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Choreographing the Complex Recruiting Dance

By **BILL PENNINGTON (NYT)** 1777 words

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It is all about the coach's list.

More than 80 high school athletes went to Haverford College on Oct. 1 to inspect the campus, meet potential teammates and monitor classes, but for many there was a tacit tension. They were trying to gauge their standing on a secret ranking of players each coach will forward to the admissions office.

"You stand around with the other recruits like you're friends, and you are," said John-Paul Cashiola, an 18-year-old lacrosse goalie from Houston. "But you're also sizing everybody up."

"So you can't help but notice who he seems to be paying more attention to," he added, referring to Mike Murphy, the lacrosse coach. "You ask who else plays your position, you start to count, and you wonder where you fit in."

Haverford, a small, selective liberal arts college outside Philadelphia, competes in Division III, which prohibits athletic scholarships. But at many Division III institutions, including most of the nation's small-college academic elite, athletes can measurably enhance their chances of acceptance by being included on a coach's list for the admissions office.

There are no guarantees, but in the frenzied atmosphere enveloping top colleges like Haverford, parents and their children pursue any advantage.

"It can be stressful," said Kevin Friedenberg of Needham, Mass., another goalie, one of 20 lacrosse players who made the trip to Haverford. "You'll see the coach writing something on his clipboard and you think, Am I moving up or down on his list?"

The anxiety was laced with another dynamic: Murphy was trying to figure out where Haverford ranked on each prospect's list of colleges. He does not want to place a player near the top of his admissions list of about 15 if he believes a player's top choices are Ivy League universities or Division III rivals like Swarthmore or Williams.

Murphy has spent eight months sifting through hundreds of potential recruits; at this stage, he wants to support athletes he thinks will go to Haverford if accepted.

"It hurts my credibility with admissions if I push and scream for a kid to be admitted who ends up rejecting us," Murphy said. "You want someone who wants you. Of course, the kids are saying the same thing about the coaches."

This byplay between coaches and prospective players exists for most of Haverford's 21 men's and women's sports, and has an intricate protocol. The college has agreed to give The New York Times access to its recruiting process. Even at colleges that do not play football, like Haverford, coaches and their potential recruits are engaged in a kind of high-stakes poker.

"Everybody has a full deck of cards, but nobody wants to show their cards at the same time," said Clay Bartlett, a right-handed pitcher from Washington who has been a Haverford baseball prospect for more than a year. Bartlett recently decided to apply for early decision to Columbia. He is obliged to attend Columbia if accepted in December. If he is turned down, he goes back into the recruiting pool.

Bartlett, whose family spent about \$5,000 on six recruiting showcase events this summer, grew accustomed to nightly phone calls from college coaches.

"My cellphone has 14 coaches' numbers in the directory," Bartlett said. "It's fun, but it can be overwhelming. At times, I felt I could drown in it. The conversations with the coaches have been like something out of diplomacy training."

When it comes to their ranked lists, players and coaches tend to talk in code.

"I learned to be as vague as you can while also being direct," Bartlett said. "I didn't want to say anyone was my top choice, but I would say they were on the top of my list. On the whole, the coaches are going to respond in a vague manner, too."

Amy Bergin, Haverford's volleyball coach, said she usually told her best prospects they were in her top five.

"But I refrain from saying you're my No. 1," she said. "What if God's gift to volleyball drops into my lap? Now my old No. 1 isn't No. 1. And that happens."

Most high school athletes have instead learned to ask each coach how much playing time they will get. It is a way to measure the coach's interest -- if you understand the code.

"I listen to everything coaches say to me carefully," said Elizabeth Sugden, a 17-year-old volleyball player from suburban Chicago, who attended Haverford's recruiting event. Sugden is considering a handful of colleges, including Washington University in St. Louis and the University of Chicago. "There are clues to where you stand."

Murphy, the lacrosse coach, agreed. When it comes to the playing time question, he says he answers truthfully.

"To some kids I will say, 'You can help us,'" Murphy said. "Unfortunately, some kids will hear that and envision playing as a freshman and scoring 30 goals. But what I mean is that I think they can play, but probably not in a leading role."

"For the next level of recruit, I will tell them, 'You can start for us.' Which means they can start eventually. Next, I'll say, 'You can start early for us.' And the next step would be, 'You're a potential all-conference player.' The last response is, 'You're a potential all-American and will start as a freshman.' I pass the same assessment on to the admissions department."

Some coaches at Haverford, and at other Division III colleges, approach this stage of the recruiting dance with a less tactical choreography. Tom Donnelly, Haverford's men's cross-country and track coach, is one of them. When a recruit presses to learn his ranking on the list for the admissions office, a red light goes off for Donnelly.

"I know he has no real interest in running in college," he said. "I've lost some kids with fast times thinking that way, but I don't know if they ever went on to run fast times in college."

Donnelly, who has coached 95 all-Americans in 31 years at Haverford, calls potential applicants whose lobbying efforts seem too professional "résumé runners."

"There is one high school, a good school, where I think they have classes that teach the kids how to sell themselves to college coaches," said Donnelly, who added that he no longer put prospects from that school on any of his admissions office lists. "I don't feel like my list makes that much of a difference in admissions, but given the chance I am going to support the kids who I believe really want a great college running experience. There are too many who use their cross-country records as just another way to sell themselves to the Ivy League or to their fallback schools, like Haverford or Bowdoin."

"They're great kids, but they sound like they've been rehearsed. Those kids usually come out for the team and last one season."

Donnelly shepherds Haverford's most successful athletic program. Last year's cross-country team finished fourth in the Division III national championships.

Describing his recruiting philosophy, he said, "I look for nice kids who like to run."

And how does he persuade them to come to Haverford?

"I send them a handwritten letter," Donnelly said. "That probably so shocks them, they say, 'I've got to check out this place.'"

The Oct. 1 recruiting event wound down with more than 60 prospects heading off to spend the night with current Haverford athletes. At the major college sports powers, a day like this could include a visit to a 100,000-seat on-campus stadium, where the recruits' names are flashed on the scoreboard.

At Haverford, Coach Wendy Smith, after leading her women's soccer team to a 2-0 victory over state rival Muhlenberg, sat her players and her 18 prospects on the field to share a bucket of sliced oranges. Earlier, at a forum in a quiet auditorium, the potential recruits and their parents heard from a history professor, the dean of first-year students, an admissions officer and the head of financial aid.

At the lacrosse field, the scrimmage was breaking up and the high schoolers were walking toward their hosts' dorm rooms to change for a reception that evening.

"We were told, 'No sandals, no T-shirts, a collared shirt,'" Cashiola, the goalie from Houston, said, smiling. "Maybe they want to see how we clean up."

In his office, Murphy sat below a large chart of his top lacrosse prospects this year. Each name was written on a small strip of magnetic tape, with the positions coded by color and the players within each position ranked, generally, by ability.

Since the spring, the names have been shifting, some even coming off the chart because the players committed to another college or performed poorly at a camp Murphy attended, or because their grades and test scores did not, over the months, improve enough.

In Murphy's bottom left drawer were dozens of magnetic strips from previous years, with the names of top players who chose not to attend Haverford.

Picking through the pile, Murphy said: "This kid went to Dartmouth, this one to Harvard, this one to Tufts, this one to Holy Cross. I don't know why I keep them. Maybe to torture myself."

Murphy's chart is a kind of spreadsheet of his active admissions list. But there is a reason the magnetic strips are easy to move. Murphy said the recruiting weekend would probably bring more changes to his list, especially after he learned more about the other colleges his prospects were pondering.

"But I never ask them where we stand compared to other schools while they're here," Murphy said. "They've just met a bunch of 22-year-old girls the night before. They're too excited about it."

"That isn't the time. I'll call in a few days."

Trying to Achieve Diversity by Persuasion

By **BILL PENNINGTON (NYT)** 749 words

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Greg Kannerstein, the longtime athletic director and former coach and player at Haverford College, has watched the recruiting process in Division III athletics transform from a homespun endeavor to an orchestrated, expensive enterprise. High school athletes, trying to catch the eye of coaches at elite small colleges, now routinely tour the country to audition at showcases, and many hire recruiting services to market themselves.

Among the side effects, Kannerstein said, is the inadvertent exclusion of many inner-city and minority athletes.

"Division III institutions are going to great lengths to increase the minority population in the overall student body," Kannerstein said. "At the same time, because of the advent of the kind of recruiting we're now doing, sometimes I feel we're resegregating athletics. Many inner-city kids are losing the chance to come to the kind of college where they could flourish."

The Haverford athletic department has a multicultural recruiter, Ty Taylor, but he concedes it can be a challenge to attract minority athletes. A Division III college like Haverford cannot award athletic scholarships, nor does it pay for potential recruits to travel to the campus in suburban Philadelphia.

"Kids from affluent areas of the country go to the camps and all-star tournaments, and spend the summer touring colleges and meeting coaches," Taylor said. "They know how to get on a college coach's radar. I can go to a college fair in Cleveland, and there might be interest in Haverford, but economically, it's going to be a stretch for those kids to even get to our campus."

"I hear high school counselors pushing the kids to nearby safety schools instead."

People of color make up 30 percent of the Haverford student body and about 17 percent of its varsity athletes, Kannerstein said.

Ann Koger, the women's tennis coach at Haverford, says many inner-city students interested in college sports look no further than a Division I athletic scholarship.

"They are told that if you don't get a scholarship, forget it, you've failed," Koger said. "They are told the prize is a scholarship. The prize should be an education. Nobody's selling Division III."

Coaches and administrators said that inner-city athletes who approach colleges like Haverford frequently do so too late to be viable candidates.

"In the other communities, they tell their kids to get this process started early in high school," Koger said. "They learn to get their test scores and grades in order. I am constantly hearing from students for the first time when it's October and they're already seniors in high school."

Fran Rizzo, the women's track coach at Haverford, recalled a recent applicant from Philadelphia who was the state champion in the triple jump. The student ranked in the top five of her high school class, Rizzo said. But she had not taken the honors and advanced-placement classes customarily sought by Haverford and was denied admission.

Some Haverford coaches suggested that student athletes from rural areas faced a similar disadvantage because they were not as close to travel-team networks. Their high schools may not regularly send graduates to top-ranked colleges, so their counselors may be less savvy about the admissions labyrinth.

Many athletes from city high schools, coaches said, go on to play sports at all levels of collegiate athletics.

"We are very versed in Division III opportunities," said Frank Greco, the athletic director and women's basketball and softball coach at Central High, a selective public high school in Philadelphia. "A.A.U. basketball has created a wider network for spotting potential talent than there was 10 years ago. But I don't think a lot of kids recognize how plentiful the opportunities are in Division III. They don't see them on TV. The kids all want to go to Duke or Notre Dame. I have to educate them."

Lurline Jones, the athletic director and girls' basketball coach at University City High School in Philadelphia, began holding low-cost showcase events for girls nearly 20 years ago.

"It has helped a lot of kids," she said. "But the Division III schools should become a little more visible. If more kids knew about them, they might think of them as a viable option."

Racing One Another, Athletes Are Driven to Early Decisions

By BILL PENNINGTON (NYT) 660 words

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As athletic recruiting in Division III college sports has become more competitive, trends trickle down from the high-powered world of Division I. The most recognizable one has been new pressure on high school athletes to file early-decision applications by November, a process that binds them to a college if accepted in December.

Applying early, instead of by the traditional deadline, is increasingly popular nationwide even among nonathletes; colleges often look more favorably on applicants who are willing to make a commitment.

Coaches and administrators say athletes are jumping in early at a greater rate because of worries that whatever advantage they have in the admissions process will evaporate. If they wait, they reason, other athletes who have applied early will take up those spots.

"That's our problem: a lot of the early-decision process is born out of fear," Dave Beccaria, the baseball coach for Division III Haverford College, said. "If you are certain of where you want to spend the next four years, early decision is a good idea. But some student athletes believe they have to grab at something, whatever it is, right now or lose out. That's not what early decision is about."

Several Haverford coaches said that, subtly or inadvertently, they passed early-decision pressure onto prospects because more and more of them were applying early.

"You have to be honest if a recruit asks you, 'Are there other recruits at my position who might apply early?'" Mike Murphy, Haverford's lacrosse coach, said. "What I really don't like is that some Division I programs are squeezing kids for a commitment as early as September. That's imposing an arbitrary deadline to make a 17-year-old kid nervous. That trickles down, too. I'd like to see us as coaches agree to ratchet down the pressure."

High school athletes have been quick to grasp the changing landscape. "I've had coaches tell me they would hold off recruiting another middle infielder if I go early decision to their school," said Casey Ennis, a 17-year-old shortstop and second baseman from Chester, N.J., who has been recruited by several colleges, including Haverford.

"They say it's a bird-in-the-hand thing. So that can go in your favor. Then again, if you go early decision and don't get in, other schools might say: 'Why didn't you pick us for early decision? We're clearly not your first choice.' So you can get caught in between."

In an interview this month at a Haverford recruiting event, Brian Fleishhacker, a lacrosse player from Manhasset, N.Y., said that five of his high school teammates had committed to Division I colleges.

"Early decision is the way to go," Fleishhacker said. "You know you're on the team."

But there can be drawbacks. Athletes who opt for early decision cannot wait to see where else they may be accepted, and therefore cannot compare financial packages that may be offered by other colleges.

Last year, Haverford admitted 98 of 230 (43 percent) early-decision applicants and about 700 of 2,900 (24 percent) during the regular admission process.

The Athlete's Edge

Articles in this series will periodically examine how Haverford coaches decide whom to support in the admissions process, how the athletics and admissions offices interact, and why some applicants are accepted and others are declined. Bill Pennington discusses recruiting at elite small colleges at nytimes.com/sports.