

Golden Tickets or Empty Promises? *Early Athletic Scholarships*

► PAUL VOLPONI

Picture in your mind an athlete—a young man or woman who has just received an athletic scholarship to attend a major university.

Most of us would probably create the image of a high school senior: an established teen who has matured physically, athletically, and emotionally—from freshman through senior year. Think again. You might be seriously mistaken about the age you assigned to that young person. The truth is that more and more college coaches are offering future athletic scholarships to kids as young as seventh- and eighth-graders. You might even think this only applies to the offspring of iconic athletes, such as LeBron James or Tom Brady. It doesn't. The recipient of this perceived golden ticket could be any over-achieving middle schooler in your community, or perhaps your own child.

I was inspired to write **Top Prospect** by several real-life cases in which football players received high-profile scholarship offers before they had even entered high school. Among these players are quarterbacks Chris Leak (Wake Forest) and David Sills (University of Southern California), as well as defensive back Evan Berry (University of Tennessee). But don't believe that these early scholarships, which are totally non-binding on either the school or the athlete, only happen in money-making sports such as football. They also occur in sports such as lacrosse, soccer, swimming, and field hockey, too. The majority of these handshake offers are actually made to young women.

Top Prospect centers around a middle-school quarterback named Travis Gardner from Alachua, Florida. Besides his family (his parents are divorced and his father has moved to California), Travis has an intense passion for two things—playing quarterback and rooting for his hometown team, the University of Gainesville Fightin' Gators.

If you ask me what I love most, the answer would be football. Hands down. Not the whole game—the running, blocking, and tackling parts. Those things are all right. I'm talking about playing quarterback. Calling the play in the huddle and then leading a team up to the line of scrimmage. It feels like the entire world is hanging on my voice. And when "Hut, hut" springs from my vocal cords, twenty-two football players start flying in every direction. Sometimes the play's moving in fast-forward, difficult to see. Other times, when I'm in the zone, the game moves in slow motion. That's when everything comes easy and natural. Don't



TOP PROSPECT BOOK COVER (LERNER)

get me wrong. There's pressure in playing quarterback, too. Lots of it. Pressure to read the defense for a dozen disguised blitzes, to find the hot receiver, and to deliver a tight-spiral pass into the smallest of windows. Never mind the pressure to win—whether that comes from inside myself or from other people.

Travis meets the Gators's famous head coach, Elvis Goddard, when he comes to Travis's house to recruit his brother Carter, a senior tight end at Beauchamp High School. The charismatic Coach G. always finds a way to get the recruits he desires most.

My eyes were glued to the two huge National Championship rings Coach wore. The one on his right hand was gold, with blue sapphires forming a football in its center. The number 1, set in diamonds, sparkled in the middle of those sapphires. The ring on his left hand was silver, decorated with the head of an emerald green gator grinning with a mouth full of jeweled teeth. Coach lifted up his hands, letting a stream of sunlight pouring through the window shine across his rings. "Carter, how'd you like to come to Gainesville? Help me and your future teammates earn a third one of these?" Then Coach took the ring from his left hand and put it onto Carter's finger. I jumped up off the arm of the sofa, wanting to scream, "Yes! Yes!" Only, Coach wasn't asking me.



EVAN BERRY (UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE)

In 2009, real-life football coach Lane Kiffin made a scholarship offer to fourteen-year-old Evan Berry. At the time, Berry's older brother, Eric, was an All-American at the University of Tennessee, the school at which Kiffin coached.

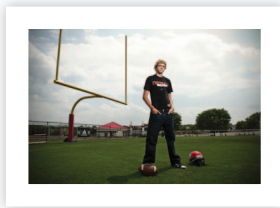
The very next year, however, Kiffin moved on to head the University of Southern California Trojans. That basically erased Kiffin's non-binding offer to Evan Berry.

Why was it *non-binding*? Because, according to NCAA rules, an athlete can't officially commit to a college until late in

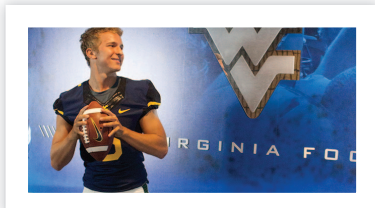
that athlete's junior year of high school.

But Lane Kiffin wasn't through courting middle-schoolers.

In 2010, Kiffin went to the publicity playbook once again by offering a scholarship to thirteen-year-old quarterback David Sills, a native of Delaware. Kiffin, who had seen Sills's **YouTube** workout



DAVID SILLS



CHRIS SILLS (NOW AT WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY MOUNTAINEERS)

video, had not even met the youngster in person yet.

For Sills, the offer and its acceptance was a dream come true, an affirmation of his budding talent and all of his hard work.

"The scholarship offer has always been a dream of mine. I didn't want to give up a chance like that," David Sills told Comcast Sports Network at the time of the offer, which came from Kiffin via a phone conversation. "Other people don't like the commitment at a young age. But I think it's best for right now."

Naturally, the fictional Travis Gardner receives the same type of awe-inspiring phone call from Coach Elvis Goddard.

Mom stepped into my room, carefully cradling the phone. "Travis," she said, with a smile and a sort of stunned look on her face, "this call's for you." She handed me the phone with her eyes on mine . . . "Hello," I said into the receiver, like I was walking into a room with the lights off. "This is Head Coach Elvis Goddard, Travis. How are you today?"

"Fine, Coach. I'm fine," I said, as Mom's smile grew wider. "I spoke briefly with your mother, and she said it was all right for me to make you this proposal. Travis, I'd like to offer you a football scholarship to play at Gainesville." For a second, the only sensation I could feel was goose bumps popping up over my body. My mouth hung open and I couldn't speak. "Travis?" said Coach G. "What do you think? Would you like to become part of our Gator family?" The words rushed out of me in a flood of emotions. "You bet, Coach. Yes! Yes! Yes!" I said, with my heart beating like a big bass drum in a halftime marching band: Boom! Boom! Boom! "It's not official yet. It can't be. You're too young to commit to a college," Coach G. said. "This is just a personal promise from me to you that there'll be a place for you here in five years." I turned to see Mom still standing in the doorway, looking as proud as could be. "I won't let you down, Coach," I said. "You'll see. I'll do whatever it takes to make it." "I know you will, son. That's why I'd only make someone like you this offer," he said, before clearing his throat. "Now, this proposed scholarship is highly unusual. Let's talk a little bit about the media. They should be calling soon."

Having a pre-set course to college, as well as a free education, can be quite a comfort to both an athlete and his parents. The pressure and expectations to perform at an extremely high level, however, can be an enormous burden for these anointed youngsters as they enter high school.

For example, does an incoming high school freshman with a future scholarship in his pocket sit on the bench behind older, more mature players? Or does the media-hype surrounding the youngster push a coach into making him a starter too soon?

"Yeah, Coach Goddard. He's the only reason we're standing here," said Aiden, who was my main competition for the starting job in high school. "If he didn't give you that fake scholarship, there's no

question I'd be the starter. You know that, right?" . . . Our high school coach, Pisano, called us into his office. "Quarterback's always a difficult decision to make," Pisano said. "I'm a firm believer that a team needs a leader at that position, one clear starter to shoulder the load." I was completely ready for Pisano to pick Aiden. I even pushed my toes into the floor, bracing for it. That's when Pisano said, "Travis, you're going to lead the Bobcats this season." I looked up to see his finger pointing right at me. I was so psyched. Something inside me wanted to grab one of the footballs on the floor of Pisano's office, just to feel it inside my hands. I'd nearly forgotten Aiden was standing there. Then Aiden stuck out his hand to me and I shook it. Standing there in my shoulder pads and jersey, with the starting job mine, I suddenly felt twice his size.

Pressure never seemed to unbalance Chris Leak, who, after being offered the early scholarship to Wake Forest, led Independence High School in Charlotte, North Carolina, to three consecutive state championships as their starting quarterback.

In fact, Leak decided to walk away from his non-binding scholarship to Wake Forest and instead attended the University of Florida, where he quarterbacked the Florida Gators to the 2007 National Championship.

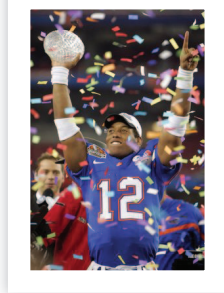
It's not only the players who need to remain grounded, but everyone around them, including the adults. With his well-publicized scholarship only days old, Travis Gardner's Pop Warner (little league) game becomes a spectacle.

Saturday morning at the field was crazy. Mom sat in the first row of the bleachers, surrounded by six or seven reporters. A crowd of more than five hundred showed up. It was the most people I'd ever played in front of. And every one of them seemed to know my name. "Go get 'em, Travis! This is the start of something special!" "Travis, show us that Gator spirit!" Cameras pointed at me from every angle. There's no press section at Pop Warner games. So those reporters were practically spilling over our sideline.

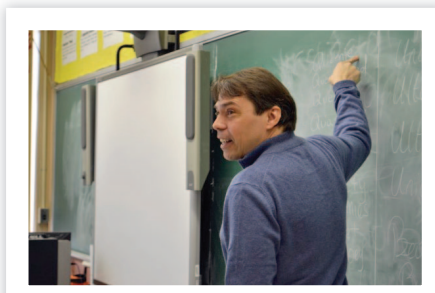
Our protagonist's parents are somewhat blinded by the bright lights of the scholarship, losing partial sight of their son. As the pressure begins to weigh upon Travis, it is his best friend Damon who realizes it first.

"There's a question I've wanted to ask you for a while," said Damon. "Go ahead," I replied. "Is football still fun for you, Travis? I mean the way it used to be, like when we were kids playing in the park?" It took me a couple of seconds to get my mind in gear before I could answer Damon's question. "Yeah, I'm having fun. Who wouldn't? Why would you even ask me something like that?" "Ever since they gave you the scholarship," Damon said, "it looks more like work. Like football's your job now." I didn't know what to say. "Well, it's not exactly easy. I've got something to live up to on every snap, every game. But it's nothing I didn't ask for.

Early scholarships can also put athletes in the sights of many unscrupulous characters. There are those who will offer guidance



CHRIS LEAK (#12 CELEBRATING) THE 2008 NCAA CHAMPIONSHIP FOR FLORIDA GATORS



PAUL VOLPONI TEACHING A CREATIVE WRITING CLASS IN NEW YORK CITY

PHOTO CREDIT: APRIL VOLPONI



PHOTO CREDIT: APRIL VOLPONI

PAUL VOLPONI WITH THE BASKETBALL TEAM ON A VISIT TO KALAMAZOO, MICHIGAN

as a way of possibly hitching themselves to a rising star, maybe with hopes of becoming their agent or financial advisor some day.

In *Top Prospect*, Travis injures his elbow in a game and begins popping Tylenol like candy, without his mother's knowledge. As a result, someone from the darkest of shadows emerges into his life—someone who sees Travis as strictly a commodity.

"I've seen enough to know that elbow isn't healing on its own," he said. "It's terrible. My passes have nothing on them," I replied. "That's why I think you need these," he said, pulling a vial of pills from his pocket. "What are they? A new supplement?" I asked, trying to peer through the darkened plastic. "Sort of. Just not approved yet. But they're completely undetectable to any test. I use them myself sometimes," he answered. "So they're not legal?" I asked. "Not for athletes, not without a prescription," he said. "You mean they're steroids?" "Travis, steroids are everywhere in society. They're in the feed we give chickens and cows to make them healthier. These are for humans. In pill form, no needles. The mildest you can take. Just a few steps above aspirin or Tylenol. But instead of masking pain, they heal the problem at the source and promote growth," he said, pointing at my left arm. I started to tremble on the inside. All I'd ever heard since the first grade was, JUST SAY NO! "I can't. They're drugs," I told him, feeling some distance between us for the first time. "Anyway, it'd be cheating." "I didn't mean to insult you," he said, putting the vial away. "I was only trying to help. It's what plenty of scholarship athletes do to compete when they're injured. I just wanted you to have the same options they do."

In 2013, the University of Southern California replaced Coach Lane Kiffin, which basically invalidated the early-offer to quarterback David Sills. Under the mentorship of his father, who, from an early age, had his son in training with specialized quarterback gurus, Sills eventually attended a newly formed on-line high school in Maryland (Eastern Christian Academy). The school was reportedly established by Sills's father, and its entire student body was made up solely of the football team.

In *Top Prospect*, Travis Gardner goes to his local Beauchamp High School where he is treated by almost everyone as a pop star. The main exception is Travis's math teacher, Mrs. Harper, who believes that teachers and scientists should be considered heroes, not athletes.

"Travis Gardner, rest assured you won't get any special treatment from me because you've already secured a college scholarship," Mrs. Harper told me as I first passed her desk. "That's the beauty of a mathematics grade. Numbers don't lie. They're not influenced by popularity. Your brother Carter understood his obligations as a student. I hope you have the same work ethic."

Travis's older brother Carter, already a member of the Gainesville Gators football team, begins to watch after his younger sibling. Carter has experienced the college football scene firsthand, including the sudden death of his roommate who had dabbled with performance enhancing drugs (PEDs).

"I just wanted to see how you were feeling. Let you know it's not the end of the world, just a football game you lost," said Carter, over the phone. "But I gave this one away. It was a big one," I said, glancing over at Carter's bed in the far corner, as if he were there. "They're all big ones. So you messed up. Don't repeat the same mistakes. That's why they call it learning." "Sounds good, but it doesn't change things," I said, as new waves of pain and self-pity slammed my insides. "Nothing changes things," Carter said. "Then why am I even talking to you about it?" I asked. "Because I might have answers to questions you didn't even know were coming. And if I don't have the answers, at least maybe I've seen the questions before. Just know that I'm here," said Carter.

Despite Lane Kiffin's departure, the highly-recruited Evan Berry eventually did choose the University of Tennessee, where his brother starred before moving on to the NFL's Kansas City Chiefs. In 2015, **Sports Illustrated** named Evan Berry an All-American based on his college performance as a defensive back and fleet-footed kick returner.

After high school, David Sills joined the University of West Virginia Mountaineers football program. As a freshman last season, Sills was their backup quarterback.

Chris Leak went on to play football in the NFL and Canada. He is now an assistant coach at his alma mater, the University of Florida.

Lane Kiffin is currently the offensive coordinator at the University of Alabama, which won the National Championship in 2015.

In 2014, the **New York Times** reported that fourteen-year-old soccer star Haley Berg was already weighing offers to attend several universities. That made Berg one of the first female athletes to have her early offers publicized.

"When I started in the seventh grade, I didn't think they would talk to me that early," Berg told the **Times**. "Even the coaches told me, 'Wow, we're recruiting an eighth-grader.'" Berg, a midfielder from Celina, Texas, is reported to have settled on a handshake deal with her home-state University of Texas.

Early scholarships are more prevalent among female athletes than male athletes, probably because there are just as many scholarships available (thanks to Title IX) and fewer great athletes to fill them. In 2014, the National Collegiate Scouting Association, which helps athletes navigate the recruiting process, published numbers on offers made prior to an athlete's junior year in high school. For female lacrosse athletes, 36 percent of scholarships were early offers (compared to 31 percent for males). In soccer, it's 24 percent (8 percent for males); volleyball, 23 percent (18 percent for males); basketball, 18 percent (5 percent for males); and field hockey, 15 percent. The NCSA reports that 4 percent of male football scholarships are early offers. Football is undoubtedly the lowest on the scale because it is difficult to forecast future success in the sport—one in which physical growth will influence an athlete's performance.

Of course, in **Top Prospect**, the emotional growth of our protagonist is just as big a factor.

"Travis seems to be doing an incredible job with all of it—the pressure of living up to his scholarship, media attention, his popularity here, his studies. It can't be as easy as it looks, Travis. Can it?" asked my guidance counselor on open school night. "Gets hard sometimes," I answered, trying to sound humble. "I know. I worry about him dealing with so much," Mom said, squeezing

my left arm. I had to clench my teeth to keep from screaming out in pain from my injured elbow. "Travis, promise us when that weight gets too heavy, you'll talk to your mother and me. It's not something you need to handle alone," said my counselor. "I will. I promise," I said, slipping free from Mom's grasp. "Remember, you're a quarterback, not a superhero," said Mom. "You're also a teenager," added my counselor.

Despite Travis's cool exterior, internally he is feeling the immense pressure of the early scholarship and its expectations.

I locked my bedroom door behind me. Then I put both vials of steroids on top of my dresser and stared at them as my elbow throbbed. It's almost the same as taking Tylenol, I told myself. Dad rang my phone, but I wouldn't pick up. I didn't want to mix one set of problems with the other. I had too much sitting in front of me right now. I must have walked twenty laps around the room, with my mind racing in a thousand different directions. Once I even stopped in front of my dresser and pushed down on the cap of the blue vial. I felt it give and knew it would twist open with one turn of my wrist. But just as quick, I took my hand back off. . . . The trophies on the top shelf of my bookcase could have made up a team of golden football players. They looked down on me, like they were already passing judgment—only none of them had a dent or scratch on his body to worry about. I was leaning toward trying the pills. I figured there was so much about big-time football I just didn't understand yet—maybe this stuff was totally common.

Opinions vary widely over the practice of early scholarships. Do they give the pre-high school athlete an inside-track to secure a future scholarship? Or do they leave the youngster hanging onto a handshake promise that has no integrity or obligation? Are coaches helping these youngsters or exploiting them? Should some of our country's leading educational institutions even be involved in such a practice?

Parents play an important role in protecting young athletes from a recruiting system that can *unofficially* promise so much, and five years down the line forget their names. But with so much seemingly on the line, including what might appear to be a golden ticket to future fame and fortune, it's very easy for youngsters and their parents to be seduced by these early-offers and the often powerful coaches who propose them.

"What's he like?" asked Dad. "Who, Coach Goddard?" I thought about it for a moment. "He's like a football Zeus," I answered. "He snaps his fingers and things happen. Lightning bolts, earthquakes—" "Scholarships," said Dad, completing the list. "Yeah, those too." ■

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HALEY BERG (#11)

PHOTO CREDIT: SCHOOLPRESS.ORG

Paul Volponi is an award-winning author, journalist, and educator living in New York City. He is the author of twelve young adult novels, which have garnered eleven American Library Association honors. Volponi's novels include; **Top Prospect**, **Game Seven**, **The Final Four**, **Rikers High**, and **Black and White** (winner of the 2006 IRA's Children's Book Award). Visit him at <http://paulvolponibooks.com/>.



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