

College Admissions: Can You Play Your Sport in College?

Wednesday, June 03, 2015

Kathy Smith Connor, GoLocal PDX College Admissions Guest Contributor

Sometimes my job involves being a “dream crusher”. It’s not a part of the job I like. I often have parents come into my office with the expectation that their son or daughter will be able to play his or her sport in college. For some, this is a realistic option. For others, not so much.

To start off, here are some facts about collegiate sports and athletic scholarships:

1. *A lot of athletes contend for limited opportunities.* There are 7,400,000 high school student athletes and 460,000 NCAA student athletes. Statistically, about 6% of student athletes will end up being able to compete in college.
2. *The odds of winning an NCAA sports scholarship are long.* Only about 2% of high school athletes win sports scholarships every year at NCAA colleges and universities. For those who do snag one, the average scholarship is less than \$11,000.
3. *Full-ride sports scholarships are in short supply.* There are only six sports where all the scholarships are full ride. These so-called head-count sports are football, men and women's basketball, and women's gymnastics, volleyball, and tennis. In these Division I sports, athletes receive a full ride or no ride.
4. *Scholarship amounts can be modest.* Beyond the head-count sports, all other sports are considered "equivalency" sports. NCAA rules dictate how much money a program, such as lacrosse or track, can spend on scholarships. Coaches can slice and dice these awards as they choose, which can lead to smaller scholarships than you might expect.
5. *Take flattery with a grain of salt.* Coaches may tell teenagers that they have lots of scholarship money to divvy out, but prospective student athletes shouldn't assume that they will be the recipients. A coach might not know whether he really wants a certain player until he finds out what other prospective players want to sign on to the team, and then he may drop the player with whom he had been in discussion.
6. *A verbal commitment is meaningless.* There is no guarantee that an athlete who verbally commits to a team will end up on it. A coach can change her mind about a prospect.
7. *Playing high-level college sports will be a full-time job.* Division I athletes may as well be called full-time employees of their schools because of the long hours they “work” to fulfill their sport commitment. According to an NCAA survey last year, playing football required 43.3 hours per week; college baseball, 42.1 hours; men's basketball, 39.2 hours; and women's basketball, 37.6 hours. Because of the huge time commitment, as well as time away from campus, Division I athletes will often find it extremely difficult to major in rigorous disciplines, such as the sciences and engineering. If this is the case, having the ability to play a Division I sport does not always mean that one should. Division III schools should be under consideration in certain scenarios.

With all of this in mind, here are some ways to determine if your student/athlete can compete in college. Keep in mind that you are working to determine if he can compete collegiately as well as which NCAA Division (NCAA Division I, II, or III or NAIA) is the best fit for his abilities.

Timed/measured sports are easier to discern. For swimming or track & field, one can look at a “time” (distance, etc.) and know whether the student will be able to compete collegiately by comparing their times against how fast the student/athletes are swimming, running, etc. in college. Generally, coaches want to see that a student/athlete

can “score” for them in their Athletic Conference to determine if they will make the roster and/or receive some sort of athletic scholarship funding. Obviously, the faster they are, the more money they may receive. We can look at CollegeSwimming.com, for example, and see if a swimmer’s current times could score in any particular conference as well as where her times would place her on a given college roster. In this way, we can tell if the student has a realistic chance of competing for that college, or any college.

For “subjective” sports (soccer, softball, basketball, etc.) it’s a bit harder to determine whether an athlete could compete collegiately, as well as which NCAA Division she is best suited for. This is done through a series of steps such as communicating to coaches, followed by sending video of her play, and participating in ID Camps and college showcases to get “exposure”. As the student starts writing to coaches, she notes which college coaches are writing back with possible interest, which helps direct the search towards the best athletic fit (Division I, Division II or Division III or NAIA). If no coaches write back, this is an answer as well. For certain sports, it’s also telling if an athlete made their Varsity high school team freshman or sophomore year rather than in later years.

While I don’t want to discourage student/athletes from pursuing their dream of playing collegiate athletics, it’s important to be realistic about their chances of competing at this extremely competitive next level.