



The Student Athlete Guidebook:

Preparing for College Athletics Recruitment

A Practical Guide for Scholar-Athletes Pursuing
Highly Selective Colleges and Universities

From the Admittedly Admissions Strategy Team
Led by former Ivy+ Admissions Officers

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A Practical Guide for Scholar-Athletes *Pursuing Highly Selective Universities*

For many families, athletic recruitment feels like a mystery; Division I vs Division II vs Division III, when and how to contact coaches, and whether athletics can have a massive influence on admissions outcomes. The experience often leaves families overwhelmed by conflicting advice.

The reality is that recruitment looks very different for students targeting highly selective colleges than it does for students whose primary goal is being recruited as an athlete or receiving an athletic scholarship.

For academically strong students, athletics is often less about financial aid and more about admissions advocacy. And at many selective institutions, a coach's support can become one of the strongest advantages available during the admissions process.

Understanding how recruitment works, when to begin planning, and where your student is most competitive can make a meaningful difference.





Athletics Is More Than *a Scholarship Opportunity*

Many families assume that Division I athletics should be the ultimate goal. In reality, the best fit depends on far more than athletic ability alone.

Highly selective Division III colleges and Ivy League institutions recruit exceptional student-athletes every year. While Division III schools do not offer athletic scholarships, coaches can often provide meaningful support during the admissions process for students they hope to recruit.

For academically strong students, this combination of rigorous academics and coach advocacy can make selective Division III programs an outstanding option.

The goal should not simply be playing at the highest athletic level possible. Instead, families should consider where athletics creates the greatest opportunity while also supporting a student's academic and personal goals.



Bottom Line: The “best” athletic fit isn’t always the school with the biggest stadium or D1. It’s the school where a student’s athletic ability, academic profile, and long-term goals align.

Academics *Still Matter*

Athletic talent may open the conversation with a coach, but academics often determine how far that conversation goes.

At highly selective colleges, coaches frequently recruit athletes with comparable athletic ability. In many cases, a stronger academic profile becomes **the deciding factor** that motivates a coach to advocate for one student over another.

Admissions offices continue to evaluate academic performance, course rigor, character, and overall fit, alongside athletic achievement. The strongest scholar-athletes demonstrate excellence both in competition and in the classroom.



Recruitment Starts Earlier *Than Most Families Think*

One of the most common misconceptions is that recruitment begins during or close to senior year.

In reality, many coaches are identifying prospects years before applications are submitted. While NCAA rules determine when coaches may initiate certain communications, students are free to begin researching programs, building relationships, and expressing interest as early as tenth grade.

Students benefit from using their freshman and sophomore years to:

- Build a strong academic foundation
- Develop athletically within their sport
- Create a thoughtful college list
- Prepare recruiting materials such as highlight reels, athletic résumés, and competition results

Being prepared before recruiting windows actually open is often far more valuable than trying to catch up later.

Building a Strong Profile (*Beyond the Athletics*)

Strong athletic performance may get a student's name on a coach's recruiting list, but it is rarely the only factor that determines whether recruitment moves forward.

College coaches are building teams that will compete together for four years. They want athletes who are dependable, coachable, academically prepared, and capable of contributing to the unique cultures of their program. At highly selective institutions, coaches also know that the students they support must be successful in a rigorous academic environment.

Throughout the recruiting process, coaches are asking questions that go well beyond times, rankings, or statistics. Does this student continue to improve each season? Do they respond well to coaching? Have they taken on



leadership within their team? Will they represent the institution well both on and off the field?

For families, this means recruitment should be viewed as a long-term process of growth rather than a race to accumulate accomplishments. Athletic success certainly matters, but so do character, consistency, and a genuine commitment to both academics **and** athletics. The strongest recruits are those who demonstrate that they are prepared to contribute to a college community in every sense of the word.

D1 vs. D2 vs. D3 *At a Glance*

	Division I (~350 schools)	Division II (~300 schools)	Division III (~430+, largest)
Scholarships	Post-House Settlement (July 2025): per-sport caps gone at opted-in schools - every sport is equivalency, fundable up to 100% of a capped roster (football 105, men's basketball 15). Power 4 must comply; others may opt in. Opted-in schools may also share revenue with athletes (~\$20.5M cap yr 1).	Partial/equivalency model - fixed per-sport pool split across the roster, commonly stacked with academic and need-based aid. Unchanged by the recent settlement.	No athletic scholarships. Same academic/merit/need aid as any student but not contingent on staying on the team. Coach advocacy in admissions is the real recruiting benefit.
Coach contact	Most sports June 15 after soph. year (calls/texts/offers); official visits Aug 1 before junior year. Exceptions: men's hockey Jan 1 soph. year; baseball/softball/lacrosse later (Aug-Sept 1 junior year).	All sports: June 15 after sophomore year for contact, off-campus meetings, and official visits.	Coaches may take incoming calls anytime with minimal on campus restrictions. No NCAA recruiting calendar but off campus recruitment is restricted to post-June 15th of sophomore year.
Eligibility	Eligibility Center required. Age restrictions and 5 years to use 5 seasons of eligibility	Eligibility Center required. Less restrictive on age. 10 semesters to use 4 years of eligibility.	No Eligibility Center. The school's own admissions bar applies. At highly selective D3s (NESCAC, MIT, Emory), the bar far exceeds NCAA minimums.
Right for	T50 & Ivy-model recruits: students with high GPA and above average test scores who want elite academics and D1 competition where coach support can meaningfully improve odds at these reaches.	Less common fit for this profile - academic bar typically runs below T50/selective D3; worth a look only if campus and program are otherwise a strong match.	The majority of scholar athletes. Selective D3s (NESCAC, UAA, Centennial) require T50-level academics, and athletics is a real, admissions-recognized advantage.



Common Questions about *Athletic Recruitment*

Q: Do I need to be a D1-level athlete to get recruited?

A: No, and for a strong student, D1 often isn't always the best target. Selective D3s (NESCAC, UAA) and Ivy League programs recruit at the same academic bar as T25 schools. D3 is the NCAA's largest division with a lot of opportunities. The right question to ask yourself is, *"Where does my sport get the most admissions leverage at a school that matches my academic profile?"*

Q: How much does athletic ability actually help with admissions?

A: For a high achieving student, it can be the single biggest lever available. Many coaches submit ranked lists of recruits to admissions; this ranges from a soft flag to hard support slots (take it to the bank kind of support). It matters most at the highly selective universities, where admissions advocacy (not scholarship money) is the recruiting currency.

Q: What's the single biggest mistake families make?

A: Assuming D1 is the goal by default and starting too late. Coaches recruit 1-2 classes ahead, so by senior year rosters are largely set. For students with high GPAs, defaulting to less academic D1s can mean overlooking selective D3 and Ivy League programs where academics and athletics both count fully.

Q: When should we start reaching out to coaches?

A: Athletes can **reach out anytime**. NCAA rules limit when coaches can respond, not when you contact them. Focus on building the target list, profile, and proof of performance by the beginning of sophomore year so you're ready to kick off recruitment the day coaches can engage (June 15 after sophomore year for most D1 sports; see table on page 5).

Q: If I'm a top athlete in my sport (state, regionally, and nationally), how much will my academic profile help me stand out?

A: Significantly. At this level, coaches already have a deep pool of comparable athletes to choose from — a standout academic profile is often the tiebreaker that gets a coach to fight for you with admissions, especially at Ivy League and UAA schools that also weigh institutional academic averages. State-level athletic ranking opens the door; the academic profile is what makes a coach spend their limited admissions support on you specifically.



A Thoughtful *Long-Term Strategy*

Athletic recruitment is about more than finding a team. It is about finding a college where a student can succeed academically, compete at a high level, and continue growing both on and off the field.

The most successful recruiting journeys are built through thoughtful planning, strong academic preparation, and a clear understanding of where a student's athletic ability creates the greatest opportunity.

If your family would like personalized guidance on athletic recruitment, coach communication, or building a strategic college list, we'd be honored to help you navigate the process with confidence.

[Book a complimentary planning call with our team.](#)



Meet Our *Athletic Recruiting Specialists:*



Brendan C.
Athletic Recruitment
Specialist | Special
Teams Coordinator at
Choate Rosemary Hall

Brendan has helped guide scholar-athletes through the recruiting process at all eight Ivy League universities and numerous highly selective liberal arts colleges.

As Special Teams Coordinator at Choate Rosemary Hall, he brings firsthand experience as both an educator and coach, along with a background that includes the Reese's Senior Bowl and work alongside NFL talent, providing families with valuable insight into collegiate recruiting and coach advocacy.



Justin W.
Athletic Recruitment
Specialist | NCAA Cross
Country & Track Coach

With more than 15 years of coaching experience across NCAA Division I (Ivy League), Division II, and Division III, Justin Wood has recruited and developed student-athletes at every level of collegiate competition.

He has coached 10 NCAA National Champions, 30 All-Americans, and 43 NCAA National Qualifiers, while building nationally competitive programs. His firsthand understanding of recruiting, admissions advocacy, and coach evaluation provides families with valuable insight into the collegiate recruiting process.