

**HOW TO GET RECRUITED**

**STARTING THE RECRUITING PROCESS**

Getting recruited is rarely a fairytale story. It doesn’t just *happen*to you. The recruiting process is a complex, winding journey that is directed largely by the student-athlete. The more you know about the recruiting process—and the more effort you put into getting the results you want—the better chance you have of competing at the college level.

One of the best ways to impress college coaches early in the recruiting process is by taking initiative. Rather than waiting for coaches to reach out to you, be proactive during the recruiting process.

**HOW RECRUITS CAN GET ON A COLLEGE COACH’S RADAR**

Getting noticed by college coaches requires student-athletes to take the initiative. This starts with an introductory email that allows coaches to get to know an athlete, their academic and athletic achievements, and why they are interested in the program.

**LEVEL SET BASED ON YOUR INTEREST, TALENT, AND EXPECTATIONS**

Getting an objective view of how you stack up against other student-athletes is an invaluable component of the recruiting process—and often one of the toughest parts of the process as families learn more about how to get recruited. There’s no point in striving for a D1 scholarship if you don’t have the size or skills to compete at that demanding level. There are a couple ways to figure out how you rank: [researching college rosters](https://www.ncsasports.org/recruiting/how-to-get-recruited/college-rosters) and being evaluated by a third party like National Prospect ID. Most importantly, you should be honest with yourself about your desire to compete at the college level. It’s nothing like high school; everything is more intense, from training to the competition itself.

**LEARN THE DIFFERENT DIVISION LEVELS**

Once you’ve determined your level of interest, talent and expectations surrounding college athletics, it’s important to consider the various division levels available to compete in:

* **NCAA Division I**—This is the highest level of college athletics and, thus, the most competitive. [D1 schools](https://www.ncsasports.org/division-1-colleges) typically have large budgets, expensive facilities, and the student-athletes are expected to train and travel extensively.
* **NCAA Division II**—While still a competitive division, D2 athletes are provided more balance in their lives, as training and competition for [Division 2 schools](https://www.ncsasports.org/division-2-colleges) aren’t as intense. Scholarships are also offered at this level.
* **NCAA Division III**—No athletic scholarships are offered for D3 student-athletes, but there are many other forms of financial aid. The competition levels at [Division 3 schools](https://www.ncsasports.org/division-3-colleges) are still very high, but practice seasons are shorter, and there’s more of an academic focus.
* **NAIA**—A much smaller community than the NCAA—with a little over 250 schools—the NAIA is a great option for student-athletes who love their sport but are looking for a smaller or private college, or a specific major.
* **NJCAA**—Junior college (JUCO) is a good option for the student-athlete looking to get a sense of what college athletics are like at a two-year institution before transferring to a four-year college. Many student-athletes compete at the JUCO level because they are working on their NCAA eligibility or are trying to save money before transferring to a four-year college.
* **NCCAA**–A community of Christ-centered institutions with nearly 100 schools, the NCCAA is a great option for student-athletes looking for a faith-based education while competing in the sport they love. Athletic scholarships are offered at the NCCAA Division I level. The NCCAA Division II level is not permitted to offer athletic scholarships, but there are other forms of financial aid.

**UNDERSTAND ACADEMIC ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS**

Academic eligibility is one of the most important aspects of the recruiting process and can be overlooked by families who aren’t sure how to get recruited. There are different eligibility requirements for NCAA, NAIA and JUCO schools—and each school will also have its own entrance requirements—so it’s crucial to actively work to maintain your grades. A great GPA and/or standardized test score can be the difference-maker between you and another recruit.

**Think about it:** A college coach wants to fill their roster with athletes who will work hard. If you can prove you have the academic chops, they have less to worry about. Being academically sound will also open more doors for you scholarship-wise.

**THE RECRUITING PROCESS**

How does college recruiting work? For many families, the most difficult part of the recruiting process is understanding how colleges recruit, evaluate, and show interest in student-athletes.

**STEP 1: COLLEGE COACHES GATHER A LIST OF PROSPECTIVE ATHLETES WHO MEET BASIC REQUIREMENTS**

To start out, coaches need to gather a large group of recruits. They will identify recruits who meet basic criteria like height, weight, position, grad year, academics, location, and more. To do so, college coaches will use the following tools and methods:

* Recruiting media sites like Rivals.com or 247Sports
* Third-party recruiting services like National Prospects ID
* Recommendations from high school or club coaches
* Emails and messages from recruits
* [Camps and showcases](https://www.ncsasports.org/events) where they can see many potential recruits in one place.

**What this means for you**: As a recruit, you need to look at the college recruiting process like a funnel. Start out with a list of programs that would be a good athletic, academic, financial, and social fit for you, and then pare that list down based on your preferences and the interest of college coaches.

Consider attending camps and showcases held by coaches at schools you’re interested in. Create your free National Prospect ID Recruiting Profile so college coaches can easily find your information online. And get your name in front of college coaches as much as possible through [emails](https://www.ncsasports.org/recruiting/contacting-college-coaches/email), social media, and other [ways to contact college coaches](https://www.ncsasports.org/recruiting/contacting-college-coaches). Always include key pieces of information college coaches need to know to conduct their initial evaluation of you as a recruit, including your measurables and recruiting video.

**STEP 2: COLLEGE COACHES SEND OUT RECRUITING LETTERS, RECRUITING QUESTIONNAIRES, AND CAMP INVITES TO PROSPECTS**

The next step for most coaches is to begin [sending out messages](https://www.ncsasports.org/recruiting/contacting-college-coaches/recruiting-letters) to a large group of athletes to get an idea of how many might be interested in their program. Athletes who pass the initial evaluation will likely receive one or more of the following:

* Requests to complete a recruiting questionnaire
* Invitations to a camp
* General interest letters from the school

How do college [athletic recruiting questionnaires](https://www.ncsasports.org/recruiting/managing-recruiting-process/recruiting-questionnaires) work? They are forms with fields for basic information that coaches want to see about any potential recruit and are very common in college sports recruitment. After coaches send these communications, they will see who responds—and consider how genuinely interested each athlete sounds—and narrow their list of prospects down to between 500–3,000 athletes, depending on the size of the program.

**What this means for you**: Recruiting questionnaires, camp invites and general interest letters from a school may seem impersonal and not worthy of a follow-up. However, they do serve an important purpose. Respond to each coach with a personalized message, thanking them for the letter and letting them know you are interested in their program. Coaches are very good at spotting generic messages and mass emails.

At this point, many athletes want to know if a college coach is really interested, and the answer is usually quite simple: If you’ve received mail (or an email) from the coach, they are most likely evaluating you as a recruit. It’s in your best interest to quickly follow up to ensure you get to the next step in the recruiting process.

**STEP 3: COLLEGE COACHES CONDUCT IN-DEPTH ATHLETIC, ACADEMIC, AND CHARACTER EVALUATIONS OF RECRUITS**

Where do college coaches evaluate athletes they are looking to recruit? At this stage in the college recruiting process, coaches really need to get to know recruits in order to create a ranked list of top prospects. This often means they will get in touch with athletes and start calling their high school and club coaches for an evaluation or recommendation. They may also travel to large tournaments or showcases where many of their recruits will be competing, or they will send athletes personalized invites to their own camps. Official and unofficial visits can also happen at this time, as coaches aim to create a solid list of top recruits.

Once this round of rigorous evaluations is complete, coaches will have a ranked list of about 20–300 athletes, depending on the sport and the division level.

**What this means for you**: Don’t wait for college coaches to start contacting you! Instead, take the initiative to show them why you deserve to make it to the next round of the college recruiting process. Send them updated athletic and academic stats and highlight videos with your best and most recent footage. Ask your high school and club coach to reach out to college coaches on your behalf. And let coaches know you’re coming to their school for an unofficial visit and that you’d like to arrange a time to meet with them while you’re there.

**STEP 4: COLLEGE COACHES EXTEND SCHOLARSHIP OFFERS AND LOCK DOWN COMMITMENTS**

At this point, coaches will have a ranked list of their top prospects and will look to lock down commitments. How do college coaches make offers? As with every step of the college recruiting process, different coaches will approach this in different ways. In general coaches will have a large list of prospective athletes. Not all those athletes will be joining the team, but the coach will start by giving out offers to the recruits at the top of their list and then work their way down until they’ve filled all [open roster spots](https://www.ncsasports.org/recruiting/how-to-get-recruited/college-rosters). Coaches may still conduct on-campus visits at this step, so athletes should be prepared to answer if they get an offer.

When can college coaches make you an offer? That depends on the type of offer. [Verbal offers](https://www.ncsasports.org/recruiting/managing-recruiting-process/verbal-offers-and-commitments)—non-binding, handshake agreements between a recruit and a college coach—can happen at any time and age. However, one of the biggest problems with [early offers](https://www.ncsasports.org/recruiting/how-to-get-recruited/early-scholarship-offers) is that both the recruit and the coach can back out of them at any time. For example, if an athlete was given a verbal scholarship offer their freshman year of high school, that offer can still be rescinded by the athlete’s senior year of high school. This leaves the recruit in a tough spot if they haven’t been communicating with any other schools. Offers usually become official when the athlete signs their [National Letter of Intent](https://www.ncsasports.org/recruiting/managing-recruiting-process/national-signing-day), which typically occurs their senior year of high school.

After all offers are made and accepted, a recruiting class can range from 2–30 athletes, depending on the sport and division level.

**What this means for you**: If you’ve made it to this point of the college recruiting process, you need to be ready to handle some tough conversations about scholarships, offers, and financial aid. Talk with your family about narrowing down your target list of schools and make sure to identify the schools you’re prepared to commit to.

**STEP 5: COLLEGE COACHES SIGN ATHLETES AND ENSURE ACADEMIC ELIGIBILITY**

The last step for college coaches is ensuring that each recruit signs with their program and meets [eligibility requirements](https://www.ncsasports.org/recruiting/how-to-get-recruited/college-eligibility-requirements). Here’s how the committing and signing timeline works in most cases:

* The athlete verbally commits to the school
* The college coach extends an official offer
* The athlete signs the official offer
* The athlete continues to meet eligibility requirements by taking all the necessary core courses and receiving the required GPA in those courses

Unfortunately, every year, there are athletes who have signed with a college but end their senior year ineligible to compete at the college level. This leaves both the athlete and the coach in a tough spot. The coach will need to go back to their list of top prospects and see if the athlete who ranked number two in that spot is still available, interested, and academically eligible. The former recruit will likely need to compete for a year or two at a junior college to gain [academic eligibility](https://www.ncsasports.org/recruiting/how-to-get-recruited/college-eligibility-requirements).

**What this means for you**: While it’s easy to get caught up in the rush of athletic recruiting and signing with a school, you still need to make sure that you stay academically eligible. If you’re concerned at all that you may not be able to meet the requirements, meet with your guidance counselor to go over what grades you need to meet in your core courses and strategize a way to get there.

**WHAT DO COLLEGE COACHES LOOK FOR WHEN RECRUITING?**

College coaches have different needs for their rosters depending on the level of competition, open positions, academic requirements, and more. Some may put more emphasis on certain categories than others, but these are usually what’s being considered:

* **Athletic ability**is usually the most important factor, even when college coaches won’t admit it. Their job is dependent on the team securing wins and finding success, so college coaches are absolutely looking for the best athletes that they can sign. But this is not the only factor they consider.
* **Academics** are very important, too. Oftentimes, a college coach will have several recruits to choose from to fill a roster spot, and when that happens, they are more likely to pick the one with stronger grades and test scores because they are less likely to experience academic problems in the future and lose their eligibility. At academically rigorous colleges, it can also be difficult for recruits to get admitted.
* **Character**is more important than most athletes and families think. When coaches are out scouting talent, they like to observe how athletes interact with their teammates, opponents, coaching staff, and even parents to get an idea of how the athlete carries themselves.
* **Location** can also play a role in recruiting. Successful programs with big budgets may recruit all over the country and even internationally, but smaller programs may only have the resources to recruit from certain regions where they have relationships with high school coaches and can also cut down on travel expenses. In this case, recruits from a certain region can have a leg up in recruiting.



**COLLEGE SPORTS RECRUITING TIMELINE**

Athletes should follow the standard recruiting timeline that breaks down certain activities for each academic year. This includes:

|  |
| --- |
| **Freshman year:** |
| * Research different colleges, different division levels, and learn differences in competition.
 |
| * Understand different college division recruiting rules.
 |
| * Know measurables for your sport (40-yard dash, vertical jump, etc.)
 |
| **Sophomore year:**  |
| * Build your National Prospect ID Recruiting Profile.
 |
| * Compile highlight video.
 |
| * Build a target list of 50-100 colleges.
 |
| * Contact college coaches at the schools you have an interest in.
 |
| * Fill out recruitment questionnaires.
 |
| * Send personalized emails to coaches.
 |
| **Junior year:**  |
| * Continue contacting college coaches.
 |
| * + 1. write letters
 |
| * + 1. make calls
 |
| * + 1. Social media
 |
| * Narrow your target list of colleges.
 |
| **Senior year:** |
| * Commit.
 |
| * Visit campuses.
 |
| * Continue to contact college coaches and target lower division levels.
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**FIVE RECRUITING MYTHS**

The college recruiting process can get complicated. It takes time and effort to stay up to date on all the latest college recruiting rules, important dates, and deadlines that athletes and families should know in order to succeed.

Things get even more confusing because most families are going through this process for the first time and sometimes make decisions based on common college recruiting myths.

**MYTH 1: COLLEGE COACHES WILL FIND YOU IF YOU’RE REALLY GOOD**

Unless you’re a five-star athlete that is an elite, nationally-noticed prospect, **chances are slim that college coaches will line up to recruit you**. To start, only about 7% of American high school athletes go on to play college sports. Additionally, college coaches are very busy and even when they are focused on recruiting, they are usually working with limited budgets and travel schedules.

Standout athletes will surely get recruiting exposure, but the vast majority of high school athletes will have to put in effort. That’s why it’s important to stay proactive in the college recruiting process. Even “normal” recruits can find their right college fit and get recruited if they put in the work, which includes [reaching out to college coaches](https://www.ncsasports.org/recruiting/contacting-college-coaches/recruiting-letters), updating their recruiting video, attending the right recruiting events, and utilizing their NCSA profile.

**MYTH 2: YOUR COACH WILL TAKE CARE OF COLLEGE RECRUITING FOR YOU**

While getting recruiting help from your high school or club coach is always welcome, **it’s not your coach’s job to get you recruited**. Athletes and families should always stay proactive in the college recruiting process if they are committed to finding the right college fit and potentially securing an athletic scholarship.

One of the main reasons is simply because high school and club coaches are busy. Even if they are sincere in helping athletes get recruited, they have to split their time among each athlete. That’s not a lot of time available for a typical coach who also teaches during the day and has family duties at home. The bottom line is that your recruiting success is up to you.

**MYTH 3: YOU SHOULD START THE RECRUITING PROCESS JUNIOR OR SENIOR YEAR**

If you’re serious about getting recruited, **your recruiting process should start long before junior year**. For most athletes, freshman year of high school is a good time to start. College coaches are increasingly recruiting online and recruiting prospects earlier. In some sports, top prospects start receiving offers by the time they finish middle school. Most [D1 colleges](https://www.ncsasports.org/division-1-colleges) have contacted prospects and offered scholarships by the end of their sophomore year of high school.

Additionally, potential recruits should not wait until the off-season to start the recruiting process—it should be a year-round focus. That’s because it’s a year-round job for college coaches. By focusing on the off-season, potential recruits will limit their window while others take advantage of the recruiting attention from college coaches year-round.

**MYTH 4: SCHOLARSHIPS ARE ALWAYS FULL RIDES**

**No, scholarships are not always full rides.** Teams have a scholarship limit and can break up scholarships into partial amounts. For example, a fully funded team with a limit of 12 full scholarships can give out half-scholarships to 24 athletes. While full rides are out there, it’s one of the common recruiting myths that they are always offered.

**MYTH 5: IF YOU DON’T GET AN OFFER, YOU CAN JUST WALK ON**

While there is more than one way to get a[walk-on offer](https://www.ncsasports.org/recruiting/managing-recruiting-process/walk-on-vs-scholarship)—this includes being a preferred walk-on or an unrecruited walk-on—it is **still a difficult task to walk on to a college roster**. Some athletes think they can show up to tryouts and impress their way to a college roster spot, but that’s one of the more common recruiting myths. The truth is that most walk-on spots are reserved for recruits that were previously invited to try out during the recruiting process. Communication with college coaches is key, even for athletes who hope to walk on.

**ARE YOU GOOD ENOUGH?**

It’s easy for high school athletes to picture themselves at their dream school, competing at a prestigious university, and playing against the best of the best. But it’s harder to grasp some of the gritty details, such as rigorous training programs, winter breaks spent on campus, and little-to-no free time.

**ARE YOU READY FOR THE COMMITMENT?**

Before we even dive into which schools you can compete at, we always ask first: Do you want to commit to playing college sports? Your experience as a college-athlete will differ significantly [compared to your high school or club team](https://www.ncsasports.org/recruiting/how-to-get-recruited/club-sports). Practice and training are much more intense (you’re no longer the best one on the team), most of your time is spent with your teammates, including the off-season and holidays, and your academic performance is closely watched.

You’ll be better equipped on your recruiting journey and more prepared for the future if you know what to expect and fully understand the time commitments required of college athletes.

**HOW TO GAUGE YOUR TALENT LEVEL**

Next, you’ll want to have a third-party evaluate you to see how you really stack up against recruits across the nation. Knowing where you stand will help you target the right programs and maximize your opportunities.

There are a couple of ways you can go about this. First, you can ask your high school or club coach for feedback. College coaches often reach out to high school and club coaches for input, so there’s a good chance yours is already in the loop. Or you can turn to an online service.

Of course, you can always attend a showcase or camp where college coaches check out talent in person. However, most coaches arrive knowing which athletes they want to evaluate, so you should make sure you’re in contact with coaches ahead of time.

**WHAT COACHES LOOK FOR IN ATHLETIC ABILITY**

When a college coach starts evaluating prospective recruits, athletic ability is often the first thing they look at. Athletic abilities are the specific skills that are required to play a sport. This can include things like strength, power, endurance, and speed. Other physical abilities that may be needed for the sport in question include agility, stamina, balance, or flexibility. As coaches assess possible recruits, they ask themselves if the athlete can make their team better, if they can compete in their program, and if their skills are at the same level or above the players they already have.

Coaches also evaluate whether or not the student-athlete is [coachable](https://www.ncsasports.org/recruiting/how-to-get-recruited/coachable). A coachable athlete is one who is always looking for ways to improve, willing to apply feedback, and has a passion for their sport.

Academic eligibility is also a crucial aspect of the recruitment process. If you want to be an NCAA Division I or Division II athlete, you need to start thinking about your academic eligibility as early as your freshman year of high school.

**HIGH SCHOOL VS. COLLEGE SPORTS**

The transition from high school to college is already a major adjustment for any student, but the differences between high school versus college sports can make the change even more monumental.

But just how much harder is college than high school when it comes to athletics? Here are six key differences between high school and college sports:

* **Training is more intense.** As a freshman in college, you’ll train with—and compete against—older athletes that are likely bigger, faster, stronger, and more skilled than you’re used to. It’s extremely rare for a freshman to be the best player on the team.
* **Everyone is talented.** Every athlete on the team is there because they’ve invested time and energy into their sport. Not only is there little room for mistakes and lack of concentration, but you need to earn your spot on the team. Think about it from the coach’s point of view—this is business for them and if you’re not performing, they’ll replace you.
* **Time management is a must.** Between practice, games, traveling, and academics, being a college athlete means your free time is limited. **In-season athletes often devote up to 80 hours per week (or more!) to their athletics and academics.**  Smaller schools tend to offer more of a sports-life balance. Athletes at all division levels need to learn how to manage the time commitment of their sport with their studies and social life.
* **Your college team is everything**. In college, your teammates are more than just your friends—they’re also your family and support system, even outside of practices and competitions. You’ll live, eat, travel, train, and study together, have classes with them, and spend most of your holiday breaks with them, taking team bonding to a whole new level!
* **Your coach is more involved in your academics.** Beyond making sure your class schedule doesn’t interfere with practices or games, coaches may also keep tabs on academic requirements like mandatory study hours and a minimum GPA so you can continue to play. Some coaches even receive bonuses based on how their team performs academically.
* **There can be some major perks.** There are some great benefits of being a college athlete beyond the potential of landing an athletic scholarship or NCAA financial aid. Athletes are usually allowed to register for classes early, have access to state-of-the-art facilities like gyms and nutrition centers, train with top coaches, travel to colleges nationwide, and get what often seems like an unlimited amount of free sports gear and apparel.

**TALK TO CURRENT COLLEGE ATHLETES**

Don’t be afraid to go directly to the source. During official and unofficial visits, you typically get an opportunity to meet with current athletes and ask them about their experience. But in the meantime, you shouldn’t hesitate to network with college athletes to learn more about a program. You can start by reaching out to former teammates from your high school or club team who are on a college team. Set up a quick chat, prepare meaningful questions, and don’t be nervous! You’ll discover that athletes who’ve gone through the recruiting process are open to helping out a fellow recruit.

**DEVELOP AND IMPROVE YOUR SKILLS**

If you feel like you’re not quite ready to play at the college level, you can always work on expanding your skillset and improving your athletic ability.

**RESEARCHING COLLEGE ROSTERS**

Earning a college roster spot is part of a long process and a culmination of lots of hard work. But it isn’t just about athletic performance—there are other factors at play. In order to get the best show at competing in college, student-athletes should research college rosters to see how they can fit.

“What do college sports programs look for?” and “What are college coaches looking for?” are two common questions, but a deeper look at a program’s roster can help athletes and families answer those questions. **By spending the time to look on a college program’s website and analyze the roster, potential recruits can save themselves a lot of time and effort**.

**WILL THE TEAM BE RECRUITING YOUR POSITION OR EVENT?**

As a prospect, you could be a standout athlete that many college coaches would love to have on their roster. However, if you play a certain position or compete in a certain event and your target school has a logjam of athletes at that position or event, then it will be difficult to earn a roster spot.

On the other hand, **if you look at a college roster and see that there are several seniors graduating the same year that you will be coming into college, that shows the college coach may have a need for new recruits**.

One thing to note is that certain college programs recruit more transfers and junior college student-athletes than others. It’s smart to keep an eye out for this, especially for potential recruits who are still a few years away from college.

By tracking athletes at each position and event, graduating seniors, and incoming transfers, potential recruits can get a good idea of when the college coach will need to fill roster spots.

**IS THE TEAM A GOOD ATHLETIC FIT?**

Considering over[45% of underclassmen athletes are not listed on their college roster the following year](https://www.ncsasports.org/state-of-recruiting), it’s important for recruits to understand their athletic fit with any team. Is playing at a D1 program your top priority, even if it means getting little to no playing time for multiple years? Would you be more satisfied getting more playing time and having more free time while getting a great education at a high-academic D3 college? These are questions to ask yourself.

Potential recruits can also do some valuable research by looking into the athletic level of the college roster and ask themselves:

* **Does your size compare to that of rostered athletes?**For many sports, including volleyball, basketball, and football, among others, size is the first thing that a college coach evaluates for potential recruits. Not meeting size standards will mean you’ll have to go above and beyond the athletic level of players on the roster.
* **Do your times or results compare to those of rostered athletes?**If not, it will be difficult to keep the interest of the coach. Especially for sports like swimming or track and field.
* **Do you have the rankings to get noticed by the coach?** If you’re not ranked or have a low ranking, you’ll have to focus on improving.
* **Does your club team compete in events the program recruits from?**Many college coaches recruit a good portion of their athletes from a handful of tournaments, showcases, and combines. If rostered athletes are coming from the same events—like basketball players getting recruited from Nike EYBL and Adidas Uprising tournaments—that’s where you need to be as well.

**DOES THE PROGRAM RECRUIT LOCALLY, NATIONALLY, OR INTERNATIONALLY?**

It could be personal connections, a limited travel budget, or just habit, but college coaches sometimes recruit from the same schools, clubs, and regions year after year. Some don’t, but it’s smart to see where rostered athletes are coming from.

If a program mostly recruits locally and you’re in that region, that’s good news for you. **If a program recruits locally in a different region, or internationally, you’ll likely have to put in some extra work to get noticed.**

**WHO CAN YOU CONTACT TO GET NOTICED?**

Besides rosters, **athletic program websites usually also offer contact information for college coaches**, which you’ll need to get noticed throughout the recruiting process. You’ll generally want to seek out and contact assistant coaches since head coaches tend to be busier throughout the year.

**THE COLLEGE DIVISIONS**

The NCAA has three division levels: Division I, Division II, and Division III.

To give you a better idea of the size and how these college divisions compare, about 187,000 student-athletes compete at the Division 1 level.

More than 124,375 student-athletes compete in Division 2 and Division 3, with just over 186,000 student-athletes on its various rosters. And that’s just the NCAA divisions.

There’s also the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA). The NAIA has 250 schools and, of course, many options at the junior college level for high school athletes. All divisions share some similarities, but each has aspects that make them unique.

Student-athletes and parents should note that for the small percentage of high school athletes that end up playing at the D1 and D2 level, only about 57 percent of D1 athletes receive some type of athletics aid and D2 athletes fare just a little better at 60 percent that get athletics aid.

**DIVISION I: YOUR SPORT, YOUR LIFE**

**What is a D1 athlete?**

A Division 1 (D1) athlete is a student-athlete who participates in a college sports program that is a member of the NCAA Division 1. Division 1 is the highest level of college sports competition in the United States and includes many of the largest and most well-known universities and athletic programs.

**How many D1 schools are there?**

There are 363 NCAA D1 schools across the U.S. Division 1 schools have the largest athletic budgets and provide more scholarships compared to the other division levels.

There are many reasons athletes try for [Division 1 colleges](https://www.ncsasports.org/division-1-colleges). Who wouldn’t want to compete at a large university in front of big crowds against some of the best athletes in their sport?

But playing in a D1 sport is not all glory. Training and practice take up most of your time. You won’t be able to have a part-time job, an internship, or vacation during spring break. You may even be volunteering when you’re not training, practicing, or studying.

Every moment of your day is accounted for. Many athletes stay on campus during the summer and take their most challenging classes then because they can devote more time to them. Some student-athletes feel separated from their classmates because they aren’t training as heavily as they are.

You live, breathe, and sweat your sport because that is what it takes to compete at the D1 level.

**Division I and the Ivy League 8**

Some of the country’s oldest and most prestigious schools make up the Ivy League. They are:

* Brown University
* Columbia
* Cornell
* University of Pennsylvania
* Harvard
* Princeton
* Yale
* Dartmouth

According to the NCAA, more than 8,000 student-athletes compete every year for these schools.

Most choose the Ivy League for its ultra-high level of competition in both athletics and academics. If an Ivy League school is on your target list, note that these schools do not award academic or athletic scholarships.

Financial aid is based on needs determined by the financial aid office at each school. Some schools will change their financial aid options yearly based on your grades and sports performance.

**DIVISION II: A MORE BALANCED APPROACH**

If you want a more balanced approach to college, consider a D2 program. Being a Division 2 athlete also requires a lot of training and practice, but less than D1.

There are still the demands all student-athletes face, but it is not as intense and rigorous as the year-round total commitment of a D1 athlete.

Additionally, you’re more likely to be rewarded with aid as 60% of D2 athletes receive athletic aid.

**DIVISION III: A WELL-ROUNDED COLLEGE EXPERIENCE**

If you want to focus on academics as much as your sport, a D3 program is your best bet. This doesn’t mean you don’t train or practice, but it’s less demanding and intense than it would be at a D1 or D2 school. Academics are just as important as athletics in a D3 school.

A D3 program offers you a more well-rounded college experience. You’ll have a better chance to make friends outside your sport and feel more connected to your classmates.

**The surprising D3 differences**

D3 is slightly different from D2 and D1. One difference is that all D1 and D2 athletes must meet specific [eligibility requirements set by the NCAA](https://www.ncsasports.org/ncaa-eligibility-center/checklist). Each school sets its own Division 3 eligibility requirements instead of the NCAA.

Regarding scholarships, D3 students receive non-athletics aid through grants and needs-based scholarships, but that doesn’t mean they don’t do well. Approximately 87% of D3 athletes graduate from college within four years.

**WHY AN NAIA SCHOOL MIGHT BE YOUR BEST BET**

It may surprise some, but the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) has been around longer than the NCAA. With 250 primarily private, smaller schools, more than 60,000 student-athletes competed at NAIA colleges in various popular sports for the 2022-23 academic year.

Many consider NAIA to be on par with NCAA D3 schools regarding life/sport balance and level of competitiveness. The [NAIA awards close to $800 million in athletic scholarships](https://www.naia.org/membership/2017-18/releases/financial-aid) every year. That, along with more aggressive recruiting, is driving more talent to these schools and increasing competition. Today, [top-level NAIA schools](https://www.ncsasports.org/best-colleges/best-naia-colleges) are like competing on an NCAA D2 team in terms of competition level.

**DON’T IGNORE JUNIOR COLLEGES**

Between the three NCAA divisions and NAIA schools, it’s easy to overlook junior college athletics as an option. But junior college is a good choice, too. According to the National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA), about 60,000 student-athletes participate in 28 different sports at 500+ schools nationwide every year.

Many don’t consider junior college because there are some common misconceptions about what junior colleges can offer student-athletes. However, today’s junior colleges have a lot to offer, especially regarding scholarships and other cost savings.

Junior college is the best path to getting a four-year college roster for some athletes. For others, it’s a chance to stay close to home, earn college credit, and continue their athletic career. Here are four reasons why junior colleges can be an excellent option for student-athletes:

Looking for more reasons to consider attending a junior college or pursuing junior college athletics? Here are a few more advantages of a junior college that other division levels may not have.

* 1. **They’re more affordable.**

Junior colleges are less expensive than public and private four-year colleges and universities. This is due to a few factors. One has to do with the fact they are two-year schools which are cheaper to run. Another is that they often don’t have dorms to upkeep.

Junior colleges also tend to be more generous with academic and athletic scholarships. Plus, you have more time to save for a four-year school.

* 1. **It’s more practical than taking a year off.**

It is tough (if not impossible) to get recruited to play at a four-year college after taking even one gap year between high school and college.

But junior colleges offer remedial classes, which can get you up to speed on some of the basics and make four-year college courses easier.

Every major requires history classes, math, science, and English. You can knock those out in junior college. That way, you’ll be ready to tackle the major-related courses at your transfer university.

* 1. **Recruits can make an impact right away.**

Junior college athletics coaches look for players that can hit the ground running and may even recruit for starting roles. They know that since you’ve been a student-athlete at a junior college, you know what it takes to compete.

You won’t be a benchwarmer. You’ll be hitting the field hard.

* 1. **Increase your chances of getting recruited at a four-year college.**

College coaches like to recruit JUCO athletes because they’re a safer bet than their high school counterparts. Coaches know these athletes have a track record of balancing college academics and athletics while maintaining their eligibility.

While nearly everyone starts out with D1 as their goal, it comes down to what type of college experience will suit you/your child. The good news is that with four NCAA divisions, NAIA schools, NCCAA schools, and junior colleges, there’s something for every type of student-athlete.

**NCCAA: CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS**

The National Christian College Athletic Association (NCCAA) was founded in 1968 and has nearly 100 schools with over 23,000 student-athletes competing in 26 different sports. About 50% of member schools are dually affiliated with D2, D3, or NAIA, giving their student-athletes the benefits from those organizations along with a Christ-centered experience and competition opportunities within the NCCAA.

Earn a degree from an institution that can help your spiritual journey**.** NCCAA schools incorporate Biblical educational components and provide chapel opportunities.

**HOW TO GAUGE YOUR TALENT TO FIND YOUR BEST DIVISION**

One of the first steps in the recruiting process is to accurately gauge your talent level and get an understanding of the divisions you might be suited for athletically. However, most athletes don’t have a good grasp on what’s realistic for them.

It’s tough to predict what level you’ll be at in three or even two years. The good news: There are plenty of ways to figure out where you stand athletically. The bad news: It’s still going to require that you honestly evaluate yourself. Let’s check out some of the best ways to get a [better understanding of your true athletic talent](https://www.ncsasports.org/recruiting/how-to-get-recruited/good-enough-to-play).

**Watch college games at every division level.**

Watch college athletes closely and compare your current skill level to the competition. If you can, visit local schools and universities and see it live. And be realistic! If you need to improve drastically to get some playing time on a team, check out a game at a different division level and see how you compare.

The head baseball coach at D3 Webster University Bill Kurich [explained during a panel discussion](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=laOkSkMCpSA&t=62s),

“Go watch a Division 1, a Division 2, a Division 3, or an NAIA game.” He added, “One of the best things I did—I played at Quincy University—I went and watched them play. I sat in the stands and said, ‘You know what, I can play here; I can do this.’ I also went and saw Illinois State play the University of Northern Iowa when I was in high school, and I thought, ‘Well, maybe not.’ Not that I wasn’t as good, but I wasn’t going to play… And I knew I wanted to play every day.”

When you’re watching a game, ask yourself these questions to help you figure out if this is the right level for you:

* Could you compete with these athletes today? If not, are you on track to be at that level as a senior?
* Would you get playing time if you joined this team? Is playing time important to you?
* Can you picture yourself competing on this team and for this school?

**Review rosters of schools at different division levels**

There’s a lot of helpful information you can get from a college sports roster. To find it, go to the school’s website and [find the roster of current team members](https://www.ncsasports.org/recruiting/how-to-get-recruited/college-rosters). Typically, you can find it by searching for the athletic program and then your specific sport. Each athlete will most likely have a short bio that talks about their high school and collegiate accomplishments. Here are a few key things to look for:

* Check out the body types of the athletes in your position. How do you stack up to their posted heights and weights?
* Are you competing in the same tournaments and showcases as the current athletes?
* Review their list of high school accolades (e.g., All-State, All-City, team MVP or captain), and consider how your current compilation of accolades compares.
* For individual sports like track & field, swimming, etc., pay particular attention to the athletes’ current stats. Compare that to your current numbers.

Keep an open mind as you’re looking through schools’ rosters. If you never imagined yourself competing at a D3 school—but those are the athletes who most resemble you—it’s worth it to continue investigating what that division has to offer.

**Get evaluated by a third party.**

In many cases, it can be difficult to objectively evaluate yourself. Especially on something as personal as your athletic talent. That’s where third parties come into play. Experts can either evaluate you in person or via your highlight film. Make sure your highlight film is up to date.

You can ask your current high school and/or club coach to evaluate your talent level. Another avenue to investigate is evaluation camps. As the name indicates, they are camps in which coaches help high school athletes gauge their talent and give them improvement suggestions.

When getting a third-party evaluation, here are a few questions to ask the evaluator:

* What level do you think I could compete at right now?
* How much would I need to improve to get to the next level?
* What are my strengths? What weaknesses should I work on?

**Compete against elite athletes.**

Some athletes play for smaller teams and don’t necessarily get a chance to compete against other college-bound athletes. This does not need to be a hindrance in getting a scholarship, especially with smaller colleges. If you play at a small school, [find camps](https://www.ncsasports.org/events), showcases, summer leagues, or club teams to play against the best high school athletes in the summer.

**HOW TO DECIDE WHICH IS BEST**

[Getting a better understanding of your talent](https://www.ncsasports.org/recruiting/how-to-get-recruited/good-enough-to-play) is a great place to start when figuring out your best school. However, don’t forget that a great match is about where you fit athletically, academically, and socially. You may have the talent to compete at a high level, but that doesn’t mean that will be the best fit for you academically and socially. Keep all three factors in mind as you build your target list of schools, [visit campuses](https://www.ncsasports.org/ncaa-eligibility-center/recruiting-rules/unofficial-visits), and do your research.

**RESOURCES**

**Build Your Profile**

Having the opportunity to play college sports is not something that comes easily, nor without hard work on your part. Not only do you put in countless hours in the gym and classroom, you also must take an active role in being discovered. Countless deserving athletes never get the chance to play college sports because the right school never saw them.

It is also important that you help colleges discover you. Remember, you are competing with players from all over the country, not just locally. The more colleges that know about you the more opportunities will come your way.

The links below will help you get that process started. This is something that you can do for free and puts all the information coaches are looking for in one place. This can save you a lot of time down the road.

<https://nationalpid.com/>

When putting your information into your profile, don’t skip steps. Fill out everything you can. It’s like a job application. No coach is going to waste their time on incomplete pages.

When contacting schools you’re interested in, or are interested in you, this link will have all the information they seek in one simple place.

Here’s a link to help you fill out the Personal Statement. For most athletes this is a very important section, as it helps make you stand out beyond just your stats. Are you the type of person they want representing their school?

<https://vimeo.com/174354493?ref=em-v-share>

**Email Template**

Dear (Coach),

I wanted to connect with you as I am eager to be a part of your program at (School Name).  As an aspiring college athlete, I am driven to excel both athletically and academically, and I believe I would be a great fit for your program.  (Try to include a sentence on something specific about the school/team you like in this opening paragraph.)

My name is (Your Name) and I’m a (height) (position) at (School Name) in (City), AZ.  I am a (years) varsity player who averages (Stats) per game.  I am also a starter on my (Club Team) that competes in (List Key Tournaments).  I take great pride in my (athletics/academics).  (Put in your GPA and ACT/SAT here, and/or your athletic awards/achievements).

For the rest of my athletic stats, highlight video(s), academic stats, and personal statement, please visit my online profile at: (link to NPID profile).

(This paragraph is two or three sentences for the next step you plan to take) i.e. (tournament schedule, high school schedule...I would appreciate it if you could see me compete in person), (going to call you in the next few days...), I’m planning to visit your campus in (month), and would love to meet you or another member of your coaching staff.  Can you please let me know if you have any availability to meet with me?)

Thank you,

(Your Name)
Class of (Year)
(Grade/Position/Height)
GPA: ( )/ACT: ( )
(High School, City, AZ)

Online profile: (link to NPID profile)
Phone number: ( )
Social Media: @( )

Much of the information in this packet was taken from NCSA.