

Introduction

What this book is about

Being recruited to play college sports is one of the most exciting things that can happen to a high school athlete. If a sports scholarship is part of the package, being recruited will also be financially rewarding. Being recruited represents recognition of athletic talent. It also is a big step toward a new, more adult world of college and college sports. How can you improve your chances of being recruited? How should you talk with recruiters? What is a recruiting visit to a college like? How much scholarship aid can you expect? What should you learn about the coach and the team?

These questions and more are addressed by this book. Some of the questions have answers and others have suggestions about how to find out the answers. I wrote this book to pass along the things I wish I had known at the time that my kids were being recruited.

Who should read this book?

This book is about college sports scholarships and the athletic recruiting process. It is primarily for high school athletes, but also for their parents, their coaches and anyone else who is helping them to achieve the goal of becoming a college athlete. Athletes, in the following chapters you will find information and advice that will help you to identify your goals and then to realize them. You will probably want some help with this process, but ultimately it will be you who will set the goals and you who will make those goals happen.

A book cannot tell you everything you need to know. You will want to add to what you read here by doing some investigation of your own. You will almost certainly benefit by taking action. Just what action you take depends on the work you have done and the goals you have established. I cannot promise that you will achieve all of your goals. However, I am convinced that despite how the process turns out, it will have been worth the effort.

What is a scholarship worth?

Everyone knows that the cost of a college education has been skyrocketing. Anything you do to qualify for financial aid is worthwhile. This is particularly true if qualifying also means doing something that you really want to do, like competing in college sports. A sports scholarship can be anything from a small fraction of the college costs up to a “full grant-in-aid.” We will talk about these details later, but a full grant-in-aid is still less than the university’s or college’s “full cost of attendance.”

For students who start college in the fall of 2004, a four-year college education is likely to cost from \$65,000-180,000. If you think these numbers are unrealistically high, check out a list of actual college costs in Chapter 7. It is clear from that list and from a quick look at college websites, that all but the very rich are going to require financial aid.

Types of scholarships

The two most common types of college scholarships are *need-based* and *academic*. Need-based financial aid awards are based on a calculation of the ability of the student and his family to pay college costs. A common way to determine that need is by using the *Free Application for Federal Student Aid* or FAFSA. You submit the FAFSA to the U.S. Department of Education and from it an “expected family contribution” or “EFC” is computed. The costs above the EFC are generally met by some combination of grants, scholarships and loans. For different colleges, the mix of these aid elements is different. The bottom line is that regardless of the school and how much financial aid a student needs, almost all students will be able to pay for a college education. A big issue in comparing financial aid offers becomes how large the student’s loan debt will be after graduating. More scholarship, less loan is a good goal.

Academic aid is scholarship money offered to students who have demonstrated high academic achievement. Often the students receiving academic scholarship awards have also demonstrated some other unusual academic, intellectual or creative talent that may earn them an additional scholarship. Also, many students who are awarded academic

scholarships will also be receiving need-based aid. Academic awards are important honors and they can substantially lower the total amount of loans a student amasses by graduation time.

Academic aid is competitive and there is relatively little of it to go around. By comparison, need-based aid is not competitive, it is based on a standard evaluation of financial need. There is generally more need-based aid available than there is academic aid.

There are many books that discuss need-based and academic college financial aid. This book is about a third type of financial aid, college sports scholarships. Sports scholarships are awarded to athletes in return for participation in the college's sports program. The extent to which sports scholarships can be mixed with other grants is a complication that we will discuss at length. It is not simple and it depends on the college and its membership in a sports organization.

The two main organizations governing college sports are the NCAA and the NAIA. In addition, the NCAA is divided into three divisions, each of which has different rules for sports related financial aid. We will discuss these organizations in more detail in Chapter 1. The different rules for recruiting and sports related financial aid in the NAIA and NCAA will be dealt with throughout this book.

“Investing” in sports

Anyone who is involved in youth athletics has seen parents who are putting a huge investment of time and money into their child's sport career. Whether it is paying for special coaching, traveling to every meet in a five-state region or buying all the fanciest gear, they can be heard rationalizing the expense as an “investment” in their kid's chances to get a college sport scholarship. It is a risky investment from several points of view.

First, the odds are low of getting a large financial payoff for an investment in youth sports. As we will go into some detail later, only about one in 25 high school athletes will compete at the college level. Fewer still will get some level of athletic scholarship

aid. As a financial matter, the money spent on enhancing a student athlete's sports career might be better invested in a college fund.

I think that calling the money spent on youth sports an "investment" in getting a scholarship puts too much pressure on young athletes. Sports for kids should be a fun, healthy activity that contributes to their physical and social development. Putting a scholarship goal on this activity is unrealistic for most kids and it is too much pressure for nearly all involved.

Parents, make your investment in youth sports for the right reasons. The time and money will be well spent if your athlete develops a lifelong interest in healthy physical activity. It will also be well spent if he or she learns how to accept defeat and to be gracious in victory. It will be a fine investment if the teamwork that is learned transfers into an ability to be a team player and a team leader in business. In short, do not bet too many of your resources on the chance of landing a sports scholarship. Save for college and make your investments in books and other educational resources.

What you won't find in this book You will not find lots of lists in this book. Some sports scholarship books are mostly collections of lists. Some have lists of colleges and universities, lists of conferences, lists of sport programs, and lists of businesses and foundations that fund sports scholarships. These lists quickly go out of date and some have very limited usefulness. Colleges drop or add sports. Coaches leave for other jobs. Telephone numbers, area codes and addresses change. As you will see in Chapter 4, the best way to find up-to-date information about colleges and their sports programs is on the Internet.

A list of athletic scholarships funded by companies or organizations is not going to help you get a spot on a particular college team. These scholarships often count against the NCAA limit on the number of scholarships a college or university can award in a particular sport (more about this later). That means that although this type of award may save the

school some money, it will probably not change the number of athletes that can be supported. Your place on the team and your potential to get a sports scholarship is up to the coach. Therefore, you are likely to gain more by spending your efforts on working things out with the coach. That is what this book will help you do.

You will not find cartoons and jokes in this book. Undoubtedly they would make the book more fun to read. However, the business of college sports scholarships is serious, so the humor here is scarce.

There are not a lot of stories about athletes and their specific experiences in this book. Every situation is different enough that an individual's story is not as useful as a more general understanding of the forces that are at work during the recruiting process. In addition, some athletes had mixed feelings about their recruiting and their college sports experiences. They told me their stories but did not want to be identified.

Some books are full of statements from college coaches, but not this one. Such statements can be a mixed bag. Coaches know a lot about recruiting from their own point of view but their interests and your interests are not always the same. On one hand, they are good at sharing tips about what they are looking for in a recruit and on how they go about contacting prospects. On the other hand, coaches idealize the recruiting process much like the NCAA does. They may picture themselves as having your best interests at heart but they are not likely to share insights that will help you to level the playing field with college sports recruiters.

Some books on sports scholarships reproduce the entire text of the *NCAA Guide for the College-bound Student-Athlete*. This annual publication of the NCAA is a fine introduction to many of the rules of recruiting and every student athlete interested in a scholarship should read it. However, you do not need to pay for this publication. Instead, you can get the latest version for free from your high school counselor. If your school's counseling

office runs out, you can get a free copy mailed to you from the NCAA by calling them at (800) 638-3731. If you want it immediately, you can download the guide from the NCAA website: <http://www.ncaa.org>. Look in the “site index” under “eligibility.”

The *NCAA Guide for the College-bound Student-Athlete* describes the recruiting process from an important but narrow point of view. It discusses recruiting as the NCAA idealizes it. The NCAA guide emphasizes recruiting rules but it pays little attention to how the recruiting process works in the real world. Interactions between student athletes and coaches do not always follow the idealized scenario of the NCAA guide. The guide offers little insight to help you to maximize your options or your potential to be recruited. Nevertheless, the NCAA guide is useful as long as you read it while keeping its limited point of view in mind.

A stylistic comment

We all should recognize that there are both men and women who coach college teams. Sometimes I refer to “he,” sometimes to “she” and sometimes to “he or she” when referring to a coach or an athlete. That is a matter of simple language, not of choosing one sex over the other. Read right through these pronouns and know that I mean the coach or the athlete, whichever sex he or she is.

This book’s point of view

One goal of this book is to give you insight into how the system actually works. You need to know something about the forces that are working on the coach if you are going to understand the system. For instance, you need to know how many scholarships are allowed in your sport before you can realistically evaluate your chances of getting one. Along those lines, you will need to know things like the difference between a full grant-in-aid and the full cost of attendance. These are two different dollar amounts and knowing about them will help you understand any offer that you get.

Rules, rules, rules...

The field of college athletic scholarships is buried in a mountain of rules. The 2003-2004 edition of the NCAA Division I Manual is 496 pages long. That is

a mighty big hunk of rules governing recruiting, eligibility and financial aid for NCAA Division I schools. Two more hefty books cover Divisions II and III. The NAIA has a different and more limited set of rules that leaves many recruiting and scholarship details up to the individual schools. (We will go into the distinctions between the NAIA and the different divisions of the NCAA in the next chapter.) Coaches, athletes and schools must all obey these rules and the schools have compliance coordinators whose job it is to know and interpret the rules.

I point out the size of the rule books to make it clear that it is impractical for a readable handbook on sports scholarships to fully cover recruiting rules. Besides, it is not the athlete's job to know all of the rules. However, some of these rules are useful to learn about because they will give you insight into how and why the coaches recruit in the way that they do. For the curious or for those with a special need, the manuals detailing these rules are available online at the NCAA and NAIA websites.

Another goal of this book is to encourage you to think about college sports and sports scholarships as aspects of the "business" of financing an education. The coach's decisions about whom to recruit and how much to offer are business decisions. Even the details of the process are business decisions. Along the way you will need to develop some business logic to use from your own perspective. To that end, this book will remind you from time to time that you are making significant financial decisions when you are considering college sports and sports scholarships. Throughout this book you will be encouraged to take a businesslike approach when considering your financial aid options.

Being realistic

More than anything, I hope that you find that this book treats the topic of sports scholarships realistically. Books, articles, websites, high school coaches and friends all have a tendency to idealize sports scholarships and to idealize the college recruiting process. There are hardheaded decisions to be made that are not helped by being unrealistic.

Most of the books and all of the websites I have seen that are devoted to sports scholarships are very encouraging. They may be too encouraging. That is not realistic.

Being realistic is not the same as being pessimistic. If you determine that it is realistic to aim for a full-ride sports scholarship at a large Division I university, then this handbook will provide you with some important information. Conversely, if you conclude that this goal is not realistic then this book may assist you to reach a different goal. You are far more likely to achieve realistic objectives if you do not waste time pursuing unrealistic ones.

Being realistic means knowing what your choices are and making the best choice for achieving your goals. You should not assume that the best way to finance your college education is with an athletic scholarship until you have done a great deal of homework. It may not even be the best way to compete in sports at the school you want to attend.

What is it like to be recruited?

I have already suggested that you should definitely read the *NCAA Guide for the College-bound Student-athlete*. However, you need to be aware that the recruiting process is usually more complicated and plays out differently than the picture you might get from the NCAA guide. An important aim of this book is to alert you ahead of time to common recruiting practices before you are confronted with them. When will a coach be making an offer? What should you do when a coach calls and wants you to agree verbally to an offer that you have not seen in writing? What if he asks you to accept the offer before the start of the NCAA signing period? Not only do these situations occur, they occur frequently.

Should you get an agent? Should you pay a fee for listing yourself on a website? Should you pay a professional to produce a “highlights video?” What other ways are there for you to get noticed by college coaches? What should you look for in a college? In a coach? In an athletic program? In an

athletic scholarship? These are all questions that this book will help you to answer.

There is a set of “whens” and “hows.” When can you get calls from recruiters? How often can they call you? Should you accept an offer to travel to a school for an official visit? When can a recruiter officially make an offer of a scholarship? How do you know a good offer? What can you do if you visit but do not get an offer? How much time do you have to decide? How can you take one offer and use it to maximize your opportunities for getting other offers?

Should you agree to an offer during the early signing period? One coach is pressing for a commitment but you would rather be on another team. How can you slow the recruiting process down so that you do not have to decide on the first offer before you get the offer that you want? How can you get a coach who is recruiting you to make a written offer? Reading this book may not give you all the answers for your specific situation but at least these common situations will not come as a surprise.

How you should read this book

Where you start to read this book depends on *when* you start. If you are a freshman or a sophomore in high school then you have plenty of time and you might want to simply read from start to finish. When you finish this first reading, you should do the “initial eligibility check.” If you are a second semester junior or a senior, then you should go right to the section on “initial eligibility” and learn how it relates to you.

If you have already received phone calls or mail contacts from coaches, you will want to read more of the details about the recruiting process. Do not forget to look over the initial eligibility information in Chapter 2.

Why the concern about initial eligibility? Because academic eligibility for competing in the NCAA is not as simple as you might think. Most students know what it takes to be academically eligible to compete for their high school. Show up to class, get

reasonable grades and you get to play. NCAA eligibility is more complicated. In recent years many excellent students with superior high school grades and superior SAT scores have been surprised to learn that they were not eligible for college sports their freshman year. Such problems usually arise when the NCAA eligibility requirements are not kept in mind when choosing high school courses.

It is important to keep in mind, 1) that the academic eligibility requirements for competing in college are different from the requirements in high school; and 2) if you do not satisfy the eligibility requirements of your college then your options for competing and for obtaining a sports scholarship can be severely limited.

An overview of this book

We will assume that you are starting to think about a college athletic career well in advance of your senior year in high school. What are the steps you need to take? What should you do to maximize your prospects? What things should you avoid doing because it might limit your options?

Decide on your goals

One purpose of this book is to help you to find your own answers to these questions. Perhaps the most important thing you need to do is to begin to think seriously about your goals. It is fine if these goals change as you go through this process. In fact, changing your goals means that you are learning and adjusting your plans based on what you learn. That is a good sign.

The first three chapters of the book are your road map to defining realistic goals. Chapter 1 outlines some basic information you need to know about college sports, scholarships, and recruiting. Chapter 2 discusses the requirements for “initial eligibility” that you must meet before you are eligible for college competition as an incoming student. Chapter 3 gets down to the nitty-gritty of figuring out goals that fit your needs, your wishes and your talents. This will not be as easy as you might think. It is great to have optimistic goals, but they should also be realistic to avoid wasting time and effort.

During this process you will also need to examine your own strengths and weaknesses both as a student and as an athlete. You will need to learn about the academic strengths and weaknesses of the colleges you consider. You should also try to learn about how your special talents as an athlete might fit the needs of the sports programs you are looking at. The more you learn about yourself and the colleges, the more likely you are to set worthwhile goals that you can achieve.

Chapter 4 is a guide to using the Internet to gather information. The Internet can be your best first source of information about colleges, universities and their sports programs. The Internet is a great source of information about eligibility and recruiting rules for the NCAA and NAIA. The Internet is also an up-to-date source of addresses and phone numbers. In short, the Internet is an essential tool for planning your college career and for pursuing your quest for a sports scholarship.

Chapters 5 through 8 cover the process of refining your goals, marketing yourself and dealing with the recruitment process. You will be encouraged to seek contacts with coaches rather than to wait for coaches to call. Along the way you will need to evaluate the opportunities and requirements to decide which choices best fit your needs.

Do not jump too soon

The old adage “look before you leap,” is good advice in seeking a college scholarship. The NCAA has dozens of rules that govern college recruiting. If any of these are broken, even if by accident, you might be prevented from competing for a particular school. Fortunately, most coaches work hard to follow these rules so that they do not spoil their chance to recruit a talented athlete. There may be well-meaning but unauthorized people who try to help you and help the team. Unfortunately, their involvement may break recruiting rules. You need to know what kinds of unauthorized contacts to look out for and how to avoid them.

Pros and cons of being recruited

An athletic scholarship can be a great way to finance a college education while competing in the sport

that you love. However, many athletes discover unforeseen disadvantages to being recruited and disadvantages to college sports scholarships. In the chapters ahead we will not skip lightly over the pitfalls. In order for you to maximize both your college experience and your scholarship potential, you need to know in advance some of the pros and cons of college athletic scholarships. For many student athletes there may be alternative ways that will pay for more of a college education and still allow you to compete in college sports.

Being recruited by a coach can also close out some of your options at that coach's college. We will discuss the advantages of being a "non-recruited athlete" at some schools. We will cover this apparent paradox in detail and show you how you can "recruit yourself" at these schools. Choosing among these alternatives is not easy. This book will help with those choices.

That is enough of expectations and warnings for the time being. Now it is time to start your journey!