

A Parent and Player's Guide to Playing College Sports

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The goal of this paper is to provide, from a parent and player's perspective, a realistic view of the process required to play sports at an academically elite college or university. For more information visit EliteCollegeSports.com



involvement can be an obstacle to a successful search. Ultimately, the coach is interested in your daughter, not you. And remember, most college coaches aren't under the same pressure to win as are many of their Division 1 college football and basketball counterparts (especially in higher academic schools). Appear to be a pain-in-the-butt, and they'll walk away without ever even giving a reason. "I dropped a good player because her dad was a jerk — all he ever talked to me about was scholarship money," said Joanie Milhous, the field hockey coach at Villanova. "I don't need that in my program. I recruit good, ethical parents as much as good, talented kids because, in the end, there's a connection between the two." (*NY Times*, March 10, 2008)

BEING RECRUITED - "THE BLIND SIDE"

One of the early common misperceptions is what I call "The Blind Side" fable. If you've seen the movie, you'll recall the scenes where a steady stream of top college football coaches are showing up at Michael Oher's house in an effort to woo him to their school. If you are among the nation's top recruits, some college coaches might eventually show up at your door; for the rest, keep reading...

Drop the expectation of coaches relentlessly courting you for their college team.

Job Searching

Yes, it's far better to drop the expectation of coaches relentlessly courting you for their college team. The best analogy to getting a college varsity position is to think of it as a job search. And like a job search, it takes lots of work to get the right match. You have to define your target companies (in this case, colleges and universities), research them, get the attention of the decision-maker (coach), impress that person with a limited initial audition, be persistent in following up, and not get discouraged with the failures. For parents, a fortunate benefit is that you have a fantastic opportunity to teach your son or daughter a valuable skill; that is, how to search for a job.

Parental Interference

The comparison of a college search to a job search raises a question. When your daughter graduates from college, are you going to be the lead in her job search? Are you going to call your son's potential employers, email them, and meet with them? Parents should only operate in the background during the search process; and take a more active role (and then with some tact) only near the end of the process. Overt parental

"I dropped a good player because her dad was a jerk."

Parents can provide invaluable guidance during the search, including helping to organize the process and your son or daughter's material. Also, try to remain focused on your list of potential schools and not get fixated on a single "ideal college." And most important for parents, provide unwavering support during the inevitable highs and lows.

REASONS TO PLAY COLLEGE SPORTS

The most common reasons for wanting to play varsity sports in college are:

Scholarship

Unfortunately, for most players, obtaining an athletic scholarship is perhaps one of the worst reasons for pursuing college sports, and the myths surrounding athletic scholarships are well documented. First of all, this is primarily a parent motivation, since they are generally the one who has to pay tuition.

Only 6 of the top 40 colleges and universities as ranked by U.S. News give athletic scholarships of any kind.

The follow table shows the number of scholarships allowed for various sports for 2012-13.

Maximum Number of Scholarships per School:	Men		Women	
	NCAA I	NCAA II	NCAA I	NCAA II
Baseball	11.7	9	NA	NA
Basketball	13	10	15	10
Field Hockey	NA	NA	12	6.3
Football - NCAA I FBS	85	NA	NA	NA
Football - NCAA I FCS	63	NA	NA	NA
Football - Other Divisions	NA	36	NA	NA
Ice Hockey	18	13.5	18	18
Lacrosse	12.6	10.8	12	9.9
Soccer	9.9	9	14	9.9
Softball	NA	NA	12	7.2
Volleyball	4.5	4.5	12	8

Most NCAA varsity programs are *equivalency sports* which means awards can be split into partial scholarships in any proportion up to the maximum allowed. Whereas, football and basketball are *head sports*, which means that the scholarships can't be split between players. Note these are the maximum allowed, and many programs do not fund all of the allowed scholarships; some schools (for example Ivy League schools) fund none. Also, if your daughter is interested in playing for an academically elite school, only 6 of the top 40 colleges and universities as ranked by U.S. News give athletic scholarships of any kind. And if you are receiving any needs-based aid, athletic scholarships offset needs-based awards dollar-for-dollar. So if you are eligible for \$15,000 in needs-based aid and you receive \$10,000 in athletic scholarship, you'll only get \$5,000 in aid.



Finally, from what I've seen, the quest for athletic scholarship dollars often short circuits the most important reason for picking a college – choosing the school that best fits your academic pursuits and desired environment. The axiom of "picking a school that you would attend even if not playing" often goes by the wayside when chasing an athletic scholarship. A hot NCAA topic these days is the large

number of athletic transfers, which likely reflects high school athletes often making poor initial decisions as to which school to attend.

Gain Admissions

This is one of the best reasons for pursuing college sports. Getting entry into an academically selective school, such as the Ivy League, SCIAC, NESCAC, Patriots League, or UAA schools is difficult even for good students. If you can play at a level that a coach is willing to support your application, that can be the difference between getting in or not getting in, effectively adding hundreds of points to your SAT.

Love of Sports

I put this last, but what better reason exists? The effort required to get a position on a college team and then the commitment necessary to play for four years requires a love of the game and your teammates.

MAKING A GREAT MATCH

There are four things to consider when seeking the right match for your daughter: (1) college characteristics, (2) academic level, (3) athletic ability, and (4) the coach.

College Characteristics

When someone tells me their list of schools and it includes large public D1 universities, small D3 liberal arts colleges, some in major cities, others in remote rural locations I generally assume they have no idea what kind of college they want (or the parents and son have very different views).

The universe of potential schools can be a bit over-whelming at the start. But determining what kind of college you're interested in can quickly get you to a manageable target list. Answering just a few of these questions can help immensely:

- Do you want to be in a certain geographical area of the country (or are there some places you definitely don't want to be)? This goes along with how far from home would you like to be? (And do you want your parents to attend your home games?)
- Do you want a school that is less than 2,500 students, 2,500-5,000, 5,000-10,000, more than 10,000?
- Do you have a preference of being in or near an urban location? Perhaps the better question, would you prefer not being in an urban or rural area?
- Do you have a specific major that you think you want to pursue (for example, engineering)?

Academic Ability

As discussed above, sports can help get you into a college that you would not otherwise; however, there are limits. If your son says that he wants to go to Amherst or Hamilton, she'll still likely need a SAT in the 1900s even if she's a stellar player. Likewise, your daughter can be on the National team, but she's not going to Harvard or Dartmouth with a C- average and 1500 SAT.

Knowing the appropriate academic level to shoot for requires some research. It also requires the passage of time, as you will start to get a better understanding as you takes the PSAT, SAT, and ACT. One caveat - some highly selective schools expect their students to take the hardest possible course load. So if your player elects out of the honors track freshman and sophomore year, and doesn't take lots of AP and honors courses as a junior and senior they might not be considered for the more academically selective schools.

There's no shortage of online information on college admissions statistics. Specifically, www.EliteCollegeSports.com provides a list of the most academically selctive programs in the U.S. The important thing is to do your research early and

make the appropriate choices in regards to high school courses. At the end of this paper, I list a number of helpful websites.

Athletic Ability and Expectations

This is the trickiest one, with the hardest part of the search being a realistic appraisal of your player's athletic level. Parents are notoriously poor judges of their own children's athletic ability; our natural interest in wanting happy, successful children does not foster unbiased views. Your daughter's coaches are often only slightly better judges, either because they don't understand what it takes to play college sports or they have a reluctance to give honest, sometimes expectation-deflating feedback.

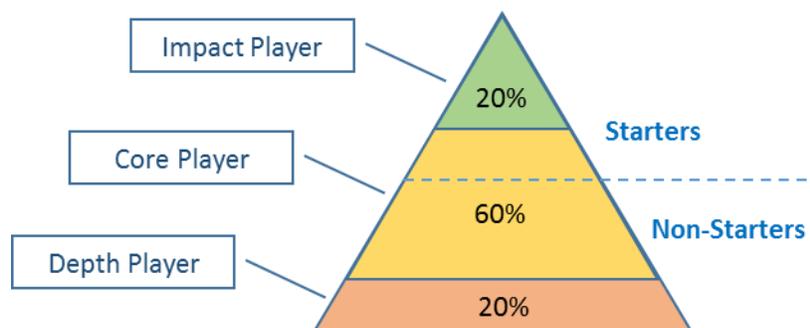
Pursuing the right level is actually a multifaceted issue, since it includes both your son's ability to make a team, your expectations of playing time, and overriding goals (e.g., does he want to play at the highest level possible or use lacrosse to get to the highest possible academic level?). It also introduces the questions of D1, D2, or D3. Let's start with the division question.

There's a common perception that the level of play is highest at D1 schools, next highest at D2 schools, and lowest at D3 schools. In reality, for many sports each of these divisions have a wide competitive range of play and often overlap. The best college athletics is at the top D1 programs; however, depending on the sport, the best of the D3 schools would be competitive against lower level D1 programs.

There is a plethora of online discussion of the various divisional levels. My advice is to let the division fall out of the search; in other words, get the right school (academic and athletic fit), determine your desired balance of academic and athletics (D1 generally requires a bigger time commitment than D3), and then play at whatever division in which that college happens to fall.

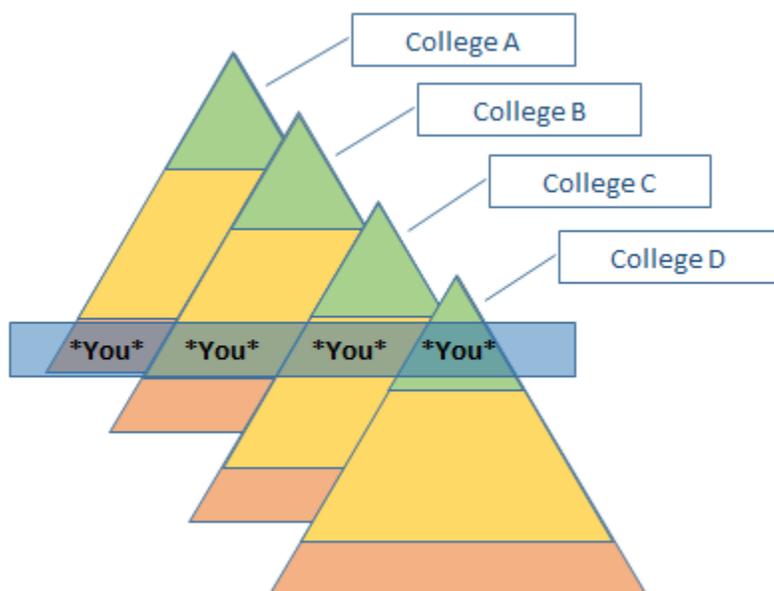
This also leads to an important question: what playing expectations do you have and what role do you expect to fill? Broadly speaking, players fall into three categories: (1) impact players; (2) core players; and (3) depth players. Where you fall in these categories is dependent on your (a) natural athletic ability, work ethic, and acquired skill, and (b) the competitiveness of the program.

The diagram below illustrates the typical make-up of a college roster, with 20% of the players being impact, 60% core, and the remainder depth. Impact players rarely leave the field or court, some core players start and others get playing time, and the depth players rarely, if ever, play. (*diagrams courtesy of NEFC*)



Where you fall on this chart is a combination of your ability and the level of the program, as illustrated by the following diagram:

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As an example, an impact woman soccer player at Notre Dame will likely be on a U20 National team or playing at some equivalent high level. Whereas, a Notre Dame core player (someone who might or might not start, but gets playing time) could be an impact player at Bucknell. Feeling pride in being a depth player (someone who rarely, if ever, sees action during a game) at Boston College could fit within your goals. But if you're used to being on the field or court for most of the game during your club and high school years, sitting on the bench for four years might not be satisfying. The point is, you need to decide where you'll likely fit at a school, and whether you are satisfied with that expected experience.

Finally, analyze the rosters of your target schools. How large is the team's roster and how many players are graduating? What position do you want to play and who is currently playing there (will there be three other sophomore quarterbacks when you arrive)? Also, understand how the coach tends to allocate playing time for games.

The Coach

Assuming that the coach doesn't leave, you're going to spend lots of time with this person over the four years. Obviously, coaches are going to be at their best during the recruiting process, therefore, you need to research the coach and their style of play to ensure that you fit. If possible, you should talk to current and former players and to other people familiar with the coaching community (for example, your high school or club coach). Find out what kind of experiences other girls have had with the coach.



TIMEFRAMES

One of the most common refrains in college sports is, "I wish we'd known to start earlier." The best time to start your college athletics pursuit is freshman year of high school. It might feel too early; some people might even tell you it's too early; don't buy it. Start your college pursuit as a freshman. If you're already a sophomore, work to catch up. Remember, starting the process doesn't mean calling coaches and asking them for a position; that comes later.

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If you intend to play Division 1, some sports begin making verbal commitments sophomore year, and many are done before the end of junior year. If a coach is going to make an offer in the fall of junior year, they most likely have been communicating with you and your coach and watching you play for the previous 6-12 months (i.e., while you were a sophomore). Division 2 and 3 timeframes are a little later, but it's still good to start the process as a freshman.

It's important to show early interest in the teams on your list and make sure that coach knows you. Trying to get a coach to notice you for the first time when they are in the midst of making their final decisions is a challenge. The coaches will tend to favor players who have made a previous impression on them. Those impressions include having shown interest in the college prior to the spring of junior year, coming to watch the team play, attending their camps, and providing the coach with information on you (possibly a recruitment video).

Freshman Year

- If your sport has club teams get on team that will get you exposure. Find a club and coach that has a history of success in getting players onto college teams.
- Create your initial list of possible schools. Use online sites to read about and research schools (some sites are listed at the end of this paper). Try to get on a variety of campuses (urban, rural, large, small) and see what you like.
- In spring and summer, consider attending clinics and camps. (EliteCollegeSports.com has a list of clinics and camps.) And remember, you are always being evaluated, both on and off the field. Coaches are watching to determine how you will affect their team chemistry.
- Email the coach prior to each tournament, clinic, or camp; and email again to thank them after the event. Within reason, use every opportunity to reinforce your interest in their program. Personalize your emails, and don't send an email with the wrong coach's name (it happens). Have an appropriate and reasonable email address (not lazypartygirl@gmail.com).
- Go to the athletic website and register as a prospective athlete.
- Most important, make good grades.

Sophomore Year

- Define your priorities (for example, play D1 on a top 10 team, get a scholarship, get in an Ivy League school, start as a freshman, be in a major city).
- Hone your list of schools to 5-10 colleges (this could continue to evolve over time).
- Discuss with your coaches and other knowledgeable people as to your realistic level of college play.
- Create a Player Profile that you can send to college coaches.
- If interested in D1, focus on those camps and clinics at this time.
- Go to the Admissions website and register as a prospect for the college (this is a different registration from the athletic recruiting site).
- Try to get the coach to watch you play at tournaments or camps.
- Keep your grades up!

Junior Year

- D1 coaches can email and call you after September 1 of your junior year (D2 can email and call after June 15 before your junior year). D3 coaches can communicate with you at any point, including freshman and sophomore years.
- If possible, watch your target schools play. And make sure the coaches know you watched their teams.
- Determine which schools are truly interested. If you are being actively recruited, you will know it; if you're unsure if a coach is interested, they probably aren't. But there is no reason to guess, ask direct questions. (See questions to ask the coach below).
- Based on coach feedback, further narrow your list. Decide if you are aiming too high academically or athletically; if you are (i.e., none of the coaches on your list are actively recruiting you) adjust your list and get noticed by different coaches.

Elite College Sports provides the most insightful and valuable information for pursuing college sports for U.S. academically elite colleges and universities.

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USEFUL ONLINE SITES

The following online sites can be very useful in your college research. Also, many high schools have Naviance access for their high school students.

www.EliteCollegeSports.com

www.CollegeProwler.com

www.CollegeConfidential.com

www.CollegeData.com

[US News and World Report College Ranking](#)

[Description of Ivy League and NESCAC](#)

[Recruiting process](#)

- Take the SAT or ACT.
- In the summer after your junior year, register with the NCAA Clearinghouse.

Senior Year

- D1 coaches can call you after July 1 following your junior year.
- Many D1 and D2 programs will have made their decisions by the start of your senior year. However, some D1 and D2 programs will have openings if one of their candidates changes their mind. The more competitive D3 programs will be wrapping up their recruiting by early fall.
- Lower level D1 and D2 programs could still be trying to fill their roster, especially if they found that most of their top prospects took other offers. Many D3 programs will be trying to complete their recruiting.

YOUR COACH'S PART

Simple fact of life – some club and high school coaches are great in assisting their players in the college process; some are not.

One caveat is that some coaches view success as having as many of their players as possible playing D1. And coaches sometimes promote their players into college positions beyond their ability or primarily focus on scholarship dollars as a sign of (their) success. It's important to make sure that your coach is working toward your goals rather than his or her goals.

QUESTIONS TO ASK THE COLLEGE COACH

The recruiting process is also stressful for the college coach. Ultimately, the prospective student-athlete has the final say. Therefore, coaches have an incentive to keep as many viable candidates as possible interested. They hope that their top candidates will decide to join their program, but they know that those top prospects are probably on other coaches' lists, too.

At some point, you have to pin down the coach as to your chances and their interest. Here is a list of suggested questions:

1. Am I on your list of potential recruits?
2. Can you tell me where I am on that list (the top, top 5, top 10, top 20), and how many players do you expect to recruit for my class?
3. (Depending on your goals and expectations) Do you see me as a contributor as a freshman?
4. What else do you need to know about or see of me? What are your questions or concerns concerning my play?
5. What is your timeframe and when will you know for sure to whom you'll offer spots?

If scholarship is in the cards, you'll need to broach that subject, too. Based on these questions and your intuition, you should have a good understanding as to whether the coach is interested. [For more on this click here: [Are you a buyer or seller?](#)] (Remember, D1 coaches are not allowed to email you, including replying to your email, until September 1 of your junior year and D2 coaches cannot until June 15 before your junior year. So not getting a response to your email as a sophomore doesn't mean they are ignoring you.)