Going South: Canadians’ Engagement with American Athletic Scholarships

Noel Dyck

ABSTRACT: This article examines the dynamics and implications of Canadians’ pursuit of and ambiguous engagement with athletic scholarships offered to elite athletes by American colleges and universities. After sketching in the broader social and cultural context within which the movement of Canadian athletes to the U.S. occurs, it considers ways in which reckonings of high achievement in sport and other fields of performance tend to be constructed in Canada in terms of transnational and global comparisons. By examining how and why innumerable Canadian children and youths, with the assistance of parents and other adults, come to focus upon the pursuit of American athletic scholarships, this article seeks to penetrate an ambivalent form of competition that rewards its winners by taking them away from their families and country for a period of years just as they enter adulthood.

KEYWORDS: ambivalence, community sport, competition, student athletes, university scholarships

Introduction

The analytical issues examined in this article can be highlighted by reference to a controversy sparked in Canada on the sixth day of the Beijing 2008 Olympic games. Frustrated by the failure to that point of members of the Canadian team to win even a single medal, the Globe and Mail – Canada’s self-proclaimed ‘national’ newspaper – published a highly critical lead editorial with the provocative title, ‘Enough with personal bests’. Charging that ‘[d]espite some bright spots, our summer Olympic team is not very good’ the editorial went on to assert the importance of sport to Canada and to spell out a plan to rectify this regrettable state of affairs. Appealing for the ‘serious investment and organization’ needed to ‘make it better in 2012’, the editorial stopped short of advocating the copying of the host country’s remarkably effective sport development programmes: ‘No one is suggesting that Canada adopt the Chinese approach to sporting success, a vertically integrated juggernaut of scouting teams and tiny-tot camps that would have made the late Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev blush’. Instead, readers were directed to the Australian sports model that features proportionally higher per capita levels of sport funding and facilities, not to mention the provision of scholarships for especially promising competitors.

While similar sentiments and expressions of angst may, or may not, have been conveyed by national media outlets in other countries, what I want to note here are some intriguing aspects of how this controversy played out in Canada. To begin with, the title of the editorial – ‘Enough with personal bests’ – made pointed and dismissive reference to a familiar credo of child and youth sport in Canada: namely, that
boys and girls who participate in sport should be counselled to ‘do your personal best’ and not to worry too much about the results of their rivals. While this approach in the past accommodated relatively high levels of child and youth sport participation in Canada, it has not, the editorial bemoaned, delivered ‘millions of Canadians’ from having to perform ‘a familiar ritual this week: waiting nervously for the first Canadian medals, even as athletes from China, Australia, and the U.S. (and Azerbaijan and Zimbabwe) climb the podium again and again’. The importance of Olympic medals, the editorial argued, goes beyond mere pleasure and national pride: ‘our best athletes are living proof of Canadians’ capacity for international excellence and the rewards of pursuing it, whether in athletics, business or the arts’. But in a Janus-faced shift in reasoning and priorities, the lead editorial also claimed that world-beating Canadian athletes such as Donovan Bailey, the 1996 Olympic gold medallist in the men’s 100 metres, inspire countless Canadian children to get involved in physical activity.

This Globe and Mail editorial, along with another the following day that characterised the Chinese programme as one that was ‘not sport but child labour in the service of the state’, triggered a flood of responses in the few days that passed before a Canadian Olympian, Carol Huyhn, broke the drought by winning a gold medal in women’s wrestling. The most pointed of these was a letter to the editor that appeared two days after the original editorial:

The Globe and Mail editorial board really needs to make up its mind. First, you anguish about Canada’s failure to secure any medals at the Olympic Games ... arguing that Canada should be ashamed, how can we fix this lamentable state! Yesterday, you chastised China for its success. ... Sure, they’re winning medals, but they’re doing it the wrong way. It’s authoritarian, it’s child abuse.

When, oh when, will we stop trying to glean some deeper message from the Games? The reality is this: The success of any individual athlete is just that: their individual success. It’s not mine. I have no right to bask in a Canadian Olympian’s glory; I’m not the one who put in years of training, they did. By the same token, should they fail to reach the podium, it’s not my failure.

I’m sure they’re all having a wonderful time in a fascinating part of the world and making memories that will last a lifetime. I suspect that’s enough for many of them: It’s certainly enough for me.

What this particular controversy shares with Canadians’ engagement with American athletic scholarships is that both are underpinned by a distinctive mode of social ambivalence that Merton and Barber identified as being ‘found in the form of contradictory cultural values held by members of a society’ (1976: 10). To be ambivalent is, of course, to have mixed feelings or contradictory ideas about something or someone. The appropriation of ambivalence as an early psychoanalytic concept fixed it within the ‘inner experience and the psychic mechanisms released by efforts to cope with conflicting emotions, thoughts, or actions’ (Merton and Barber, 1976: 4). The presumed locus of ambivalence in this psychological rendering of the term was the person or individual in whom opposing emotions or attitudes towards the same object or situation coexisted uneasily. Merton and Barber’s contribution was to articulate a social perspective upon ambivalence that, unlike the psychological orientation, would focus upon ‘the ways in which ambivalence seems to be built into the structure of social statuses and roles’ (1976: 5). Although their primary objective was to forge analytical connections between ambivalence and role theory, Merton and Barber distinguished that particular undertaking from other identifiable modes of social ambivalence, among which they included situations defined by relationships of cultural ambivalence. Subsequent refinements of this concept by Danforth (2001), McLoughlin, Badham and Palmer (2005), Nagle (2005), Nelson and Ottes (2005), Tabboni (2007), and others have demonstrated the types of ethnographic and analytic insights that can be eluci-
dated by attending to the dynamics of cultural ambivalence.

The ambivalence so clearly expressed in the quintessentially Canadian dilemma1 recounted at the beginning of this essay underscores two issues that connect directly to Canadians’ engagement with American athletic scholarships. First, the insistence that an athlete’s performances ought to be deemed his or hers alone rejects the propriety of attaching any additional burden of interests and entanglements to the outcomes of sport competitions or the success of athletes’ careers. Nevertheless, the very fact that the letter writer deemed it necessary to make such a pronouncement suggests just how frequently this may, in fact, be done. To pursue this further is to raise questions about the processes and protocols by which sports accomplishments (and disappointments) are defined and accounted for in given settings.

The second matter concerns the ways in which Canadian constructions of high achievement in sport and other areas of performance are often bound up with transnational and global comparisons. Of particular concern here are certain ambiguities and contradictions that inform Canadian notions of competitive success and complicate the careers of Canadian competitors. These come into play not just every few years during international competitions such as the Olympics but as ongoing and problematic features of everyday community sport activities for children and youths. These issues will be addressed by looking into how and why innumerable Canadian children and youths have, with the assistance of parents and other adults, focused upon the pursuit of athletic scholarships offered to young athletes by American colleges and universities. A form of competition that rewards its winners by taking them away from their families and country for a period of years just as they enter adulthood requires explanation.

Before venturing into the specificities of Canadians’ involvement with American athletic scholarships it will be helpful to sketch in certain features of the broader social and cultural context within which this unfolds. Notwithstanding their country’s geographic expanse, Canadians are inclined to think of themselves as members of a relatively ‘small’ country, at least in terms of its prominence in the world. Living check by jowl alongside an American population that is more than nine times as large as that of Canada predisposes Canadians to pay attention to the United States and Americans on a continuing basis. While recognising how much the two countries and peoples have in common, Canadians often carp about just how infrequently Americans show any interest in Canada. Differences that are said to set Canadians apart from Americans often become the object of sustained, not to say obsessive, commentary north of the 49th parallel. A number of popular Canadian television programmes have been scripted in terms of stereotypical attitudes and behaviours seen as distinguishing Canadians from Americans or the common belief that Americans are typically ignorant about Canada.2 In contrast, Canadians prefer to position themselves as possessing a detailed and sophisticated understanding of the United States and of American culture.

But balancing the amusement that Canadians so often take in searching out and ridiculing various forms of ‘Americanisms’ is sober recognition that Canada is perched next to what has been the most powerful nation on earth for the better part of a century. The economic, military, and communications pre-eminence of the United States has long induced Canadians to measure their accomplishments by comparing these implicitly or explicitly with what are invoked as American standards, and yet being deeply ambivalent in some respects about doing so. Irritation sparked by the anticipation of these kinds of comparisons is exaggerated by the fact that it is characteristically other Canadians rather than Americans who take it upon themselves to ‘cut down to size’ Canadians’ performances and achievements. This is done by labelling a given performance as being
'perhaps OK for Canada' but not at a level that would be well regarded in the United States. There are repeated accounts of the travails of writers, actors, and artists who, after struggling to obtain recognition and to earn a living in Canada, have left the country in search of better opportunities. Developing a successful career in the U.S. is often sardonically identified as the best means of gaining recognition as an artist in Canada.

Similar dynamics come into play when young Canadian athletes, assisted by parents and other adults, become caught up in the pursuit of athletic scholarships offered by American colleges and universities. The mere possibility of a young woman or man being recruited to serve as a varsity athlete in the U.S. is mooted in Canadian sporting circles as clear recognition of her or his accomplishments. But how is this view maintained and reconciled with the stream of controversies and criticisms to which intercollegiate athletics programmes are regularly subjected in the United States? How is it that Canadians, who pride themselves on their familiarity with so many things American, appear unaware of or untroubled by various problems that plague varsity athletics in the United States? Why has the prospect of leaving one’s family, friends, and country for a period of years become emblematic not only of a successfully concluded childhood but also of the implied subsidiary accomplishments of some of those left behind?

The departure of a Canadian high school graduate to the U.S. on an athletic scholarship embodies an especially memorable rendering of a rite of passage that separates adolescence from young adulthood. All those involved in the pursuit of athletic scholarships – no matter what their age – seem to look their best at the moment that such an award is announced. What actually happens following the much-anticipated move to the U.S. may or may not become a part of future discourses about athletic scholarships that circulate in Canada. Individual outcomes that are consistent with positive expectations attached to the rhetoric of athletic scholarships may well be incorporated into these in future editions. But the personal experiences of Canadian athletes that fall outside these preferred boundaries tend not to be circulated widely or with enthusiasm. Such instances are not entirely expunged from discussions in local sporting circles, but are apt to be treated as specific instances that might have been occasioned by the personal shortcomings of the athlete in question rather than by a system of intercollegiate athletics that places priority on the success of the programme into which an athlete has enlisted. Preserving whatever long-term recognition among family, friends, and future employers as may result from having been an athletic scholarship winner may suggest the wisdom of exercising a certain discretion in recounting all that being a varsity athlete may have involved.

**Working Knowledge About Athletic Scholarships**

The fact that many American universities and colleges offer athletic scholarships scarcely counts as ‘news’ in Canada. The saturation of Canadian television with broadcasts of professional sports events from across North America serves to remind anyone who pays even the slightest attention to such programming that many – and, in the case of some sports, almost all – of the featured athletes previously attended American universities or colleges. Readers of the sports section of local or community newspapers regularly come across reports about young Canadian male and female athletes who have been awarded athletic scholarships that will take them to the United States to become ‘student athletes’. Undoubtedly there must be some Canadians who have yet to stumble across any mention of athletic scholarships, but not many of them are likely to be included among the thousands of mothers and fathers who each year accompany their
sons and daughters when they register in one or more community sport activities.

My own working knowledge of athletic scholarships dates from high school years when four of my consociates – two of whom had been teammates and two opponents – opted to explore this route. All four obtained athletic scholarships, and three went on to careers as professional athletes. A somewhat different perspective on the impact of American athletic scholarships in community sport in Canada took shape some years later when my daughter joined a neighbourhood team of six- and seven-year old soccer players. Only a few weeks into what was for most of them their first experience of participating in organised sport, the parents of one girl, who showed an aptitude for scoring goals, waxed enthusiastically about the possibility that highly accomplished young athletes could win athletic scholarships that would take them to ‘big’ American universities and ‘cover all the costs’ of a college education (Dyck 2003: 56). The fact that this girl, a decade later, did go on to win such a scholarship underscores the manner in which a child’s participation in sport and the ensuing procurement of such an award may well have been accompanied from the outset by more or less explicit adult objectives. The lack of any mention in community newspapers of her subsequent return to Canada before she had completed even two years of study in the U.S.A. – though her return was relayed sotto voce within restricted sectors of the local sports community – spoke to the layered levels of ambivalence that link individual athletic performances, iconic renderings of success, and the interests of the varied adult figures who bask in the glow of young peoples’ accomplishments.

When I subsequently chose to study children’s sport activities not as a parent but as an anthropologist (Dyck 2000a, 2000b, 2002), the inherent ambiguity and ambivalence of some of the relationships and purposes that inform community sport for children in Canada began to suggest certain lines of analytical inquiry. My interest in adults’ involvement in the social construction of children’s sport repeatedly drew my attention to the gravity with which coaches and parents so often approach discussions of athletic scholarships. Eventually this led to a research project and publications (Dyck 2006, forthcoming) that inquired directly into the meanings and impacts generated by the pursuit of athletic scholarships by Canadian youths and adults. As part of a larger, combined research undertaking, it also positioned the relocation of Canadian elite athletes to American universities within broader patterns of international travel by Canadian youths.3

Given that Canadians have long constituted one of the largest contingents of foreign athletes competing in American intercollegiate sports, one might have assumed that their countrymen would be likely to profit freely from their first-hand experiences of athletic scholarships and thoughts about the implications of accepting these. Instead, clichés tend to predominate in many conversations about these awards. What is broadly understood is that the kind of financial support offered to elite athletes by many American universities and colleges is not available in Canada where universities have traditionally eschewed awards of this kind.4 It is also often touted – if not invariably believed – that students who win a ‘full ride’ scholarship will have the entire cost of their university education paid for. It is, of course, recognised that accepting such a scholarship will require a young athlete to leave home and live in the United States for an extended period of time. Yet some, though by no means all, coaches and parents enthusiastically pitch this prospect as an ‘invaluable opportunity’ that will permit an athlete to play sport at the ‘highest’ level and get a degree from a ‘big’ and presumably ‘prestigious’ American university. Discursive renderings of athletic scholarships structured along these lines imply that those who succeed in winning such awards will ‘have it made’, presumably for the rest of their lives.
But beyond television broadcasts and recitations of second- or third-hand accounts of the exploits of previous award winners or the stylised discourses that abound in community sport circles, what more comprehensive sources of information about the terms and outcomes of athletic scholarships are available to youth athletes, parents, coaches, and, for that matter, curious anthropologists? To begin with, every organisation or institution in the United States involved in intercollegiate athletics boasts as dazzling a website as it can afford in order to showcase what it wishes to publicise about its operations, athletes, and accomplishments. If one has the time and inclination, hours on end can be spent ‘surfing’ such sites, pouring over lists of inter-collegiate sports played at particular universities, as well as the names, biographical summaries, and photographs of varsity athletes, not to mention reports of recent games and competitions. Discretely located on athletics departments’ websites are links that connect directly to host universities’ homepages. But nowhere to be found here or in the mountains of publicity material on intercollegiate sport that one can collect is there anything like complete and transparent information concerning actual patterns of distribution of athletic scholarships and current amounts of aid granted to individual athletes in a specific institution. Indeed, which members of a selected varsity team are in receipt of a ‘full ride’ scholarship, a partial award, or no scholarship at all is rarely, if ever, indicated. In consequence, trying to estimate, for instance, how many Canadians hold athletic scholarships in the United States at any particular time, let alone over a period of years, remains a matter of conjecture.

In the absence of more forthcoming accounts concerning the actual functioning of athletic scholarships, a lot of young Canadian athletes and their parents rely upon guidance offered by coaches and other local sports officials reputed to have ‘inside’ understanding of these matters. Others resort to self-styled consultants or online agencies that sell advice about how and where to seek athletic scholarships as well as assistance in preparing and distributing packages of information on individual athletes to college coaches and recruiters.

Indeed, the massive scale of intercollegiate athletics in the United States makes speaking definitively about athletic scholarships difficult, for these are anchored in highly particular yet varied institutional settings. The complexity of rules applied at different levels of competition by the National Collegiate Athletic Association is such that athletics departments commonly dedicate specific staff positions to monitor and confirm that their activities comply with frequently revised regulations. Be that as it may, words and practices do not always align seamlessly in such intricately structured realms of technicalities. For instance, NCAA Division III athletic programmes are explicitly prohibited from offering athletic scholarships. That recruited athletes at some of these institutions may proportionately receive general forms of student aid more frequently and in greater amounts than do other undergraduates (Bowen and Levin, 2003: 108, 308, 330) does little to dispel suspicions that the honouring of the ‘no athletic scholarships’ rule in these institutions may be a matter more of terminology than of substantive operations.

Over and above sources of ‘practical’ information about how one might obtain an athletic scholarship there is an extensive literature published in the United States that dissects some longstanding controversies associated with the granting of these awards. Just how frequently Canadian athletes, parents, or coaches consult this literature or take account of the issues debated therein is not clear. But anyone who can navigate the Internet well enough to learn about one or another university’s athletic programme could just as easily consult accounts of misgivings about various aspects of the operations of varsity athletics in the United States. A lingering suspicion that there might well be a lot more to say about or, alternately, rather less to say for American
athletic scholarships than those who are intent upon obtaining one for themselves or others might acknowledge remains a tacit aspect of much of the discussion of these awards in Canadian sport circles. Indeed, one way of reducing, if not entirely eliminating, nagging sources of ambivalence may be to speak only that which one wishes to hear.

Canadians and American Athletic Scholarships

Visiting the expensive, often state-of-the-art facilities where Canadians who hold athletic scholarships in American colleges and universities practice and compete as athletes, and observing how they tend to move around campus garbed in highly prized, iconic leisure and sports apparel that identifies them as varsity athletes, underlines the levels of prestige attached to intercollegiate sports in the United States. Speaking with them about their experiences as students and athletes, the circumstances that led them to come to the United States, and their hopes and plans for the future not only generated the kinds of ‘thick description’ that ethnographers search out, but also raised matters that tend to be absent from discourses about American athletic scholarships that circulate in Canada.

Levels of varsity sport competition and the standards of coaching encountered in the U.S. were sometimes, but not invariably, categorised as being higher or better than those encountered by these athletes in Canada. But the intensity and competitiveness of American varsity coaches often were reported as extending beyond anything these young Canadians had expected. ‘Kelly’, who completed an undergraduate degree and a playing career as a varsity basketball player before moving back to Canada for graduate studies, summarised her ambivalent experience in these terms:

I think my expectation was that it would be a lot more fun. I think it’s really a job. It’s a full-time job … so I think you’re a little duped in what you think is going to happen. Of course, you’re in college and you’re having fun and you’re partying and doing all these things – but it’s hard work. You’re up very early, it’s long days, you’re travelling, you need tutors for classes because you are never there. So it’s an extremely different college experience than you would [have] … if you were playing sport in Canada or not playing any sports at all. Yeah, my idea of what it was going to be like was extremely different than what it actually was. Um, there’s a lot of psychological abuse that goes on. The coaches, I mean they’re absolutely nuts … and it’s not just at my school, it’s at every school, but it’s absolutely nuts. So it’s not fun anymore…

Coaches will do ab-so-lutely anything to win. They will make you cry … I think in Canada the coach has a limit where they’re going to stop whatever they’re doing. If they’re trying to win they’re going to stop at a certain point. In the U.S. they will go, they will go as far as they need to go. They will make a student athlete just crumble whereas in Canada I don’t think you have that as much. I think coaches in Canada actually look at the player as a human being, where I really feel … in the U.S. that it’s like you’re a commodity. You’ve got to produce and that’s it. … Some of the things I have seen coaches in the U.S. do to their players, I’m like ‘do you realise it’s another human being that you’re dealing with?’

The scholarship holders who were interviewed provided vivid and varied accounts of their athletic and academic activities as well as of their general experience of living in the United States for periods ranging from one to five years. The athletic demands made of scholarship holders were fairly consistently recounted as being of an order that left many of them with less time and energy to put into their studies than they would have wished. Furthermore, virtually all of them spoke of the social gap that tends to separate athletes from other students in the United States. Even those who played relatively ‘minor’ sports, such as women’s field hockey, mentioned how dissimilar their experiences had been from those of high school teammates who remained in Canada. Some Canadian scholarship holders
basked in this celebrity, and enjoyed spending their college years competing as varsity athletes, attending classes, and partying primarily with other athletes. Others chafed at what they came to view as the academic and social limitations of being a varsity athlete and sought out more demanding academic programmes than their coaches counselled them to select. ‘Lane’, who had wanted to get as far away from home as he could after completing high school, decided to walk away from a full ride scholarship in the U.S. after only two years and to return to Canada to resume his studies because the school that he had selected was, in his words, ‘a complete joke’: ‘I never really had to study or go to class and I still walked away with a 3.96 GPA’. But Lane did not regret the path he had taken:

I'd just say that you'd never know unless you try it, and that's what I did. Um, for me it was a great experience, even though the school and [Lane's varsity sport] totally flopped in my view. If I were to have stayed there for four years and got a degree from [that university], I don't know what it would be worth and I don't think I would have learned a whole lot that would be valuable in a future career. But life experience-wise, it was definitely awesome. Grew up a lot in two years, that's for sure.

When asked what advice he would give to young Canadian athletes who might be interested in going to the U.S. on an athletic scholarship, Lane suggested that it would probably be a good idea ‘to do your research before you go’. But he would counsel young Canadians, ‘to definitely go for it. I think if kids get offers and chicken out at the last minute, they’ll probably kick themselves. But you’ll never know unless you try…. Even if you end up coming home after two years’. In contrast, Kelly indicated that when asked by Canadians, ‘would you push your kid to go on an athletic scholarship to the U.S.’ she would say, ‘no. I would tell them to stay in Canada’. For young athletes who were, however, determined to go to the U.S., Kelly said that she would advise them:

... not to get wrapped up in the prestige, the glory, the fame, the … you know, all of those things that people think that going to the U.S. is about, because it’s not about that. [It seems like it is] … a great idea because, you know, it’s prestige, someone’s paying for you to go to school, it’s fantastic. But at the end of the day you have to really know … if it’s what you want to do. Really evaluate your alternatives, you know, staying in Canada [is an option. We have] … excellent basketball, excellent sports teams, period. […] If you think you’re going to the WNBA, then you need to go to the U.S. No question about it. But if you’re not going to be the next superstar, really think about what it is that you want in your life because at twenty-one or twenty-two when your basketball career is done your identity is out the window, right? Because you identify with it, it’s your identity for so long; you just have to remember that your identity is going to end and what is going to be the next thing that you’re going to want to do? Set yourself up for that.

Scattered among the accounts obtained by interviewing young men and women about their careers as varsity athletes are recurring references to other actors who, though familiar social types, tend to figure only incidentally, if at all, in Canadian discourses about athletic scholarships. Parents along with an influential community coach or a helpful schoolteacher surface again and again in young Canadians’ explanations of the particular circumstances that led them to take up athletic scholarships at American colleges and universities. Kate’s mother, for instance, loyally supported her participation in a range of community sports for many years: ‘she wasn’t a gung-ho soccer mom, you know, but she definitely brought me all the time to everything I needed to go to’. While Kate’s mother left the decision of whether or not to seek an athletic scholarship to her, Kate did not make this decision entirely on her own:

...my coach was a high-level soccer coach at the club level ... and he was the one who suggested that I go to the States. […] Like I really thought he was joking and I didn't think it was a possibility for me because I was never the best player
on my team. You know, I was consistent, I guess, but I was never ‘Oh, yeah, for sure she’s going to the States or she’s going places with sports’. I was never looked at like that so when he suggested it to me I kind of shrugged it off until I got sick of [living in her home city]. [...] He said that it would probably be best for me to go away to school, and it would be a good change for me. So it was basically his suggestion and he did a lot of work for me.

But in the end it was Kate’s mother who did the 16-hour drive to deliver her daughter to her new university, a journey that she retraced at the end of every summer until Kate completed her studies.

Lane’s decision to leave Canada following completion of high school coincided with his decision to drop out of a sport in which he had competed at the national level as a youth athlete. He spent a year living with relatives in another city in order to hone his skills in another sport to a level that would earn him an athletic scholarship. Although the decision to explore this possibility remained his, the logistical support provided by his extended family was crucial to the successful completion of this venture. Kelly’s decision to follow her older sister to the U.S. on a full ride athletic scholarship initially encountered a mixed reaction from her parents:

My mother … really didn’t care, like not in a negative way, but she would have been happy if I had gone … or happy that I hadn’t gone. My father, I think, it was more like a bit of bragging rights … like, ‘my daughters are so good at sports, they went to the States.’ He was never one of those people who … rub it in or have an ego about it. But I think it was prestigious for my father and it represented – like my dad didn’t have to pay for two educations, and for my dad that’s a big thing,….

In Verne’s case, there was co-ordinated effort between home and school to assist him in obtaining an athletic scholarship: ‘My dad and I sat down every couple of weeks and discussed what our options were. And I had a high school counsellor who had kids actually go to the States, so I worked with him a little bit as far as getting the application process [going], with like high school signatures, teachers’ reports and all that’. Garth’s father, who had been his coach during much of his childhood, helped him to draw up a list of all of the American schools that contacted him and to check out what each of them were offering. Elise had enrolled in a specialised fee-paying sport school attached to a public high school in her hometown. This programme had assisted her and a number of her classmates to apply for athletic scholarships or equivalent forms of aid at Ivy League universities that do not formally provide such awards.

Renate, who moved from one city to another as an adolescent, transferred to a school that had developed a powerful rowing programme:

So the vice-principal, who was the coach of the rowing team, made a joke like, ‘Oh, she can only come in if she rows’. So, I started rowing and really quickly I was told that I was very good at it and became addicted very quickly. So … I continued rowing and ended up dropping hockey and track and field and all my other sports. … And we were incredibly successful at it in high school. We won the national championships.

Although Renate was not initially interested in leaving Canada to attend university, her coach was concerned by her reluctance to follow several of her teammates to the U.S.: ‘My rowing coach was like, “Alright, if you’re staying in Canada I’m not wasting all the work I did on you. You’re going to go somewhere where they have a good rowing programme”. And he gave me a list of three schools [in Canada]. […] But it was a very limited choice’. Subsequently a coach at an American university who was well-known in local rowing circles approached Renate with the offer of what would initially comprise a partial scholarship and entry into the particular programme of professional studies that she wished to take up. Renate’s parents conditionally agreed to support this option:

My father was willing to pay as much as it would cost for me to go to a Canadian school
for one year. Like that was the [maximum] he was prepared to pay. Because if I had stayed in Canada I would have had academic scholarships and all those kinds of things. So, I wouldn’t have had to pay even the full price [of a university education] for Canada. Which is ridiculously cheaper … room and board in the U.S. is more expensive than ‘full everything’ in Canada.

Without having her athletic scholarship bumped up to a full ride award in her final two years, Renate would have continued to be dependent on her parents’ financial support. Although her parents had, in her view, ‘had no say at all as to where I was gonna go’, by the end of four years Renate was ready to end her career as a rower:

What I have noticed in a lot of people when they are done – and this is what scares a lot of high school kids in my opinion – is they see these great athletes leave for college and come back to the town and never row again. And, everyone talks about being a burnout and … 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 every day in [the training room] for four years because of knee problems, ankle problems, and back problems.

While finishing the final courses required for her undergraduate degree, Renate had moved from varsity rowing to a set of, to her, more pleasurable sporting activities: ‘as I’m getting older I’m back into hockey. I’ve … started hiking. … And … yeah [laughing] … I’ve been getting back into sports. I competed in a couple of triathlons last summer’.

The athletic scholarship holders interviewed for this study were without exception proud of the manner in which they had responded to the different challenges encountered in relocating to the U.S. and in performing as varsity athletes. None of them expressed any ultimate regret about having opted to become varsity athletes in the U.S. Yet they described in graphic detail the subsequent choices and adjustments they had had to make in order to manage, terminate, or otherwise make endurable the athletic, academic, and social circumstances within which they found themselves.

Conclusions

Athletic scholarship holders acknowledge in interviews that the decision to relocate to the U.S. following high school to become a varsity athlete depends in many ways upon the assistance and encouragement extended by some combination of parents, other family members, coaches, and/or teachers in Canada. The accomplishments of child and youth athletes may conventionally be reported in local newspaper articles as being their own, but the adults who make a point of reading these tend to be reasonably conversant with the amounts of time and money parents are asked to contribute so that sons and daughters can participate in community sports. Similarly, those involved in community sports circles have a pretty good idea of the extent to which particular coaches, local sport officials, and schoolteachers are publicly and personally invested in child and youth sport. Although they seldom figure prominently, if at all, in newspaper reports about athletic scholarship winners, the mothers and fathers of young men and women who receive such awards are expected to bask at least to some extent in the reflected glory of a son’s or daughter’s accomplishments. The same holds true for a coach or teacher who is identified as having contributed significantly to the development of the winner of an athletic scholarship.

The awarding of an athletic scholarship, therefore, testifies not only to the ostensibly exceptional abilities of an athlete but also to the generous support and sophisticated guidance provided by parents and other significant adults credited for rearing that young person and leading him or her to a level of achievement that transcends the limitations of being merely ‘good by Canadian standards’. The dis-
cursive conflation of ‘becoming a varsity athlete in the U.S.’ with an expectation that this will probably cover the cost of a college education at a ‘big and prestigious’ American university serves also to enlarge the pool of those who can be celebrated. Parents who may quietly pay as much or more for their child to play intercollegiate athletics at an American school as it would cost to cover the entire outlay for a comparable or better education at a Canadian university nonetheless complete on a high note the most active and locally visible stage of their own careers as parents.

Coaches who ‘send’ one or more of their players to become varsity athletes in the United States are thereafter recognised as persons who have an ‘inside’ understanding of how athletic scholarships can be attained. The parents of younger Canadian athletes and their coaches who rush to tell one another which boy or girl has just been offered such an award implicitly endorse the value of community sport and of their own involvement in these by joining in the ongoing observance of ‘what can come of a kid being involved in sports’. Coming full circle back to the athletes themselves, even just to be identified as a possible candidate for such an award brings with it recognition.

To parlay one’s entry into the scholarship sweepstakes into circumstances that may bring otherwise sceptical parents around to accepting plans for leaving home and contributing resources in excess of what they might otherwise have expected to provide in order to permit a son or daughter to ‘follow their dream’ could be interpreted as constituting an especially astute and subtle – although not necessarily final – performance of ‘being a kid’.

Similar considerations appear to shape the ways in which parents and coaches contrive at an earlier stage of this process not to be particularly familiar with the ample supply of warning signs emanating from the United States about the problems created by intercollegiate athletics both for institutions of higher learning and for varsity athletes in that country. This stands as an unlikely and unconvincing response on the part of Canadians who otherwise pride themselves on their understanding of Americans and their institutions. But it parallels the process identified above of acknowledging only those parts of an experience or undertaking that support the overall impressions that one wishes to maintain. Young Canadians who take up athletic scholarships or simply become varsity athletes in the United States may, indeed, have learned all too well from their parents and coaches what counts as success in this enterprise. It is a recipe that does not always leave much scope for openly acknowledging the kinds of experiences they described in their interviews. Of course, the general disinclination of all concerned not to make too much of what they have reason to suspect or know about the dynamics that lead young Canadians to athletic scholarships in the United States and the athletic and educational systems that await them there does have consequences. It serves to ensure that dreams of ‘going south’ will be passed along more or less intact to other sets of child and youth athletes, parents, and coaches to discover for themselves.

Although the operations of the NCAA have long been subject to written policies and more or less consistently administered regulations, the large assemblage of community sports organisations, coaching projects, and parental priorities – not to mention the ambitions and objectives of individual child and youth athletes – that embody Canadians’ continuing engagement with American athletic scholarships are not readily amenable to, nor containable in, simple policy prescriptions per se. Nevertheless, any contribution to an increased appreciation and acknowledgement of the hard realities that inform the abiding cultural ambivalence that shrouds this extensive field of sporting and child-rearing activities constitutes a preliminary but essential step in the right direction.
Acknowledgments

The research on which this essay is based was undertaken as part of a larger project entitled, "Coming of Age in an Era of Globalization: Achieving Cultural Distinction Through Student Travel Abroad", directed by Vered Amit and Noel Dyck, and was funded by a standard research grant provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. I should like to thank Vered Amit for her comments and suggestions.

Noel Dyck is Professor of Social Anthropology at Simon Fraser University (Canada). The author of several books on relations between Aboriginal peoples and governments, he has subsequently conducted field research on sport, childhood, and youth mobility in Canada.

Notes

1. Ambivalence is a concern that surfaces frequently in writing about Canada as, for instance, in Juneja’s and Mohan’s (1990) volume on Canadian literature and Ross’s (2006) review of Canadian security policies after 9/11.

2. For instance, the Canadian television comic drama, ‘Due South’, recounted the adventures and discoveries of a ‘Mountie’ (member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police force) assigned to work in a liaison capacity with an inner city Chicago police officer. The featured contrasts between the invariably polite and unflappable Canadian – ever resplendent in his full dress uniform with red tunic – and his sarcastic, sloppily dressed and violence-prone American partner were buttressed by a warm friendship between the two that, nonetheless, always emphasised the generosity and intelligence of the Canadian. The second type of programming, a comedic pseudo-documentary segment (originally a part of the comedy programme, ‘This Hour Has 22 Minutes’), entitled ‘Talking With Americans’, featured a well-known Canadian comedian asking people on the streets of various American cities to comment on various absurd scenarios or contrived ‘news develop-
Byers (1995), Gerdy (2006), Sack (2008), Sack and Staurowsky (1998), Shulman and Bowen (2001), and Smith (1988), for a sampling of this critical literature on American inter-collegiate athletics. See also Golden (2006) and Stevens (2007) for discussion of the manner in which admissions to prestigious colleges and universities are linked to participation in inter-collegiate athletics.

9. Pseudonyms are used throughout to preserve the confidentiality of research informants.

10. This represented a 3.96 standing on a 4.0 scale for grade point averages.

11. The WNBA stands for the Women’s National Basketball Association which is the professional basketball association for women in the U.S.

References


