

Preparing for College: Exercising Your Options: Tips for Student-Athletes

By Jennifer Gross [National Association for College Admission Counseling](#)
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You are an athlete. You look forward to working out, to pushing yourself, to competing against yourself and others. Perhaps you're a first-string quarterback, or a top gymnast or a star forward. Maybe you aren't a star, but you certainly give your competitors a run for their money. Or you may be happy to play just for the love of your sport.

Whatever your sport or skill level is, college offers you the opportunity to continue your participation and even to raise your skill to a higher level. From big-name varsity teams to campus intramural leagues, colleges have a variety of ways for student-athletes to hone their skills. To help you sort through the many options available to college-bound athletes, here are some things to consider when choosing a college.

The Fundamentals

"Choose the school, not the team," says Sarah McGinty, an independent educational consultant and supervisor of the Harvard Graduate School of Education teacher accreditation program.

It's easy to be dazzled by an exciting sports program or a great coach. But keep in mind that college is more than sports.

"The main factor in choosing a college should be academics," says Susan Hannon, guidance counselor at Rye Neck High School (NY). "Why academics? What if a student-athlete suffers an athletic career-ending injury or is unhappy with the team and quits? Will they still be happy at the school they chose or are they going to have to transfer to find this happiness?"

A good strategy for student-athletes, then, is to consider their sport as just one of the many characteristics to look for in a college.

Making the Team

One of the most important aspects of assessing your college athletic options is assessing your own skills and interests. It's fun to daydream about playing football for a Big 10 school or playing in the NCAA basketball finals, but you need to give your athletic abilities a cold, hard look.

"Athletes who overrate their ability may be set up for disappointment later on," says Hannon.

Talk to your coach about what NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) division may fit your abilities and interests. You may also want to participate in a college showcase that

"rates" student-athletes according to what different divisions require. The NCAA has three divisions:

- Division 1 is the most competitive, has the highest profile and offers athletic scholarships.
- Division 2 is the second tier, with an above-average level of competition, a somewhat lower profile and scholarship opportunities.
- Division 3 is made up mostly of smaller colleges, which range from division powerhouses to no-cut teams. Athletes in this division are students first, athletes second; there are no athletic scholarships (but Division 3 schools still have financial aid and academic scholarships).

Admission and athletic experts generally agree that if you are Division 1 material, you'll know it fairly quickly. In Division 1, sports are a serious business, and recruitment efforts are extensive and nationwide. If you're not being recruited by Division 1 schools, you should probably turn your attention to Division 2 or 3 schools.

To find out if you could make it at Division 2 colleges, send the coaches at a few Division 2 schools your information, statistics and a videotape of you playing. (Make sure to indicate which player you are on the videotape!) If you find that Division 2 coaches are very enthusiastic about your skills and are willing to offer you athletic scholarships, you may want to send your tapes and information to a few Division 1 schools, just to explore all of your options.

Division 3 schools differ from the other two divisions in financial support and philosophy. This division does not have athletic scholarships, although student-athletes can still get financial aid and other types of scholarships. Many Division 3 colleges operate on more of a participatory model than do the other divisions. At Division 3 colleges, athletics is considered to be on the same level as other activities, and student-athletes are definitely students first.

Even if you have the skills to compete at a Division 1 level, you must decide if you really want such a high level of commitment to your sport.

"Some student-athletes just want to play; others want to play at the highest level they can," says Hannon.

Each division offers its own advantages and disadvantages. If you want to play sports primarily for fun, you may not want the sometimes all-consuming commitment of Division 1. But if you have a good shot at making it to the pros, Division 1 may be the best choice (remember, though, that very few players--even those in Division 1 college programs--advance to the professional level). If you are on the borderline between two divisions or between two colleges with differing levels of competitiveness in your sport, consider how much participation means to you: would you rather be in the starting lineup for four years in Division 3, or have a greater challenge but sit on the bench more often in Division 2?

"Go where you can compete as soon as possible, which means traveling with the team, improving as an athlete and gaining some success," advises Bruce J. Jones, counselor at Plymouth Middle School (MA) and experienced cross-country and track coach.

Playing by the Rules

If you're looking at Division 1 or 2 colleges, make sure that you fulfill all of the NCAA requirements by the time you graduate from high school. The NCAA requires that athletes in these divisions have completed a core curriculum with a minimum grade point average and a minimum SAT or ACT score. You could be forbidden from competing in college if you do not meet the eligibility requirements.

All high school athletes that anticipate participating in a Division 1 or 2 college program must submit their high school transcripts to the NCAA Initial-Eligibility Clearinghouse. To make sure you fulfill the eligibility requirements, submit your high school transcript to the clearinghouse as early as possible, preferably in your junior year. Then, you'll have some time to schedule any courses you may need to fulfill eligibility requirements.

The NCAA also has strict rules for recruitment practices for Division 1 and 2 programs. Most of these rules apply to the college, but they affect students, as well. It's in your best interest to find out what rules apply to you.

If you're not sure about NCAA rules--and they can be a bit complicated--talk with your guidance counselor. In addition, check out the [NCAA Web site for student-athletes](#) for more detailed information about NCAA rules.

Studying the Playbook

It's easy to get caught up in "making it" to a high-profile team, but remember that you must live with your decision. Especially for Division 1 and 2 athletes, beware of being dazzled by recruiters or by the athletic program's reputation. Study each college's program for yourself: ask coaches, players and athletic directors the hard questions.

"Coaches have a relatively high turnover rate, so picking a college based on the coach can be dicey," says Jones. "It's better to pick the college based on its general educational philosophy: is it turning out pro athletes or accountants or chemists? What if I need to miss practice to complete a lab? Are the athletic mission and academic mission linked?"

Other good questions to ask:

- How much time will the sport take--in season and out of season?
- What percentage of athletes graduate, and how long does it take them to graduate?
- Where do academics fit in, from the point of view of the coach?
- Will you be free to major in any subject you wish?
- Will you be able to get extra academic support during the season if you miss classes to travel with the team?

- If you receive an athletic scholarship, will the scholarship continue if you get hurt and cannot play?

The answers to these and other questions can give you a better idea of how the athletic program at each college works--and where you might fit in.