

A Player and Parent's Guide to Women's College Soccer Recruiting

Version 2.0 (Oct 2013)



The goal of this paper is to provide, from a parent and player's perspective, a realistic view of the process required to play women's college soccer. While each family's circumstances and experience will be unique, hopefully, this paper will provide some valuable insights and opinions.



BEING RECRUITED - "THE BLIND SIDE"

One of the early common misperceptions is what I call "The Blind Side" fable. If you've seen the movie, you'll recall the scenes where a steady stream of top college football coaches are showing up at Michael Oher's house in an effort to woo him to their school. If you are in the U.S. Women's National Pool, some college coaches might eventually show up at your door; for the rest, keep reading...

Drop the expectation of coaches relentlessly courting you for their college team.

Job Searching

Yes, it's far better to drop the expectation of coaches relentlessly courting you for their college team. The best analogy for getting a women's college soccer position is to think of it as a job search. And like a job search, it takes lots of work to get the right match. You have to define your target companies (in this case, colleges and universities), research them, get the attention of the hiring person (coach), impress that person with a limited initial audition, be persistent in following up, and not get discouraged with the failures. For parents, a fortunate benefit is that you have a fantastic opportunity to teach your daughter a valuable skill; that is, how to search for a job.

Parental Interference

The pursuit of a college position to a job search raises a question. When your daughter graduates from college, are you going to be the lead in her job search? Calling potential employers, emailing them, and meeting with them? Parents should only operate in the background during the search process; and take a more active role (and then with some tact) only near the end of the process. Overt parental involvement can be an obstacle to a successful search.

"I dropped a good player because her dad was a jerk."

Parents, the coach is interested in your daughter, not you. And remember, most women soccer coaches aren't under the same pressure to win as are their Division 1 college football and basketball counterparts (especially in higher academic schools). Appear to be a pain-in-the-butt, and they'll walk away from your daughter without ever even giving a reason. "I dropped a good player because her dad was a jerk — all he ever talked to me about was scholarship money," said Joanie Milhous, the field hockey coach at Villanova. "I don't need that in my program. I recruit good, ethical parents as much as good, talented kids because, in the end, there's a connection between the two." (*NY Times, March 10, 2008*)

Parents can provide invaluable guidance during the search, including helping to organize the process and your daughter's material. Also, try to keep your daughter focused on her list of potential schools and not get fixated on a single "ideal college." And most important provide unwavering support during the inevitable highs and lows.

REASONS TO PLAY COLLEGE SOCCER

The most common reasons for wanting to play in college are:

Scholarship

Unfortunately, for most girls, obtaining an athletic scholarship is perhaps one of the worst reasons for pursuing college soccer, and the myths surrounding athletic scholarships are well documented. First of all, this is primarily a parent motivation, since they are generally the one who has to pay tuition. Second, the average women's soccer scholarship is under \$9000; whereas, parents can easily drop \$5000-\$10,000 a year starting at age 13 to play premier soccer – the math doesn't add up.

Only 6 of the top 40 colleges and universities as ranked by U.S. News give athletic scholarships of any kind.

Division 1 women's teams are allowed a maximum of 14 scholarships and D2 are allowed 9.9. Note that is the maximum allowed, and many programs do not fund all 14 or 9.9; some schools fund none. So best case, a team with a roster that is sometimes up to 30 girls is splitting 14 scholarships. Some get a full scholarship, some get partial, some none. Also, if your daughter is interested in playing for an academically elite school, only 6 of the top 40 colleges and universities as ranked by U.S. News give athletic scholarships of any kind. And if you are receiving any needs-based aid, athletic scholarships offset needs-based awards dollar-for-dollar. So if you are eligible for \$15,000 in needs-based aid and you receive \$10,000 in athletic scholarship, you'll only get \$5,000 in aid.



Finally, from what I've seen, the quest for athletic scholarship dollars often short circuits the most important reason for picking a college – choosing the school that best fits your daughter's academic pursuits and desired environment. The axiom of "picking a school that you would attend even if not playing soccer" often goes by the wayside when chasing an athletic scholarship. Women's college soccer has the highest transfer rate of any college sport; which obviously means that lots of girls are making decisions they eventually regret.

Gain Admissions

This is one of the best reasons for pursuing college soccer. Getting entry into an academically selective school, such as many in the Ivy League, NESCAC, Patriots League, Centennial Conference, or Liberty League is difficult even for good students (especially if you live in New England). If you can play at a level that a coach is willing to support your application, that can be the difference between getting in or not getting in.

Love of Soccer

I put this last, but what better reason exists? The effort required to get a position on a college team and then the commitment necessary to play for four years requires a love of the game and your teammates.

MAKING A GREAT MATCH

There are four things to consider when seeking the right match for your daughter: (1) college characteristics, (2) academic level, (3) athletic/soccer ability, and (4) the coach.

College Characteristics

When someone tells me their list of schools and it includes large public D1 universities, small D3 liberal arts colleges, some in major cities, others in remote rural locations I generally assume they have no idea what kind of college they want (or the parents and daughter have very different views).

The universe of potential schools can be a bit over-whelming at the start. But determining what kind of college you're interested in can quickly get you to a manageable target list. Answering just a few of these questions can help immensely:

- Do you want to be in a certain geographical area of the country (or are there some places you definitely don't want to be)? This goes along with how far from home would you like to be? (And do you want your parents to attend your home games?)
- Do you want a school that is less than 2,500 students, 2,500-5,000, 5,000-10,000, more than 10,000?
- Do you have a preference of being in or near an urban location? Perhaps the better question, would you prefer not being in an urban or rural area?
- Do you have a specific major that you think you want to pursue (for example, engineering)?

Academic Ability

As discussed above, soccer can help get your daughter into a college that she would not otherwise. However, there are limits. If your daughter says that she wants to go to Amherst or Hamilton, she'll still need a SAT in the 1900s even if she's a stellar player. Likewise, you can be on the National team, but you're not going to Harvard or Dartmouth with a C-average and 1500 SAT.

Knowing the appropriate academic level to shoot for requires some research. It also requires time as you will start to get a better understanding as your daughter takes the PSAT, SAT, and ACT. One caveat - some highly selective schools expect their students to take the hardest possible course load. So if your daughter elects out of the honors track freshman and sophomore year, and doesn't take lots of AP and honors courses as a junior and senior she might not be considered for the more academically selective schools.

There's no shortage of online information on college admissions statistics. The important thing is to do your research early and make the appropriate choices in regards to high school courses. At the end of this paper, I list a number of helpful websites.

Athletic Ability and Expectations

This is the trickiest one, with the hardest part of the search being a realistic appraisal of your daughter's soccer level. Parents are notoriously poor judges of their own children's athletic ability; our natural interest in wanting happy, successful children does not foster unbiased views. Your daughter's coaches are often only slightly better judges, either because they don't understand what it takes to play college soccer or they have a reluctance to give honest, sometimes expectation-deflating feedback.

Pursuing the right level is actually a multifaceted issue, since it includes both your daughter's ability to make a team, her expectations of playing time, and overriding goals (e.g., does she want to play at the highest level possible or use soccer to get to the highest possible academic level?). It also introduces the questions of D1, D2, or D3. Let's start with the division question.

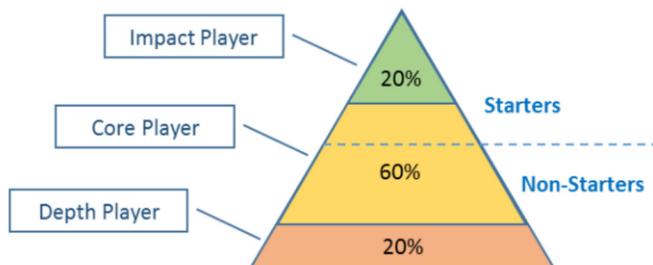
There's a common perception that the level of play is highest at D1 schools, next highest at D2 schools, and lowest at D3 schools. In reality, each of these divisions has a very wide range of play and overlap. The best college soccer is at the top D1 programs; however, the best of the D3 schools would be competitive against an average D1 program.

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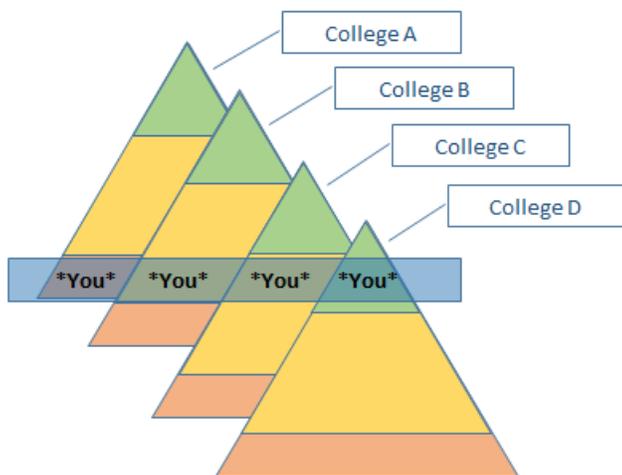
There is a plethora of online discussion of the various divisional levels. My advice is to let the division fall out of the search; in other words, get the right school (academic and athletic fit), determine your desired balance of academic and athletics (D1 generally requires a bigger time commitment than D3), and then play at whatever division in which that college happens to fall.

This also leads to an important question: what playing expectations do you have and what role do you expect to fill? Broadly speaking, players fall into three categories: (1) impact players; (2) core players; and (3) depth players. Where you fall in these categories is dependent on your (a) natural athletic ability, work ethic, and acquired skill, and (b) the competitiveness of the program.

The diagram below illustrates the typical make-up of a college roster, with 20% of the players being impact, 60% core, and the remainder depth. Impact players rarely leave the field, some core players start and others get playing time, and the depth players rarely, if ever, play. (diagrams courtesy of NEFC)



Where you fall on this chart is a combination of your ability and the level of the program, as illustrated by the following diagram:



As an example, an impact player at Notre Dame will likely be on a U20 National team or playing at some equivalent high level. Whereas, a Notre Dame core player (someone who might or might not start, but gets playing time) could be an impact player at Bucknell. Feeling pride in being a depth player (someone who rarely, if ever, sees the field during a game) at Boston College could fit within your goals. But if you're used to being on the field 90 minutes a game during your club and high school years, sitting on the bench for four years might not be satisfying. The point is, you need to decide where you'll likely fit at a school, and whether you are satisfied with that expected experience.

Finally, analyze the rosters of your target schools. How large is the team's roster and how many players are graduating? What position do you want to play and who is currently playing there (are they graduating)? Understanding the roster depth is especially crucial for goal keepers. Also, understand how the coach tends to allocate playing time for games.

The Coach

Assuming that the coach doesn't leave, you're going to spend lots of time with this person over the four years. Obviously, coaches are going to be at their best during the recruiting process, therefore, you need to research the coach and their style of play to ensure that you fit. You should talk to current and former players, and also talk to other people familiar with the coaching community (for example, your club coach). Find out what kind of experiences other girls have had with the coach.



TIMEFRAMES

The best time to start your college soccer pursuit is freshman year of high school. It might feel too early; people might even tell you it's too early; don't buy it. Start your college pursuit as a freshman. If you're already a sophomore, work to catch up. Remember, starting the process doesn't mean calling coaches and asking them for a position; that comes later.

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If you intend to play Division 1, some of those schools begin making verbal commitments sophomore year, and most are done before the end of junior year. If a coach is going to make an offer in the fall of junior year, they most likely have been communicating with you and your coach and watching you play for the previous 6-12 months (i.e., while you were a sophomore). Division 2 and 3 timeframes are a little later, but it's still good to start the process as a freshman.

It's important to show early interest in the teams on your list and make sure that coach knows you. Trying to get a coach to notice you for the first time when they are in the midst of making their final decisions is a challenge. The coaches will tend to favor girls who have made a previous impression on them. Those impressions include having shown interest in the college prior to the spring of junior year, coming to watch the team play, attending their camps, and providing the coach with information on you (possibly a recruitment video).

Freshman Year

- Get on the right premier team. For girls, the best possible stage is ECNL; but not everyone can or wants to play ECNL. Find a club and coach that has a history of success in getting girls onto college teams.
- Create your initial list of possible schools. Use online sites to read about and research schools (some sites are listed at the end of this paper). Try to get on a variety of campuses (urban, rural, large, small) and see what you like.
- In spring and summer, begin attending clinics and camps. Remember, you are always being evaluated, both on and off the field. Coaches are watching to determine how you will affect their team chemistry.
- Email the coach prior to each tournament, clinic or camp; and email again to thank them after the event. Within reason, use every opportunity to reinforce your interest in their program. Personalize your emails, and don't send an email with the wrong coach's name (it happens). Have an appropriate and reasonable email address (not lazypartygirl@gmail.com).
- Go to the athletic website and register as a prospective athlete.
- Most important, make good grades.

Sophomore Year

- Define your priorities (for example, play D1 on a top 10 team, get a scholarship, get in an Ivy League school, start as a freshman, be in a major city).
- Hone your list of schools to 5-10 colleges (this could continue to evolve over time).
- Discuss with your club coach as to your realistic levels of college play.
- Create a soccer resume.
- If interested in D1, focus on those camps and clinics.
- Go to the Admissions website and register as a prospect for the college (this is a different registration from the athletic recruiting site).
- Try to get the coach to watch you play at tournaments. IMPORTANT: coaches do not come to tournament games to identify prospects from random games. Coaches are there to watch players who have contacted them prior to the tournament. Before the tournament, send the coach your soccer resume (including jersey number and color) and your team's schedule. Remember to update the coach should your schedule change. After the tournament, follow-up with an email or phone call.
- Keep your grades up!

Junior Year

- D1 coaches can email after July 1 of junior year (although that is likely about to change to July of sophomore year). D3 coaches can communicate with you at any point.
- If possible, watch your target schools play during the fall. Make sure the coaches know you watched their teams.
- Try to get coaches to watch you play tournaments.
- Determine which schools are truly interested. If you are being actively recruited, you will know it; if you're unsure if a coach is interested, they probably aren't. But there is no reason to guess, ask direct questions. (See questions to ask the coach below).
- Based on coach feedback, further narrow your list. Decide if you are aiming too high academically or athletically; if you are (i.e., none of the coaches on your list are actively recruiting you) adjust your list and get noticed by different coaches.
- Take the SAT or ACT.
- Register with the NCAA Clearinghouse and download the guide for [College-Bound Student-Athletes](#).

Senior Year

- D1 and D2 coaches can call you after September 1.
- Most D1 and D2 programs will have made their decisions by the start of your senior year. Some D1 and D2 programs will have openings if one of their candidates changes her mind. The more competitive D3 programs will also have finished their recruiting by September 1.
- Lower level D1 and D2 programs could still be trying to fill their roster, especially if they found that most of their top prospects took other offers. Many D3 programs will be trying to complete their recruiting.

YOUR COACH'S PART

Simple fact of life – some club coaches are great in assisting their players in the college process; some are not. A European coach who is excellent at teaching soccer, but who never attended a U.S. college or coached at the college level, might be absolutely clueless in helping you get into college. Hence, an ideal coach at U12 might be very different from an ideal U15/U16 coach. In deciding where to play club, it's great if you can identify a coach who will be helpful in navigating the college process.

College coaches who are coaching club teams are often valuable because they understand the recruiting process and have a feel for the capabilities needed at each level. They also often have contacts and the respect of the other college coaches. Soccer recruiting is a subjective process, and coaches like to have their decisions reinforced by other coaches whom they respect. So it's great to play for one of those respected club coaches.

Western United Extreme is a non-profit 501(c) 3 corporation that focuses exclusively on Premier and Premier development soccer. A group of soccer enthusiasts founded the program in 2006 to provide a regional soccer program for western and central Connecticut and eastern New York State.

Western United Extreme is dedicated to providing the training and environment for the strongest skilled players to compete at the highest level of premier, high school, and college soccer. Our programs begin with premier development at U9 through U11, and progress into CJSA premier leagues starting at U12. In 2011, Western United entered into an alliance with SoccerPlus to provide our girls with access to ECNL leagues, the highest level of girls' premier soccer in the United States.



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One caveat is that some premier/club coaches view success as having as many of their players as possible playing D1. And coaches sometimes promote their girls into college positions beyond their ability or primarily focus on scholarship dollars as a sign of success. It's important to make sure that your coach is working toward your goals rather than his or her goals.

QUESTIONS TO ASK THE COLLEGE COACH

The recruiting process is also stressful for the college coach. Ultimately, the prospective student-athlete has the final say. Therefore, coaches have an incentive to keep as many viable candidates as possible interested. They hope that their top candidates will decide to join their program, but they know that those top prospects are probably on other coaches' lists, too.

At some point, you have to pin down the coach as to your chances and their interest. For D1 programs that's by early in the junior year. For D3 programs that is before the end of junior year. Here is a list of suggested questions:

1. Am I on your list of potential recruits?
2. Can you tell me where I am on that list (the top, top 5, top 10, top 20), and how many girls do you expect to recruit for my class?
3. (Depending on your goals and expectations) Do you see me as a contributor as a freshman?
4. What else do you need to know about or see of me? What are your questions or concerns concerning my play?
5. What is your timeframe and when will you know for sure to whom you'll offer spots?

Based on these questions and your intuition, you should have a good understanding as to whether the coach is interested. That's not to say that the coach won't eventually offer you a position, but at the point the coach sees you as a great prospect, they'll generally make that known. [For more on this click here: [Are you a buyer or seller?](#)] (Remember, D1 coaches are not allowed to email you until July 1 before your junior year and D2 coaches not until June 15 before your senior year. So not getting a response to your email as a sophomore doesn't mean they are ignoring you.)

USEFUL ONLINE SITES

The following online sites can be very useful in your college research. Also, many high schools have Naviance access for their high school students.

www.EliteCollegeSports.com

www.CollegeProwler.com

www.CollegeConfidential.com

[US News and World Report College Ranking](#)

[Description of Ivy League and NESCAC Recruiting process](#)

www.D3Soccer.com