughter has the talent to play professionally." The odds are huge and the financial rewards are minimal when it comes to making a professional soccer team in our country, and living the high lifestyle of other professional athletes.

If we examine the salaries of six former Eastern Pennsylvania soccer players currently playing in the MLS, you may be surprised at their pay in the beginning of their careers. As their careers blossom and progress, an MLS professional can make a decent living, but until that time, their salary is less than that of a first-year teacher coming out of college.

Ben Olsen and Chris Albright are two of the most successful players from EPYSA now playing in the MLS. Both have 10 years experience in the league and have played for the U.S. national team on numerous occasions. Olsen's salary from D.C United is $215,000 and Albright's salary from New England is $160,000. Jon Conway has been playing in the MLS for eight years and makes a salary of $81,250. Jeff Parke of Seattle, who has been a strong back in the league for five years, earns $58,737. Jeff Larentowicz, a young, strong central midfielder for New England is entering his fifth season, earned $33,000 last year. Wake Forest's Julian Valentin, currently on the LA Galaxy roster, earned $12,900 in 2008.

You can expect the Women's Professional League to have lower salaries than the men, with only the top-name players receiving larger shares.

Conclusion

Parents, take the time to think about you child and their future. Provide them with opportunities when they are young to explore other interests in sports or in the arts. There is always a possibility that, simply because you exposed them to new ventures, they may find a career or a wonderful hobby that will last a lifetime.

Should your child remain passionate about soccer or any sport, choose the proper path. Ask questions, expose them to different coaches and ask yourself, "Am I doing what is in the best interest of my child?"

Trust me, you will be pulled in many directions as he or she goes through youth sports. Make the right decisions.

(Mike Barr is the Director of Coaching of the Eastern Pennsylvania Youth Soccer Association and the head men's coach of Immaculta University. He coached the boys team at Strath Haven High School in 1984-2005, winning five PIAA state titles, six PIAA District One titles and 16 Central League titles.)