

For most, sports are a hobby, not college tuition

When my children were young, I was convinced they would grow up to be star athletes. My oldest daughter had a great arm for a 2-year-old, and my youngest chased bouncy balls around the floor with an agility I was sure would lead straight to varsity glory.

I was confident that I wouldn't have to save for college because, no doubt, they would have their choice of full athletic scholarships. Reality struck hard when they headed out for their first team sports and I learned the truth: they had inherited their father's genes. As my coach was somewhat too fond of telling me in my youth, "Kid, I can't teach speed."

As girls easily dribbled past one daughter on the basketball court, and my other budding star seemed constantly to be running in mud on the soccer field as players sped past her, it became crystal clear that sports involving quickness would not be their ticket to college. Fortunately, speed isn't the crucial factor in all sports. Running is definitely frowned upon on the golf course. Gravity helps in skiing. Hand-eye coordination and agility are at least as important as pure speed on the tennis court. A good hike, well enjoyed, requires stamina and leg strength more than bursts of speed.

I learned the truth early on, though many parents continue to pursue the college scholarship dream long after they should have started emphasizing academics over athletics. The truth is this: Your son or daughter has a better chance of getting accepted to an Ivy League school than he or she does of earning a full ride athletic scholarship. So what's a parent to do?

Encourage a healthy appreciation for competition and fitness by exposing your children to sports they can play all their lives.

Summer Camps

In the not-too-distant past, mainstream summer camps came in two varieties: traditional or specialty sports. A traditional camp offers varied activities, with about half of the activities consisting of some type of sports and the other half some type of arts (studio, performing or crafts).

Specialty camps train athletes in specific sports: football, basketball, baseball, tennis and soccer. The goal of these camps is give middle school kids a leg up in skills and discipline over their peers. And in today's highly competitive world of high school sports, the demand of coaches to specialize in one sport at an early age has never been greater.

For all those parents who simply refuse to have their kids play hockey year-round, or for those who don't want their 11-year-old to give up softball to play spring soccer because the high school coach is in charge of the spring travel soccer team, there are alternatives.

General interest camps usually have some sports as part of the overall program, but most encourage children to pursue a variety of interests: an hour of swimming, followed by an hour of crafts, followed by an hour of canoeing, followed by an hour of volleyball. While kids stay active, the level of instruction is much lower than at sports specialty camps.

So if you have no delusions about your children's athletic prowess – and you want them to get better at sports they can play for life – what's a parent to do?

Find the middle ground

Long after the high school gridiron glory days have ended, adults continue to stay active in sports they can enjoy for a lifetime: tennis, golf, swimming, biking and hiking. Hiking and biking don't take specialized skills, but figuring out how to develop an appreciation for them in our children can be more difficult. Kids don't seem to rely on their bicycles for transportation anymore, though trail riding keeps growing in popularity. Kids don't seem to spend as much time hiking or just plain spending time in the woods anymore, either, and participation in Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts has declined sharply in this generation.

The Maine Golf & Tennis Academy in Belgrade, Maine is a summer camp with a heavy focus, not surprisingly, on golf and tennis. If you want non-stop tennis for your child, there are hundreds of tennis academies, usually at prep schools, that offer tennis and not much more. This camp offers both golf and tennis as part of a traditional camp setting. Situated on Lake Salmon in the Belgrade Lakes region of central Maine, you don't have to be a ranked in the juniors to attend. It offers golf and tennis lessons for beginners, intermediate and advanced players. In addition to golf and tennis, campers can choose waterskiing, dance, boating, field sports, swimming, arts and crafts, fishing, theater and a number of other areas of interests.

All of these options carry a hefty price tag along with the camp's equally impressive instructor credentials. Depending on the mix of activities chosen, a two-week session starts at \$2,995 up to \$5,295 for one of the full four-week sessions. For more information, go to www.golfcamp.com.

A little more casual and considerably less pricey at \$975 per week is the Waterville Valley Summer Camp, a Sports for a Lifetime Academy. A coed camp for children ages 8-15 near the base of the famed Waterville Valley Ski Area, it is located in the heart of New Hampshire's White Mountain National Forest.

This camp offers several unique options for campers and parents. First, campers stay in the Snowy Owl Inn rather than in traditional cabins. Packed with skiers during the winter, this dormitory style hotel is the residence home in the summer for campers looking to improve in sports they can play for life. The emphasis here is on introducing campers to new sports and honing skills for those who already know something about tennis, golf, hiking or mountain biking. Sessions and lessons are shorter (an hour to an hour and a half) than at the Maine Golf & Tennis Academy, so kids are exposed but not overexposed. As with lodging, the camp makes use of certified golf and tennis instructors who work at the year-round resort community.

And parents can get away, too, with special lodging deals at other Waterville Valley properties. Go to www.sportsforalifetime.com

Another option for parents who want excellent instruction in lifelong sports coupled with a traditional camp atmosphere is Windridge Tennis & Sports Camps. Windridge has two camps, Teela-Wooket and Craftsbury Common, with two very different programs.

Both are located a little more than an hour from Burlington, Vermont, and both have a heavy emphasis on tennis. Their atmosphere and programs are very different, however. Teela-Wooket, which opened more than 100 years ago as a girls horseback riding camp, offers three majors – tennis, soccer and riding. Each camper signs up for one or two major activities, which meet two hours a day with an additional two hours available if desired. Electives include aerobics, archery, mountain biking, swimming, photography, and arts and crafts. Craftsbury Common, situated on Lake Hosmer, doesn't offer riding but does have the waterfront activities one normally expects at a traditional summer camp, as well as archery, mountain biking, sculling, golf, theater and arts and crafts. Tennis is required here, not one of the optional activities.

Windridge offers a wider range of session than most camps, from one week to 27 days. Prices range from \$1,330 to \$5,130 (riding is extra). Go to www.windridgetenniscamps.com.

All of the camps above offer some sort of family program, so the parents can tag along for a brief time and relive their camp experiences, too. After all, isn't that the point of sports you can play for life?

For The Sentinel's list of summer camps in and around the Monadnock Region, go to www.sentinelsource.com.