

Competitive advantage

Photos by Ron Albertson, the Hamilton Spectator



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How to save pennies if your child competes on the ice, in the water, on a stage or on a field

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Children in competitive sports stay active and enjoy an increased social network of friends.

They also learn lifelong transferable skills such as time management, team collaboration and commitment.

But unfortunately competitive sports are pricey.

Any parent whose child competes -- whether on the ice, in the water, on a stage or on a field -- knows all about the high fees and hidden costs that accompany the competitive season.

Brooke DeLench, author of *Home Team Advantage: The Critical Role Of Mothers In Youth Sports* (Collins Group, \$17.50), says that as a child moves up the competitive ladder, the cost of competitive sports can become the third biggest item in the family's budget, after mortgage and car payments.

With three daughters hooked on competitive dance, I'm living this statistic. But after five fully engrossed years in the competitive dance scene, here are some tips I've learned about cutting corners and saving pennies.

* Share the load: Carpool with a family or two. You'll not only save on gas, you'll also relieve some stress.

* Recycle equipment: Set up a team shoe and equipment exchange. Families that sell or even swap equipment within their own team save everyone money.

You can also check out consignment sports stores like Play it Again Sports, where gently used equipment is sold at a discount.

Dancers requiring a closet full of new costumes each season can take advantage of dance consignment stores such as Encore Once More. They not only sell "like new" dance costumes at a fraction of the cost of new, but they also help you clear out some of those old costumes by consigning them. Find out more at encoreoncemore.com.

* Fill'er up at home: Save a bundle on plastic water bottles and sports drink by investing in a good water bottle (check out website kleankanteen.com) and filling up at home.

While you are at it, fill your travel coffee mug and skip the drive-thru. You'll be surprised how fast those toonies add up.

* Team photos: Save on all those photo packages by putting that digital camera to work and taking your own team and individual pictures.

* Share pet duties: Weekends away from your pets can quickly add up to expensive kennel bills. Arrange to swap pet-sitting duties with a friend (who's not on your team).

* Pack a competition cooler: Shelling out money for fast food during competitions hurts more than just your wallet. Competitions are stressful, hours are long, and people are often low on sleep at a time when athletes are expected to perform at their best. The last thing they need is expensive junk food.

Make a cooler part of your game- day equipment and fill it with easy-to-grab snacks such as sandwiches, popcorn, crackers and cut-up fruits and veggies.

At first I thought my girls might feel left out eating homemade subs while their friends ate fast food. But my tired and hungry girls were grateful to have snacks at their disposal. Their teammates often look longingly at our cooler while waiting for their parents to return from the nearest drive-thru.

Now I share my cooler with another mom, and we take turns filling it. And don't forget to pack enough for the adults.

* Save on overnight trips: Map out travel plans and create a budget as soon as your away-game schedule comes out.

* Book early: Rooms go fast when there are lots of out-of-town competitors, so book hotels right away. Most hotels let you book months in advance, and only require 24 to 48 hours for cancellation.

* Set up a group rate: You don't have to be a travel agent to get group rates on blocks of rooms. Just ask for the manager. You might get an excellent rate for your whole team.

* Consider sharing a room: Splitting the room with another family works great if it's a one-parent trip. Some hotels offer larger rooms or suites.

You can split the cost of the room and the gas, and the kids will have a blast bunking together.

