Inside the College

ATHLETIC

RECRUITING

Process:

Tips for Parents and Teens

BY KRISTEN LICCIARDO

Getting into college is not as simple as it used to be. To stand out in a field of star students, college applicants are expected to shine in the classroom and beyond. Not surprisingly, athletics are taking a more prominent role on the well-rounded student resume. ESPN's recent study on youth and competitive sports notes that overall, high schools are expanding athletic opportunities for students. Club teams are proliferating, too, separately from school programs. In certain sports like soccer, teens are increasingly foregoing high school teams altogether to play exclusively for clubs—a development that is impacting high school athletic programs nationwide, according to athleticbusiness.com.

While high school athletes are certainly competitive, many consider their sport as a hobby—an experience that makes high school more enjoyable. But what happens when your child decides to pursue a sport in college? For a prospective athlete, the recruiting process can ramp up an already stressful college admissions race.

A recent New York Times article was an eye-opener for me. It highlights the increasingly heated competition among college coaches to recruit kids as young as middle school to play college sports. It’s a trend that parents feel they have little control over, as their children vie for coveted athletic scholarships (see statistics on page 21).

While much of the recruiting process is unique to the individual sport and college your child is pursuing, some advice rings true across the board. It is important to help your teen navigate the athletic recruiting process in a more proactive, positive way, rather than succumbing to the pressure and competition. Here are some key factors that every parent of a prospective college athlete should keep in mind.

Specializing: An Early Decision

Before starting the athletic recruiting process, every parent should educate himself or herself on specialization. Sports-savvy families and high school coaches are the first to acknowledge that youth athletes are specializing in one sport by middle school and playing that sport year-round. For example, "U.S. soccer is requiring both boys and girls to commit to the sport full-time at an earlier age," notes Heidi Valk, girls' varsity soccer coach at Deerfield Academy in Massachusetts. Sports specialization is a "relatively new development that has gained momentum over the past 10 years or so," she says.
Is specialization a good thing for children? There are pros and cons that each family has to weigh individually. The biggest payoff: Year-round competition can turn talented athletes into top college prospects. "These girls become really good soccer players. Their skill level is outstanding," Valk remarks, referring to the athletes who play for both club and varsity teams. She predicts some of her current students will play Division I women's soccer.

There are some caveats to full-time play. Injuries occur more frequently when an athlete specializes in one sport, which may sideline them for months, not to mention, "It's a huge commitment for the students and the parents who take them to the practices, camps, and tournaments," Valk acknowledges. However, on the bright side, it is very common for parents and athletes to arrange carpools, as many sports programs are location-based. This lowers the time demand for parents.

High-Profile Play Is Critical

Sports specialization requires many outside events, such as camps and tournaments. While these events may not be as competitive as a regular-season game, camps and tournaments are where college coaches see prospective players in action, says Lori Hendricks, Director of Athletics at Mount Holyoke College, an NCAA Division III college. "Our coaches are recruiting year-round," she notes. Knowledgeable club and high school coaches can advise students on the must-attend showcases for their individual sport, says Valk. "If you want to play on the college level, you have to put yourself out there," she notes. Many colleges also offer summer camps (sometimes called "ID camps"), where coaches will assess a prospect's athletic abilities and identify whether he or she is the right fit for that specific college.

Do Your Homework in Advance

The experts agree: For the student-athlete, freshman year of high school is not too early to start researching and creating a list of prospective colleges. Today's students have a wealth of digital resources to help them. When an athlete starts to refine his or her list of potential schools, make sure to visit the individual colleges' websites. Most institutions have "recruit me" forms within the athletic department's online offerings, making it very easy for students to make contact with a prospective college and its coaches, Hendricks notes.

The NCAA website is also a must-read; it has extensive information on college recruiting and eligibility rules, including the Guide for the College-Bound Student-Athlete. It's critical to understand how the NCAA rules, which differ by division, can impact your child's interaction with coaches and colleges throughout the recruitment process. For example, students who decide to apply to Division I and II schools must register online with the NCAA Eligibility Center by the end of sophomore year.

"Make sure you and your child understand the real differences in philosophy between the different NCAA divisions and their respective athletic programs," Hendricks cautions. Students should consult with their club and high school coaches to figure out what level of play will best suit their individual talents. Don't forget to keep your child's guidance counselor or independent college advisor in the loop, as they will be able to offer more insight on how a potential college matches up with your teen's academic credentials and goals.
Be Aggressive and Thorough

Once a student develops a list of prospective colleges, it's time to become a proactive participant in the recruitment process. Experts agree that with so many qualified student-athletes, even the best players shouldn't assume colleges will seek them out. Hendricks advises, "If you have a particular interest in competing at a certain institution, make any effort possible to contact the coach directly and attend that school's summer camp, if you can."

Student-athletes should make sure to look beyond the athletic programs of prospective colleges. "Learn about the college as an academic institution. Meet the professors, visit the campus, and take a tour that goes beyond the athletic center. And definitely let the coach know about your visit," Hendricks recommends. With the help of coaches and guidance counselors, students should develop a list of questions for college coaches and staff, students, and professors. After all, it's in a student's best interest to gather as much information as he or she can during the recruitment process. Valk notes, "It's that tried-and-true question that every athletic recruit should ask when they visit a college campus: 'Would I be happy going to school here if I broke my leg and couldn't play soccer for the rest of the season?" Students need to consider what type of institution will fulfill their athletic and academic ambitions.

Recruiting Services: Be Cautious

College insiders say that student athletes and parents should be wary of online recruiting services. In the age of social media, it's tempting for students to think that online recruiting will help them "connect" with more coaches on the field, in action. Video footage can also be helpful, but "Don't give us more than 3 minutes of live footage. Nothing fancy," says Hendricks, who notes that prospects can upload their own video on YouTube, eliminating the need for professional video services.

Financial Aid and Scholarships: Not a Guarantee

Unfortunately, not all athletic recruits earn financial aid or a scholarship as part of their acceptance to a college team. Similar to athletic or merit scholarships, athletic scholarships are granted on an annual basis and are not necessarily extended year to year, according to the NCAA website. It is important to note that Division III schools do not offer sports scholarships but can offer other financial aid and merit-based scholarships.

The bottom line is that athletic excellence doesn't guarantee a student will receive financial rewards. Take the time to research and plan for saving for college—including when and how to fill out financial aid forms. Big Future by The College Board is an excellent online resource for parents and students that offers comprehensive tools, webinars, and resources to guide you through the financial aid application process.

Keep All Your Sporting Options Open

In the event that your child doesn't get a spot on a college team, remember that there are lots of options to stay active and engaged in a chosen sport. Many institutions, especially larger universities, have extensive, highly competitive intercollegiate club teams, college insiders say. These clubs, which operate outside of the NCAA, offer 2 million college athletes the opportunity to compete against other colleges, without the pressure of intensive practice and game schedules. For many competitive athletes, club sports are actually a better option. Visit NIRSA, a collegiate recreation association, for more information.

While the athletic recruiting process can be time-consuming and overwhelming, parents and students should not be intimidated. If your child has natural skills, it is very likely that he or she will find a place on a college-level team without difficulty. Most importantly—make sure your student-athlete is passionate about the sport, as passion drives success. LWT