

Playing College Soccer

For a talented soccer player, finding the right college can be an exciting experience. There are so many strong programs. Indeed, the number of quality college soccer teams, including those offering scholarships, seems to increase every year as the sport surges in popularity throughout the U.S. and more foreign players come to the country. With so many options, a family must carefully weigh which school is best for their child. That may mean combing through mounds of information, including brochures, guidebooks and Web sites focused on university admissions and college soccer.

Which school is best for a scholar athlete? A large NCAA Division I program with a storied history? Smaller Division II or III schools; the latter doesn't offer athletic scholarships but is less pressure-packed. A program situated in the Northeast? The West or South, where even as seasons wind down, weather remains warm. What's the proper balance of academics and athletics? Which approach to coaching and training is best for you? The right place for one individual may be less so for another.

This handbook will familiarize you with the college recruiting process and provide other helpful information. Use it to complement other resources. But also remember that finding the right school requires hard work. Moreover, it means using common sense and listening to your heart. If a place feels right, it probably is. That can make for an enjoyable and rewarding college experience.

Should You Play College Soccer?

If you've played youth club soccer at the highest levels, the answer may seem a foregone conclusion. It shouldn't be. College soccer requires a commitment beyond what most junior players have encountered. You'll be practicing more, not including optional training and conditioning sessions that aren't so optional. A number of big-time, Division I programs ask their players to rise with the roosters for weight lifting and running. You may not be able select courses that meet during practice or you'll miss class when you travel to away matches. Indeed, in some conferences with schools spread over several states, travel to other schools can take hours. Crammed into a hotel room with two or three other players, you may also not be able to study. Academics are after all, the primary purpose of attending college – at least for most people. But the rewards are undeniable. Consider that:

Soccer can boost your chances of admission. Given two candidates with roughly equal grades, a school is more likely to favor an athlete. That may be especially helpful at academic powerhouses where competition for openings can be fierce.

There are scholarships. If you receive one, you'll be able to afford college at a time when the cost of education is skyrocketing. Even a state school, where tuitions are generally more affordable, can set a family back more than \$10,000 per year – and prices are likely to continue rising. You'll have the opportunity to test your skills at a higher level. Most high school athletes don't have the opportunity to play for a college team; they aren't good enough. Moreover, the college game continues to improve as U.S. soccer progresses. You're likely not only to face top U.S. talent but foreign players. Succeed against them and you may even draw the interest of a professional scout.

The coaches are among the best in the U.S. Many college coaches possess A licenses, the highest afforded to coaches in this country. They set the agenda regarding training techniques that trickle down to all levels of the sport. No less than Bob Bradley and Bruce Arena, the current and former national U.S. men's coach came from the college ranks.

You'll broaden your perspective. You'll meet people of many, different backgrounds; some of them may be teammates. In the course of a year, you'll learn from them in ways that cannot be matched through more casual contact. You'll learn life lessons. Sports offer a unique variety of experiences and the better the competition, the sharper those lessons become. You'll continue learning about such areas as teamwork, discipline and dealing with adversity. Athletes receive perks. Some schools offer athletes early registration for classes. Among other benefits is easy access to tutoring and first pick of dorm rooms.

CHOOSE THE COLLEGE THAT'S RIGHT FOR YOU!

We've already made this point above but can't emphasize it enough. So we'll repeat: Trust your instincts. Choose the college that feels right, not the one that seems best on paper. To be sure, everyone likes the idea of playing for a school with a storied program, one that annually sits among the country's top-ranked teams and may have a well-known coach. But such a school may not be the best fit.

First and foremost, you'll have to consider whether this school will satisfy your academic needs?

Does it have strong offerings in your potential major?

On the playing front, do you relate to the coach?

Chemistry can be everything in player-coach relationships. There are more than a few stories about players finding that they didn't relate to someone's style or methods. They wind up unhappy, and in some instances, transferring or leaving the team.

Are you likely to get along with the players? They may offer the best evidence of the type of program that you're going to join. One recent college athlete discovered that his teammates were focused on furthering their own career instead of the team's success. The squad is winning but this top recruit isn't enjoying his ride. We repeat: Take your time and trust your gut. You're than more likely to make a good choice, one that will help you grow as a player and student.

GETTING INTO THE COLLEGE OF YOUR CHOICE:

The tips below are common sense. But they bear repeating:

Keep your grades up and show specific academic interests. College is after all primarily about education.

Schools seek serious-minded students.

Show your soccer ability. Ensure that you're competing in the right events outside your club schedule.

College coaches don't typically have the time to watch a league game; they're leading their own teams. But they do make a point of attending college showcase tournaments. Make these a priority in your playing schedule.

Complete all administrative paperwork on time. A comedian once wrote that 90 percent of life is showing up. Don't miss deadlines for filing applications and other documents and don't rely on others. Even college placement offices goof. It's best to double-check yourself if a school has received what it needs.

Develop contact with potential coaches. Remember that life is built on relationships. Even casual conversations can create lasting bonds. If coaches know you, they're more likely to remember you when they're considering scores of potential recruits.

Follow up on the contacts you make. We're not suggesting a hard sell. But persistence pays off. And by all means remember proper manners. Top recruiters in the business world favor candidates who greet them, look them in the eye and speak respectfully. As a college applicant, you're a candidate. Do the same as any wise job applicant would.

Brush up on NCAA recruiting guidelines and dates. They occasionally change and it's your responsibility to stay current. You'll find all of the above at www.ncaa.org. You may also order your free copy of the "**Guide for the College Bound Student Athlete**", or download this helpful book from this site.

What does the player need to know about the college, coach, team, and scholarship options?

College:

What schools should you consider? Here are a few questions to ask:
Does a college have courses that address your academic interests?

If you think that you're interested in a sports medicine career, you're obviously best off attending a school that's strong in sciences.

Are athletes given preference in scheduling?

It's convenient not having to wait in line for classes.

Where is the college located?

Some athletes perform poorly in colder climates or prefer a location closer to home. Others see college as an opportunity to explore new terrain.

Is the school big or small? What are the class sizes?

Some students prefer a steady diet of large lecture halls. Others prefer the intimacy of a small, liberal arts school.

What are housing options? What transportation is available?

Some urban schools have limited dormitory space for upper classmen.

Does the college have a quarter or semester system, or special terms? Is tutoring offered to student-athletes? Is there a fee? Is there a mandatory study schedule for athletes?

Some student athletes bristle at the thought that they'll have to study at a required time; they're self starters. But other students appreciate discipline being imposed.

Soccer Coach and Team:

What's the right team for you? Who's the right coach? Here are questions to help you decide:

In what division and conference does the team play?

If you're seeking the best competition, study recent records, not to mention conference representation at the NCAA Championships. The Atlantic Coast Conference, the Big Ten and Pacific Ten are perennial powerhouses. But teams from smaller conferences have frequently ranked among the nation's best teams. In 2008, no less than three different Ivy League teams crashed the top 20 at one point or another.

What are the coach's goals for the team? Make sure they dovetail with your own ambition. What is the team's style of play? Clearly, you don't want to play for a possession team if you're more comfortable counterattacking.

How many players will be on the roster and how many will travel with the team?

On a team with talent to spare, you may spend most of your time on the bench. It's better to play the games.

How many trips are planned for the coming season? What are the pre-season and post-season schedules? How often is practice during the season, and post-season?

Some coaches work their charges harder than others. Others may see a greater value in down time when players can get away from soccer. See what meshes with your philosophy.

How many seniors have left? How many red-shirt players – older players who have skipped a season because of injuries or other reasons?

On a team with many juniors, seniors and red-shirt players, you may have to wait a couple of years before you have the opportunity to play much.

What position is the player being recruited for and how many others are already playing there or are being recruited?

Some players relish the competition, secure in their ability to outshine teammates who play the same position. Others prefer guaranteed playing time.

What is the medical coverage for athletes?

Soccer is a rough sport. You want to ensure that schools have a good record in taking care of injured players. This may be an area where you'll want to consult with alumni players.

Scholarship concerns:

Not all scholarships are the same. Consider:

If a school doesn't offer a scholarship, what are your chances of admission?

Will you be able to walk on?

If you are offered a scholarship, what expenses does the scholarship cover?

What is the duration of the scholarship, and how can it be terminated?

If you're injured and can't play, will you lose the scholarship?

Communications Essentials

Strong communication skills can help your cause. Keep in mind the following:

The more contacts you create, the more options you'll have, and in some instances, the better your chances for admission. In short, speak with people and not just coaches. A casual conversation may generate useful information or lead to a helpful contact. It's no secret that alumni may carry sway with the admissions office.

Return all calls and emails promptly. Show your enthusiasm. Coaches are looking for strong signs that you want to play for them. If you sound tentative, they'll question your commitment. Coaches favor players who have expressed serious interest in their school. Don't waste your time or theirs by pursuing schools in which you have marginal interest. Act decisively and you'll streamline your search. You'll be able to focus more tightly on what's important.

Club, ODP, High School and Camps

Club and high school teams, Olympic Development Programs and soccer camps all play important roles in recruiting. Club play is essential. Coaches seek players who have competed for clubs with a reputation of developing talent. Many of these clubs compete at the state, regional and national tournaments. While not essential, selection to play on an ODP team can be a bonus since many coaches recruit from state, regional and national teams. ODP can be a helpful complement to a good club team. If you're playing with a club and ODP program, you may not have time for high school soccer. But then again, you may not want to miss out on playing with high school friends. It's up to you.

What are coaches looking for?

Coaches all have their preferences. They may favor a particular style of player or temperament. But there are a few common threads. They want players who combine athleticism, skills and integrity (They may even make note of your conduct off the field). They look for resilience –an ability to bounce back from adversity – determination and competitiveness. By position, they seek:

Forwards - who possess speed, confidence, tactical ability, fitness and scoring touch.

Midfielders - who are fit, strong, and possess tactical and technical skills, and who keep their cool under pressure.

Defenders - who are fast, strong, disciplined and have the ability to win challenges without losing their composure.

Goalkeepers - who are confident and athletic, and possess strong leadership and communication skills.

Recruiting Basics

Keep the following information in mind as you conduct your college search:

Even if you're a good club player, there's no guarantee you'll play in college. Consider the following statistics. Soccer is the world's most accessible game. From the millions of kids who play age group/high school sports only 3% will participate on a college varsity sports team, and only 1% will receive any type of college athletic scholarship. There are more than 30,000 children playing club soccer along in the Coast Soccer League, which extends from Bakersfield through Orange Country and inland past San Bernardino. A school may be in contact with as many as 250-350 players per year; 40 – 50 seriously (handwritten notes and letters, the one call per week, etc.); 6 – 12 all out; colleges will ask for early commitments from the top 3 – 4 they will ask for early commitments.

Strong academics will help your cause. But athletic prowess may help you overcome poor grades. In other words, if you're a good enough player, some program will want you. Conduct at least some your initial research into schools on the Internet. The NCAA Web site posts a list of colleges offering intercollegiate soccer. You can find more in-depth information about admissions and the soccer program on a school's Web pages. Most athletic departments have separate sites with links to their respective teams.

If you want to develop a more tangible feel for a soccer program, watch one of its practices and games. Evaluate the head coach and coaching staff just as they are judging you. Contact former and current players and/or parents. Hopefully, they'll offer an honest appraisal of a program.

Determine if you would attend this school even if you had a career-ending injury and could not play. If the answer is yes, it speaks well of the college.

Remember you can have five paid visits and drop and add visits as you go.

Division I soccer isn't for everyone. But that doesn't mean you can't play soccer. Division II and III schools offer an alternative (some of these schools schedule Division I teams). Also, many schools offer vibrant intramural soccer programs.

Yet it is also true that our club, Fullerton Rangers is recognized for producing talented players. Our teams compete at the highest possible level, and participate in top regional and national tournaments. All this will only increase your chances of being seen.