

## **The Recruiting Process by Drew Hoffman, Head Coach Freestate Thunder**

Drew has coached at Div I, II, and III schools over the last ten years.

One of the most commonly asked questions I receive is, "How do I get my son/daughter recruited to go to a college?" My answer is typically that you have to be proactive, but then I back that up and say that your son/daughter must be proactive. It is extremely important to realize that not everyone is recruited, and that not everyone is a legitimate Division I player. But if you do your homework, there is a good chance that there is an opportunity for just about everyone to play soccer in college. Is it ever too early to begin this process? In my opinion, no it's never too early. This article is just my opinion on the process, having coached at Division I, II, and III schools over the last ten years.

As a second semester sophomore or first semester junior you should begin to research schools that interest you. Don't limit your sights to just the "Big Time" schools you see on TV for college football and basketball. Be open minded and look for schools that appeal to you based on several criteria, which can include the size of the school, the geographic location of the school, and the type of school (private liberal arts, state college, etc.). Keep in mind that there are NCAA Division I, II, and III schools, but there are also NAIA, NCCAA, and Junior Colleges as well. While researching these schools, find out what their admissions requirements are to see if you could be admitted. Find out the costs involved in going to school there.

Once you've narrowed down your list to a reasonable number of schools (and that number will vary on an individual basis), go visit the schools. See the campus, take an admissions tour, and if possible try to meet with the soccer coach. You are allowed to take as many unofficial (meaning you pay all of your own expenses) visits to as many schools as you like. I strongly encourage you to let the coach know that you are coming so that you have a better chance of meeting someone (sometimes this may be an assistant coach – and don't be offended...sometimes head coaches really are busy!). You may only get a brief visit with a member of the coaching staff, but try to get a sense of what the expected levels of commitment are (is it a year round training regiment or is it more laid back?) and anything else that you may feel important to your decision making process. And most importantly, if at all possible, try to see the team play so you can get an idea of the style of play and if you can fit into that style.

Once you've seen a number of schools and have a better sense of the schools you are genuinely interested in pursuing, YOU need to stay in contact with the coaches. Let them know when and where you'll be playing so they can see you play. Most college coaches don't have unlimited resources so the major showcase events are always a best bet. Being a part of a well-known club like Freestate certainly increases your chances of playing in these events and being seen by the college coaches! Keep in contact via phone calls (you can call the coach whenever you like, but realize they may not be able to return your call) or via e-mail. Electronic communications has really opened up the recruiting process, but be responsible for your messages – write coherently, not using text message short cuts, and learn to use spell check and grammar check. You're going to be applying to an institution of higher learning so show that you're capable of writing. And have an e-mail address that is not offensive. Lastly, write a personalized message – don't mail bomb 250 coaches by blind copying everyone and addressing the letter to "Coach."

As you enter your senior year you should be looking to continue your communications with the colleges that you are most interested in. Try to get yourself an official visit (the soccer program may be able to pay for some or all of your expenses). Typically these are overnight visits that are an invaluable tool for getting to know the "guts" of the program. You'll stay with a member of the team, sleep in the dormitories, and eat in the cafeteria. You should try to get to see at least one classroom setting while on the visit. While on the official visit, ask the members of the team all the questions you may have about the school, the soccer program, and the coach. I've found in my experiences that the players in the program are the best salespeople for the program and the

school. Also on the visit, you should experience the social scene of the school but keep in mind that the players and the coaches are evaluating you. Be responsible for your own actions and be respectful. I've had kids visit my school and once they've left, my players will tell me if this is a kid we want in our program or not.

One of the most important questions you should be asking during your communications with the coach is about the application process. Does the school have an early decision or early action plan? Does the coach encourage people to apply early decision/early action and if so, what are the ramifications of doing so?

Now for the all-important question that everyone wants to know about – What about Financial Aid??? Everyone needs to know that there is not as much athletic scholarship money out there as people think! Division I and II schools may offer athletic scholarships, but not every program is fully funded so they may not be able to offer the NCAA maximum number of scholarships. In Division III there are NO athletic scholarships. Period. But every school does have a Financial Aid office and YOU need to make contact with them. There are literally millions of dollars of financial aid available on an annual basis but YOU need to be proactive about seeking out that money. There is academic money, need-based money, and depending on the school there could be money for all kinds of things. One example, at one of the schools I've worked at, there is a scholarship available for a National Honor Society member from a certain county who wants to study in a certain field. Hardly anyone knows about that scholarship, but if you do your homework and work together with the financial aid office at the school you are interested in, you can find out what monies might be out there for you. Bear in mind that at Division III, the NCAA is very clear that coaches can have no say on financial aid matters. The family must do all the leg work with the financial aid office and only then will a decision be made.

A couple of closing thoughts:

Be realistic in evaluating your own potential to play soccer at the collegiate level. Not everyone can play Division I. Not everyone can play at every Division III program. There are tons of schools out there and you need to see where you fit in. Talk to your club coaches or ask your director of coaching to evaluate you. They'll be honest and it's not about hurting your feelings or making you feel like a superstar. They're trying to help you to find the best opportunity for you.

Recruiting services – are they worthwhile? Some say yes and others say no. They are an expensive service typically, but they can get your name on a coach's desk. You can do the same by simply putting together a quality resume (try to keep it to one page, and include the vital information such as your name, mailing address, e-mail address, phone number, high school name, academic information, test scores, athletic information, and a few references such as your high school and club coaches). These services may help you to narrow down a list of schools that meet your specific desires that you may have never thought of before so don't automatically close the door to them. It's an individual's choice on whether or not to use one of these services.

Does video help? Yes and no. A high quality video that is roughly 10-20 minutes in length can be useful to a coach. Make sure that it is a video of you playing against a quality opponent. Seeing you score 10 goals against a terrible team only tells me that you can score against a terrible team. Understand that very few coaches will recruit you based solely on video. Rather it is a tool that can be used to spark a coach's interest in coming to see you play live. At the same time, video can be a detriment so choose wisely when deciding which video clips to send.

Can I walk on or try out? It depends on the program. Some coaches are very open to walk-ons realizing that it may not be possible to see everyone who is interested in playing for him or her at their school. Other coaches feel that they do enough in the recruiting process to know who is coming to their school so there is no need to offer any try-outs. This is a question you may want to inquire about while on a visit or through your correspondence with the coach.

Can this school pass the broken leg test? You need to ask yourself the tough question – if soccer were no longer an option (through injury or not making the team) would I still be happy here and get the education that I am seeking? If the answer is yes, job well done. If the answer is no, you may have chosen the wrong school for the wrong reasons.

I hope that this article is of some use to you as you are going through your college search. It can be a very frustrating and difficult process but it is one that deserves your utmost attention. After all, you are going to be spending the 4, 5, 6 years (or more) of your life at this school! Sorry, moms and dads. On the bright side, you are a member of a club that cares about its players and is willing to help you as much as possible.

I wish you the best of luck in your college selection process.

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