

# ATHLETIC SCHOLARSHIPS, HIGH SCHOOL SPORTS, AND PHYSICAL FITNESS

*by Cafè Cohen*

**From Home Education Magazine, July/Aug, 1997 Older Kids column**

"What are the possibilities of homeschoolers earning athletic scholarships? My son plays basketball, and we cannot see any alternative to his attending high school to make him eligible for athletic scholarships." So ran a recent query on one of the on-line services.

A fair question, I thought. My initial reaction was tongue-in-cheek: "Be careful what you wish for: you might get it." Parents and teens should not let the monetary awards blind them to some of the problems that plague athletic scholarship recipients.

Case in point: my son Jeff's first roommate at the Air Force Academy was a recruited quarterback. Every evening, while Jeff was studying, this cadet attended football practice. Unfortunately, while the cadet met admissions criteria, his qualifications for entering the Academy had been borderline. It was all too much. Like many recruited athletes, the football player left after a year because he could not keep up academically.

I am sure a book could be written about the problems of attending any college or university on an athletic scholarship. For example, counting on an athletic scholarship presumes that the athlete will remain healthy and uninjured. Anyone who saw the excellent documentary *Hoop Dreams* know the problem here. Trading athletic prowess for educational dollars looks attractive on the surface, but, in many cases, may be detrimental. I question the wisdom of attending high school solely for the purpose of competing for an athletic scholarship, especially if school attendance jeopardizes a teenager's education and attitude towards learning.

While it may be difficult for a budding homeschool football player to win an athletic scholarship, homeschooling actually favors the training schedule faced by elite gymnasts or figure skaters. Not surprisingly, cases of gifted athletes homeschooling to accommodate the intense training demands of their sports are becoming more common.

The point here? There are really no simple answers, just the opportunity to look at homeschooling versus school attendance for students who are serious about athletics. Let's assume that you are already well-versed in what local schools can provide and focus on opportunities in the community and at home for homeschoolers.

The out-of-school, the homeschooling options -- many of which have been discovered by homeschoolers simply looking for high-school-level team sports or physical fitness opportunities -- are more plentiful than you might think. How do these homeschooled teenagers access team sports and fitness activities? An interesting corollary question I would like to address is: are physical activities an essential part of education or just add-ons, something you do if you have the time?

In the two states where my kids were homeschooled, New Mexico and Colorado, high school sports programs were open to homeschoolers. We knew a homeschooled teenager on the high school track team in New Mexico and several homeschoolers in Colorado who played high school softball. My kids never took advantage of these opportunities. The larger communities offered so much more.

Both kids played Little League baseball and softball in their middle school years, both sports organized in the community. During his high school years, Jeff participated on a US Diving Team sponsored by the local Parks and Recreation department (his diving was good enough that the coach at West Point tried recruiting Jeff for diving). Tamara took Tae Kwon Do at a local military base and played volleyball with a church league.

While I was glad these outlets existed, something else was far more important to me than the kids excelling with a particular sport (or winning an athletic scholarship). I wanted to instill the attitude that lifetime fitness is important, that time and effort devoted to physical fitness would yield big payoffs.

My line to the kids was: "If you don't have your health (and exercise is key to staying healthy), everything else is that much harder -- not impossible, but harder." Additionally, daily intense physical activity was a stress buster, for everyone.

What options for team sports and physical fitness do teenagers have? A little networking, trial-and-error, and creativity goes a long way. We found, and the experience of our fellow home educators has shown us, that older homeschoolers can participate in invigorating, fun fitness activities. The only problem is locating them. Here are some suggestions.

\*Check all sorts of community agencies. We found swimming, diving, yoga, martial arts, and aerobic dancing with Parks and Recreation departments; hiking and synchronized swimming through community education classes (usually run by local school districts); Red Cross Water Safety Instructor (WSI) and lifeguarding classes at the YMCA; volleyball and bowling with church leagues.

As homeschoolers (and, in our case, as a family who moved a lot), we learned to look beyond our teenagers' immediate preferences. The dictum, "when in Rome..." applies here. Diving was not our son Jeff's first choice (probably not even his tenth choice). But he felt he needed sports team participation for his academy applications. Through the recommendation of other home educators, we found a US Diving Team run by an excellent coach very near our home. The outstanding coach could and did make everyone (including Jeff) enthusiastic about diving. If the ideal sport is unavailable, look for alternatives which boast good instructors, coaches, and programs.

\*Many communities have adult leagues that welcome older teenagers. Examples are baseball teams, basketball teams, and bowling leagues. Ask personnel at large sporting goods stores for contacts for these opportunities.

\*Special interest groups are another option. Most notable are the distance running, walking, and biking groups that exist even in relatively small communities. These clubs usually welcome participants of all ages and provide expertise and focus for very inexpensive lifetime sports. Gifted high school age runners may even find enough training support in running clubs to qualify for athletic scholarships in track and cross-country.

In this vein, our family very much enjoyed the outings of a cross-country ski club in Denver. The group seemed made for homeschooling families. All ages were welcome, and everyone participated in mountain treks of various lengths. Club members happily spent unlimited amounts of time to share their expertise and enthusiasm.

\*Some youth groups offer sports, including team sports, as part of their programs. At Civil Air Patrol, our son Jeff trained (mile run plus push-ups and sit-ups) for periodic physical fitness testing. Some 4-H groups field volleyball and other types of teams. Our daughter Tamara learned basic archery through 4-H. Other youth-oriented outlets include scouts, Camp Fire, and Police

Athletic League programs.

\*Do not overlook sports at government schools. A few state statutes specifically permit participation of homeschooled teenagers in high school sports extracurriculars. In many other states, no policy has been set; and cases are simply handled on an individual basis, as they occur. Contact a local or state homeschooling group for information before talking to your school district about this. They can tell you which laws, if any, apply, and what the experience of local homeschoolers has been.

Also, even if a negative policy has been set (i.e. no homeschooling participation in sports) or if the school seems confused about your teenager's request to participate in sports, rules are bent all the time. A persistent homeschooler's enthusiasm has won over many a reluctant coach or administrator. Look for loopholes. Perhaps your homeschooler could train with the team as long as he did not compete. With his foot in the door, that teenager may eventually be invited to compete, all rules and regulations to the contrary. Truly talented athletes often prove irresistible.

\*Private schools present additional opportunities. Many private institutions allow and encourage participation of homeschoolers on their sports teams. There usually is a fee involved. Suggest it to them. Most coaches will go for anything if you suggest putting it "on a trial basis."

\*Community colleges offer classes in various sports and may allow participation on certain teams, especially for older homeschoolers. Kill two birds with one stone: earn college credit and enhance physical fitness at the same time.

\*Private clubs and private lessons are the principal outlet for certain sports: fencing, martial arts, gymnastics, dance, and golf fall into this category. While expenses, at first, may seem prohibitive, seek creative solutions. For example, kids can trade golf lessons for caddying, or teach younger gymnastics students for more advanced lessons. As previously mentioned, some of these activities are so time-consuming at advanced levels (gymnastics, especially) that homeschoolers will find they have a distinct advantage over those who have to spend most of their day in school.

\*Homeschool support groups, as they increase in size and in numbers of older kids served, are organizing their own sports teams. Often these groups make arrangements to compete with private school teams or other homeschooling groups. If something like this has not been started in your area, consider doing it. Alternatively, your teenagers may prefer a more recreational approach -- simply meeting with other older kids twice weekly to play volleyball or go skating.

\*When all else fails, improvise. Some activities need no external support. Older kids can devise and set up their own physical conditioning programs with an aerobic activity (running or walking) plus some strength training (check out library books and fitness magazines for ideas on how to achieve this at home). Other may prefer working with aerobics or weight-training videotapes. Keeping a training log keeps many "on track".

If you are still with me, but yawning because you know nothing will overcome your older kids' inertia when it comes to physical activity, here are a few suggestions.

\*Discuss goals for lifetime fitness. Why does it matter?

\*Using the above suggestions, brainstorm ideas for sports participation in your community. Urge your teenager to try new activities and find one he or she likes.

\*Schedule fun, weekend family activities like hiking and biking. Make time for a daily family walk.

\*(Caution: this one is difficult!) Model desired behavior. If you, the homeschooling parent,

are doing nothing now, consider a daily 20-30 minute walk (with malls available, bad weather is no excuse). Why should teenagers put a priority on fitness if you do not?

\*Keep records. Some people are very motivated by records showing their progress. Examples are a log of distances run, a journal listing tennis skills mastered, records of competitions, and photos.

\*If all else fails, do things the hard way. Suggest that your teenager become an active nonathlete. Take the stairs instead of the escalator, walk or bike rather than drive, grow your own vegetables (gardening is excellent exercise), knead your own bread (a stress-buster and upper-body workout), and shovel snow by hand instead of using the snow-blower.

For us, encouraging lifetime fitness meant making daily aerobic and strengthening activities priorities. To that end, our kids, almost every day, did something physical. Despite my strong unschooling inclinations, daily physical activity was like household chores -- no choice. We tried many things, but cycling, hiking, and cross-country skiing were our favorites. Yard work was a constant necessity and invigorated everyone in the family.

Now at college, both Jeff and Tamara continue to make fitness and associated recreational activities a part of their lives, so I feel like an unqualified success in that area -- if not in some others! Jeff runs, lifts weights, and hikes "small" peaks near the Academy. Tamara plays rugby on a college varsity team plus recreational racquetball and tennis. Without a car, she also does a lot of walking -- a clear case of less is more.

Being a "model" for so many years stuck with us as well. I seldom miss my daily walk and enjoy gardening and the occasional nature hike. My husband works out on our cross-country ski machine in inclement weather, bikes or walks the neighborhood in good weather. He also does the bulk of the heavy yard work.

As a former couch potato, it all makes me wonder who was homeschooled -- the kids or us!