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## The Game Plan for the College-Bound Athlete

By Elizabeth LaScala, PhD



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School has started and for many students that means back to the court, track, pool or field to participate in sports. Youth sports provide a unique opportunity for children to acquire physical, social and personal benefits that can help them throughout their lives. Student athletes generally do better in school. Playing sports provides the opportunity to interact with peers and adults, teaches kids how to deal productively with criticism, to play by the rules and to deal with adversity in constructive ways. Kids can learn it's alright to make a mistake, learn from it and then move on. Sports can provide a wholesome outlet for channeling energy and build lifelong habits of physical fitness.

These benefits get misdirected when sports are used as a means to getting into a selective university or winning the elusive but highly prized collegiate athletic scholarship. It is not surprising that many young players dream of playing on a national team, going to the Olympics, or playing a sport professionally. What is surprising is how many well-intentioned parents, guardians and others ignore the data that indicate how few athletes actually achieve these goals. Young athletes face many important decisions. One is whether they wish to continue a sport in college. If so, the key is to fully research and understand both the college admission and athletic recruitment processes and how they interact. Here are some guidelines to get you moving in the right direction:

- Put academic success first. Remember, the higher your grades and test scores, the more opportunities you will have to attend a good college and play your sport. Your academic record begins in ninth grade and is based on college preparatory courses only. This is the key to being positioned to identify a list of colleges that provide the best combination of academic and athletic options.
- Be realistic in your expectations. Be honest with yourself about both academics and athletics. Remember that you will be expected to take and succeed at the same courses as your non-athlete peers at whatever school you attend. Chances are good that you will be earning a living doing something other than playing your sport when you graduate. So you want to be well prepared for academic as well as athletic competition.
- Since only exceptional athletes are recruited to play Division I sports, it is important to consider all the options, including Division II and III programs, intercollegiate club and intramural programs. There are truly excellent programs out there and you can always participate in your sport in some way in college.

- Remember you must initiate the recruitment process. High school students who are considering collegiate sports should start getting informed by the end of the sophomore year. Student athletes can register with the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) on line at [www.eligibilitycenter.org](http://www.eligibilitycenter.org) early in their junior year. Follow the instructions for completing forms and paying registration fees. There is an excellent NCAA guide that explains the procedures you must follow in some detail. Similar steps apply for the NAIA (National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics) schools. Learn more about this association's programs at [www.PlayNAIA.org](http://www.PlayNAIA.org).

- Make your college list in the same way as other students, include in your criteria for selection whether the college has a sport program for you. Be sure to include schools where you are certain to be admitted, those you have a good shot at and those where it is a long shot, but possible. Plan to apply to at least three in each category.

- If you are seeking an athletic scholarship OR an academic scholarship the same golden rule applies: consider schools where your athletic/academic skills and abilities are stronger than those of your peers and fellow recruits.

Just like on the court, track, pool or field, knowing the rules, becoming informed and getting prepared is the best way for the college-bound athlete to succeed.

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