

Another great article on Club soccer in CA

Parents willingly pay thousands of dollars for their kids to play for Camarillo soccer club, even if the odds of landing a future scholarship are slim.

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The stack of bills sits on the kitchen table at the Garza household waiting to be sorted through for payment. Sandwiched between the envelopes for gas and electricity is the one containing Sidney's \$300 soccer expense. It's been arriving every month for the last seven years, since the 15-year-old first joined the Camarillo Eagles Soccer Club.

"It's become just like a utility bill for us now," said Sidney's mother, Dacia, a teacher at Balboa Middle School in Ventura. "We expect it to come, and it's already factored into our budget."

With the yearly costs of club participation continuing to rise into the thousands of dollars, many local parents have taken a similar approach to financing their children's soccer. They are planning ahead, working overtime and devising creative strategies to afford what they view as a worthy investment in their children's future.

Most hope to eventually recoup some of the money in the form of an athletic scholarship to college.

But knowing the odds are against them -- as few as 1.8 percent of high school athletes earn scholarships -- many parents say it's not the only reason they're writing checks and swiping credit cards. "You do it because you love your kids and your kids love soccer," said Camarillo's Kim Sweetman, whose daughter Nicole plays with Garza on the Eagles Under-16 team. "You'd be wasting your money if your kids hated it because there is no guarantee of a scholarship. The real payoff is having your daughter become well-rounded and confident, and learning life skills that will last forever."

The Eagles are one of the top girls' Under-16 teams in the nation. But in club soccer, success comes with a price. The better the team, the more expensive the journey.

Since capturing the Under-14 national title in Florida last season, the Eagles have received invitations to nearly every prestigious tournament in the country.

Entries for a certain number of tournaments are included in the Eagles' \$1,600 yearly club registration fee, but any extra tournament entries must come out of pocket.

Wanting to take advantage of the challenge and exposure their elevated status grants, the Eagles have undertaken an ambitious and costly schedule this season.

Along with playing several Southern California tournaments that require long drives and hotel stays, the Eagles are headed to Maryland in October for the WAGS Tournament, and will potentially make three trips to Texas.

With plane tickets, hotel rooms and food, the costs quickly add up. Even the Eagles' league schedule requires extensive travel.

By playing in the top-level Coast Premier League, the team must drive to Irvine or San Juan Capistrano every Saturday and Sunday for seven weeks. With the price of gas sky rocketing, parents have already searched for the cheapest gas stations along the way.

The Eagles had some good fortune when an anonymous donor offered to pay for the plane tickets of every player and a few parents for the trip to Maryland. But Eagles travel coordinator Chuck Lisberger estimates the cost per player this season could still reach \$10,000 or more.

A few years ago, Dacia Garza would have gasped at that dollar amount. Not anymore. "Nothing shocks me with club soccer," she said. "At first it was like, 'Oh, my God. What are we doing? This is so expensive.' But now, we just do whatever we can to make it work."

Extra pay to play

Reece Mathis, 60, went back to work to allow daughter Amelia to stay with the Eagles. Retired from the California Youth Authority, Mathis took a part-time job at the American Legion in Ventura to help pay for club costs.

The family operates on a fixed income, and the recent success by the Eagles has the family struggling to keep pace financially. Amelia, a three-sport star and honor student at Buena High, also plays in the Olympic Development Program, which adds about \$1,000 more to the yearly soccer bills.

Just when Reece and wife, Elaine, think they have caught up with payments, another bill arrives in the mail. Last week, the family was dealt a possible setback when Reece learned his Legion job may be cut. "It's really going to be hard now," Elaine Mathis said.

Reece and Elaine Mathis can't afford to go with the team when it travels out of state, so they rely on pictures and videos from other parents to share in the joy. "It makes me feel really good to have them do this for me," Amelia Mathis said. "Because I know how much of a sacrifice it is, and they are doing it because they know I love to play."

Seeing the excitement in her daughter's eyes before a big game is the only reassurance Elaine Mathis needs to know her family's making the right choice. "I want to give her every opportunity in life, and make it work for her because I feel like she deserves it," she said. "I just tell her if you can finish high school, get a college degree and come back and make a difference, it will be worth it. I don't want her to ever have to ask anyone for something."

Providing help along the way

While the increasing financial investment in club has been a strain on some families, it's been a boon for some trainers.

The average salary for a trainer in the Eagles club is \$1,000 a month, says club president Kathleen Kelley, and many trainers increase their income by coaching multiple teams each season.

A few trainers at other Southland clubs have been known to make six figures when they combine training with a club director position. "Club soccer is a monster. So many girls are playing these days, and coaches are making a living now because there is a lot of money in it," Pepperdine women's coach Tim Ward said as he scouted for talent at the Surf Cup in San Diego three weeks ago.

"I know if I was to ever leave Pepperdine I could probably make a good living being a club soccer coach because parents are expecting professional training for their daughters, and they are willing to pay for it."

Many clubs try to help players who can't afford to join by offering scholarships. The Eagles, a non-profit club with an operating budget of \$420,000, gave out \$20,000 worth of scholarships among its 20 teams last year. Half of the money came from a portion of the registration fee paid by players, and the other half came from a fund-raising golf tournament.

A majority of the money is given to the boys' teams because more of their players come from low-income Latino families, said Kelley, while most of the girls come from middle to upper-middle class households.

"Typically, the girls side in every club takes care of the boys side," Kelley said. But Jose Luis Lomeli knows there is only so much scholarship money to go around. The Fillmore High boys' coach encourages his players to join club teams each season, but many of them don't have the money.

"Most of the parents in the Fillmore area can't afford to pay for club," said Lomeli, whose team won a CIF-Southern Section championship last season. "My players end up playing in AYSO or the men's league, which is a lot cheaper."

With colleges coaches recruiting primarily at club events, Lomeli worries some of his better players are being overlooked and missing their ticket to a higher education. One visit to a club tournament earlier this year confirmed his fears.

"I was amazed to see how many college coaches were out there. The first thing they said was that you have to be in club soccer," Lomeli said. "That is what they want. They don't want to see high school. They want to see club." Club events provides a one-stop shop for coaches like UC Santa Barbara men's coach Tim Vom Steeg.

"We have a very limited staff, and for us to see the best high school players at one event over two days is ideal," Vom Steeg said. "At a high school game, you might see only one player. It's hard to make that commitment for just one." With so much talent in California, there are bound to be a few players who slip through the cracks, says Vom Steeg.

But he believes most club-quality players, no matter their income level or location, will be found. "There are just too many teams out there," Vom Steeg said. "Most clubs, because it is crucial for them to be successful, will find a way to get a really good kid on their team somehow."

Vom Steeg says a bigger problem for college programs is having those players meet academic qualifying standards to get into their schools. "Even if they were seen, most of the low-income kids didn't have academics as a priority," he said. "A lot of times their parents never went to college or never had the conversation about going to college."

Events are big business

Killing time between games at the Surf Cup, Dacia Garza sighed heavily while retrieving money from her purse for a souvenir sweatshirt. Lunch had already cost the family \$70, and after four days of hotel stays, snacks and entertainment, the funds were quickly dwindling. It wouldn't be so hard if Sidney was Dacia and Dan Garza's only child, but they have two other children, including one who plays travel softball.

The Garzas try to use the soccer excursions as family vacations, but too many trips too fast is a formula for financial headaches. During last's summer's successful run, the Garzas estimate they spent \$7,000 or more.

The most expensive trip was to Disney World in Florida, where the Eagles played for the national championship at Disney's Wide World of Sports complex. "It was a nightmare," Dacia Garza said. "We didn't want the family to be apart for that long, so we brought everyone. But it was just money all over the place."

That is what tournament organizers are banking on from families. The Surf Cup invites 336 teams to participate in its two-weekend summer tournament, and hundreds more are turned away. According to an economic impact report published by the tournament, about 12,000 people travel to the San Diego area during those weekends, and 12,000 hotel rooms are booked.

Combined with its Thanksgiving event, the three Surf Cup weekends generate \$18.1 million dollars for the area, and \$600,000 a year in taxes. With more than 300 college coaches staking out spots along the sidelines at the San Diego Polo fields, Mick Dawson thinks at least a few parents can rationalize the expense in the long run.

"Our mission here is to provide an opportunity for kids to get into college," the Surf Cup director said, "and there are a lot of kids who get into a school because they were seen here." But after so many years coming to Surf Cup, Eagles trainer Vince Thomas still cringes when he hears parents talk about playing club only for scholarships.

"Some of these parents probably spend more money from U-9 through U-19 than they could spend to pay for their kids to go to a university," Thomas said. "I think our parents realize it's more about the experience, especially a team like this. The incredible things these girls have done are invaluable."

Finding ways to save

Developing money-saving strategies on trips has become nearly as crucial for teams as their strategies on the field.

Many parents will carpool to games, share hotel rooms, sleep in RVs or stay with friends and relatives.

Some have become expert fund-raisers. They wash cars on weekends, man food booths, sell candy and host garage sales.

A few players have taken matters into their own hands.

Thousand Oaks resident Kelsey Davis funded her entire 11-year So Cal United club career through donations from local businesses.

The Under-20 national team goalkeeper, now a freshman at UCLA on a full five-year scholarship, would put on her uniform and walk down Thousand Oaks Boulevard to ask shop owners for money.

"She wouldn't even let me go in with her," said Davis' mother, Darcy. "With her cute face and sales pitch, she would come out with a check in her hand. It was awesome because I am a school teacher, and we don't make that much money to pay for club."

Enduring similar financial challenges and being together so much on the road has created a bond between the Eagles' players and parents. "This team has become like our family. I don't think I could do this if we hated each other," Dacia Garza said. "I know some people think we're crazy to spend this much money on soccer. But everyone spends money on something, whether it's a hobby or a car. We just happen to spend ours on sports, and there is nothing wrong with that."

When the Eagles capped their weekend in San Diego by capturing the Super Division title, it made the money spent a little easier to swallow. Bracing for yet another long drive home, Debra MacKechnie said she's never had even one regret about putting three daughters through the club system.

The time spent singing in the car together on the way to practice, sharing laughs over lunch and gossiping before bed in hotels is priceless, she said. "You can't put a dollar amount on any of it," MacKechnie said as she watched the Eagles celebrate their victory. "For me, it's worth every penny."