

Chapter 1

Getting the Basics: Athletic Scholarships 101

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The world of college athletics — however seemingly vast and organized — is actually a relatively small community filled with confusing information, regulations, and rumors. There are myths — like the one that says billions of dollars of scholarship money are wasted because no one claims them, or the one that says every athlete who gets a scholarship gets a full ride — and there are dizzying real-life rules.

But don't worry. *Athletic Scholarships For Dummies* is designed to answer all your questions, address the persistent rumors, and ease your mind about how you should begin pursuing a scholarship.

In this chapter, we show you how to look at scholarships and how to think about where you want to play.



Don't worry about what other teammates are doing or how your cousin Joey got a full scholarship. We want you to begin thinking about *your* future, considering your assets, and making the moves that are best suited for you.

Sorting Through Scholarship Opportunities

If you know where to look, there is money to be found. The federal government is the largest source of funding, but you also can find all kinds of grants and scholarships available from major corporations and foundations as well as small mom-and-pop companies, all of which are committed to higher education.

Although your goal is to be awarded an athletic scholarship, you can't reach that goal without understanding where the scholarship money is coming from, what you have to do to get it, and what your responsibilities are when you've gotten it.

In an effort to raise the standard of education in this country, Uncle Sam has been a giving uncle, establishing loans, grants, scholarships, even work-study programs for students and student-athletes. State governments also award financial aid. And, of course, both the federal and state governments have vested interests in the money they award.

Colleges and universities are no different from the federal and state agencies in one important way: They expect something in return for the financial aid they offer, whether academic or athletic. Schools' academic or athletic departments will be interested in you only if they believe you have something to offer them in return. College athletic departments want athletes who will lift their programs, make boosters happy, and help ensure championships.



You need to understand what kind of scholarship is being offered to you before you sign anything. Chapter 2 shows you what a scholarship is and what the different types of scholarship are.

Finding the Right Program

Okay, so you're a top-rated soccer or volleyball player, you've broken state records in football or track, or you're a standout swimmer or diver. You show up to all your practices and games, have a great reputation among coaches and competitors, and are widely known and respected among recruiters. You don't need to worry about doing anything except playing the sport you play so well, right?



Wrong. Assuming that all they have to focus on is playing sports and that everything else will fall into place is probably the number-one mistake high school student-athletes make.



Think about approaching scholarship searches as you do the sport you play: In your sport, proper equipment is paramount to your success. Think about the money you and your family have invested in shoes, apparel, balls, and sport-specific gear for your practices and competitions. Think about the time and energy you've invested in practicing, perfecting your technique, and competing. Think about the time and money your parents have invested in getting you to your practices and games, getting you enrolled in club leagues, and allowing you to attend select camps. When you're going for a scholarship, you have to put in the same kind of time and effort.

Your educational choices are as wide and varied as are your choices in sport. But before you can make an informed decision about what school you want to attend, you have to decide what you want to achieve with your degree and what, if anything, you plan to do athletically after you graduate from college. You have to make this decision because different types of schools offer different advantages academically and athletically.

Universities are four-year institutions with a variety of colleges or professional schools (such as colleges of liberal arts, business, law, medicine, and theology) and several kinds of degrees in many areas of study. They offer bachelor's degrees in arts or sciences after four years of study; graduate degrees (master's degrees and doctoral degrees), which require additional years of study; and nursing, dental, and medical degrees, which also require additional years of study after completion of a bachelor's degree. Universities are usually much larger than colleges, carry out research, and offer on-campus housing.

Four-year colleges usually concentrate on one major area of education (such as colleges of liberal arts) and offer bachelor's degrees. Colleges generally do not support research or offer graduate programs, but they do have on-campus housing.

Within the category of four-year schools, there are large and small colleges and universities. Most large institutions participate in National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) sports. The large, Division I universities and colleges are the schools that send the majority of football, basketball, and baseball players into the major leagues. So, if your dream is to be a professional football or basketball player, you should shoot for attending an NCAA Division I school.

Many small colleges and universities are superior schools with excellent academic reputations and prestigious faculty members. Many student-athletes who are interested in education first and athletics second attend small universities, which often participate

in National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) or NCAA Division II or III athletics. Many student-athletes also attend NCAA Division III schools for the opportunities to play in multiple sports (which is usually not allowed by NCAA Division I schools).

Community colleges or junior colleges offer associate's degrees, which typically take two years to complete, and typically do not have on-campus housing. There are many reasons for attending two-year colleges:

- ✔ Some students are interested in obtaining an associate's degree to pursue specific technical careers.
- ✔ Some students begin at a community or junior college with plans to transfer to larger colleges or universities because they didn't qualify academically for admission into four-year schools. They plan to earn the grade point averages (GPAs) required for admission to four-year schools and then transfer.
- ✔ Some student-athletes start out at junior colleges when they haven't been accepted by the athletic program at the four-year school of their choice. They hope to maintain acceptable GPAs at the junior college, accrue playing time in the National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA), and attract the attention of recruiters from four-year schools.



To understand what the different types of schools mean for you academically and athletically, and what you need to do to be admitted to these different schools, check out Chapter 3.

The most difficult chore, of course, is narrowing down the list of schools in which you're most interested. You don't want to choose a school based on its team mascot, whether your dad went there, or because it's where your best friend is going. Finding the right program requires researching which colleges offer the programs you're most interested in, student graduation rates and transfer rates, academic and athletic success, athletic probation, recruiting methods, the coaching staff, and more.



For help with researching the right school for you, turn to Chapter 11.

Taking the Clearinghouse Seriously

"Nah, I don't have to mess with that. Coach tells me what I need, and he didn't say anything about the clearinghouse."

Unfortunately, this is an all-too-common response when student-athletes are asked about the NCAA Initial-Eligibility Clearinghouse. But if you want to play in the NCAA in Division I or II, and if you have visions of getting any kind of scholarship, you must register with and be certified by the clearinghouse. But what is the clearinghouse, and why — if it's so important — might your coach not stress that importance?

The NCAA Initial-Eligibility Clearinghouse is an agency that offers certification for prospective student-athletes to become eligible to play collegiate sports in Divisions I and II of the NCAA. Like everything you do as a student-athlete — the training, the competitions, the recruiting process, the letters and phone calls — you have to go through the clearinghouse if you hope to play in Division I or II of the NCAA.

The clearinghouse is not a recruiting service, nor does it guarantee that a college will take an interest in you. What it does is review your academic record to determine if you're eligible to participate in Division I or II schools as a freshman athlete (whether you've met the academic and athletic requirements of participating institutions) and then give colleges the green light to look at you after you've received your eligibility certification. When you understand and respect the process, you can be sure you've taken your first sure step into the big game: collegiate sports.

Your coach may not have mentioned the clearinghouse to you, because high school coaches — however wonderful, however nice, however gifted as coaches — can easily become overwhelmed by other responsibilities. Most high school coaches or club coaches hold other jobs. Most high school coaches also teach academic subjects in school. They're responsible for dozens of students, grading, testing, parent-teacher conferences, and school facility meetings, not to mention games, support staff, and all the other athletes on your team. The point? You can't rely on your coach for all the answers.

Going Through the Recruiting Process

Believe it or not (and you'd better believe it), just because you're the best on your team doesn't guarantee recruitment or a scholarship offer. Just because you set state records doesn't mean you'll go to the school of your dreams. And just because a college recruiter is telling you everything you want to hear doesn't mean you'll get what's being promised.

Up until the point when you start getting recruited, all the running, lifting, straining, pushing, sweating, winning, and losing you've done has been the easy part. Again and again, we've heard parents share their dismay at the recruiting process. So many parents had no idea how exhausting and confusing it is. Many student-athletes never knew how cold and businesslike recruiting procedures are. Because they were unprepared, the experience was even more frustrating. Worse, that lack of preparedness can lead to devastating consequences.

But you can make your experience a positive one by knowing what to expect. In Part II of this book, we show you the ins and outs of college recruiting.



As you begin the recruiting process, you need to:

- ✔ **Carry a portfolio notebook.** This notebook should include 4-x-5-inch cards on which you can jot down questions you need to ask coaches and recruiters.
- ✔ **Have copies of your academic and medical records.** Your medical records should include a detailed medical history on injuries, allergies, and medical conditions that trainers should be aware of.
- ✔ **File and catalog questionnaires you receive from interested colleges, including the names of recruiters and coaching staff.**
- ✔ **Begin creating a list of things that are important to you — and continue to add to it as you go through the recruiting process.** When discussing potential schools, list things that are most important to you, such as school traditions, athletic facilities, winning records, graduation rate among athletes, or geographic location of a school. This list will help you remain focused as more schools show interest and you research individual schools.
- ✔ **Create a list of pros and cons for each school you make contact with.** Include the names of recruiters and coaching staff you meet, along with your impressions of them. After an aggressive recruiting period, the names and attitudes of different recruiters begin to blend together, and you may not clearly remember who you liked or disliked (and why).

Making College Visits

College visits come in two varieties: official and unofficial. *Official visits* are ones that are paid for in full or in part by the college

that's invited you to visit, and you can make only five official visits during your senior year of high school. *Unofficial visits* are visits you pay for completely on your own, and you can make as many of them as you want.



For unofficial visits, be sure to make arrangements ahead of time to meet coaches and staff and to be able to view the sports facilities (and perhaps a practice). If you don't schedule these appointments ahead of time, you may get to campus and find everyone you wanted to meet with is away or busy.

Because the experience can be so overwhelming and exciting, many student-athletes later feel like they were in a haze as they walked across their first college campus. You can prevent that from happening by bringing a notebook with you on your visits, and writing down everything you see and hear. If you're able to have family members with you on your campus visits, ask them to do the same. (But don't take anyone with you on the official interview.) Your family's notes and your own notes will help you recall sites, sounds, conversations, and names of people and places that you may not remember later otherwise.

Talk to other college students — both athletes and nonathletes. What makes the school special to them? Ask about the campus issues that are most important to students. Find out how large the classes are, what classes are offered in your degree plan, what the professors are like. Find out what the athletic and dorm facilities are like and how the team members get along with one another and with the coach and staff.

Ask your parents or other family members who are with you to help you notice details like whether the dorms have adequate laundry facilities and what transportation will be available to you. Find out who will be sharing your living quarters. Seemingly minor details like these will make a big difference in how you feel about your college and your dorm room or apartment six months down the road.



While you're looking around and scrutinizing the college campus, you're being scrutinized by those you're visiting and those who are hosting you. How you conduct yourself can play a big part in how the coaching staff and your potential teammates remember you.

See Chapter 10 for tips on what to take, what to do, and what to ask on college visits.

Committing to a School

Committing to play sports at a school is a huge step — a life commitment. For this reason, you need to refer to your notes and prioritize your list when deciding on a school.

Rank the schools you're considering. If your first choice makes an offer, you've made your choice. But in most cases, the third or fourth school on your list will make the first offer, leaving you to agonize about what to do. ("Do I wait for a better offer and risk losing this one?")



The answer lies in your notes. Ask yourself the following questions:

- ✔ What is it you want and expect from this school?
- ✔ What did you like most about the team and coaching staff?
- ✔ What did you think of the academic department where you'll do the majority of your coursework?
- ✔ What can you offer this school?
- ✔ What do the academic and athletic departments expect from you? Are their expectations reasonable?
- ✔ How much you are willing to give to go to a specific school? Are you willing to ride the bench and see almost no playtime just to be able to say you went to a certain school? If not, and if you have no realistic chance of playing, pass on these schools. Take them out of your ranking.



If you've ranked a dream school because of its image or status, giving little consideration to what it may offer you academically or athletically, you've missed the entire purpose of the scholarship offer. When a school makes an offer to you, it's pledging money to you because it believes you'll be giving something back. You want this opportunity to improve your education and to give yourself a promising career, as well as to become a strong and positive force for the team you're joining.

As you wade through the very complex process of college recruiting, you'll begin to understand why your school ranking system and the research that has gone into it matter.



Part IV of this book outlines what to do when you're given an offer: reading a scholarship agreement, knowing whom to talk to, making a verbal commitment (and understanding how that verbal contract can be revoked), and signing the National Letter of Intent.

Staying Eligible After You're in College

What? You mean after everything you've been through, after all the hard work, the practice, the playtime, the recruiting, the research, and the signing, there are still *more* tests to come? You bet. Your scholarship is good for one year. Assuming you adhere to all the rules and regulations, keep up with your studies, maintain an acceptable GPA, and work hard and perform for the team, you should be offered a scholarship again for the following year. And the process repeats itself a year after that.



If you fall below the minimum scholastic level required for competition, your scholarship may be revoked — and poor grades are an easy mistake made by incoming freshman overwhelmed by new responsibilities.



In high school, you have everything under control. You may be very confident, popular, and organized. You're the big fish in a little pond. But in college, be prepared to be a little fish in a very big pond — at least for the first year or so. There are far bigger, faster, stronger fish in the college pond with more academic savvy and competition to their credit. Your absolute best defense to this kind of competition is to know all the rules and regulations of your school and its athletic association before setting foot on campus.

Transferring

After you've gone through all that work to choose the right school, you may find that it's not everything you thought it would be. Or maybe you've intentionally attended a particular school with the goal of transferring after a couple years.

Whatever the reason, as you consider the notion of transferring, remember that the college scholarship offered to you is a yearly gift from your college. This gift doesn't transfer with you.



Before you act, be aware of the following:

- ✓ **You cannot have direct or indirect contact with a coach or anyone from the athletic department from another four-year school without the permission of your current school.** You must receive a release — in writing — from the athletic director from the school you're currently attending.

- ✔ **You must voluntarily withdraw from your sport and relinquish your scholarship before moving forward.**
- ✔ **Talk with your coach, athletic director, and guidance counselor to discuss the option or penalties of transferring.** You'll have to meet certain legal and financial requirements.
- ✔ **You may want to request an official letter of withdrawal from your coach.**
- ✔ **If you're denied the opportunity to transfer, you may appeal this decision to a committee made up of members outside the athletic department.**

Transferring is a decision that should not be taken lightly. Be sure to research and compare the academics and athletics, location, cost, and personal needs. But also be aware of the different rules and regulations for moving from one division to another.



Chapter 18 is an excellent resource on the different rules and regulations of transferring.