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The Athlete's Edge

In Winnowing the Candidates at Haverford, Every Little Thing Counts

By **BILL PENNINGTON**

Wherever he goes, Jess Lord, the dean of admissions and financial aid at Haverford College, says he hears the same thing: An athletic career is a good way to improve your chances of getting into an elite college. It is no myth.

"If you're an athlete and can get a coach to support you, there's your concrete hook in admissions," Lord said in an interview in November at his office on campus. "It's true. Just like it's true that living in North Dakota is a hook because we seek geographic diversity. It's also true that there's a hook for brilliant 17-year-old physicists and pianists. But those are the less observable paths in the admissions process. And that's the problem. People like the idea of something concrete."

Across a cobblestone walkway from Lord's office, Greg Kannerstein, the college's director of athletics, sat in his office, holding the first tangible evidence of six months' worth of athletic recruiting by his staff of 16 coaches at this small and selective liberal arts college outside Philadelphia. Haverford and other N.C.A.A. Division III institutions do not grant athletic scholarships, but the effort to attract top student-athletes and to help them navigate the admissions process is rigorous.

With a Nov. 15 deadline for early decision applications passed, Kannerstein had been given four pages that listed 71 recruited athletes whom Haverford's coaches were supporting. The names represented a diminution of candidates from lists that were once as large as 1,000 per sport. In the end, Haverford's incoming freshman class of about 315 students may include 55 recruited athletes.

Kannerstein, seated with the associate athletic director, Wendy Smith, estimated that at most half of those on the list would be admitted in this early screening by the admissions office, with the rest deferred to the regular-decision process in the spring.

They immediately started condensing, trying to arrive at 30 to 35 applicants who figured to have the best chance of being admitted and of having an impact on Haverford athletics.

Over the next several days, the winnowing would call upon a diverse, unpredictable and variable number of factors, a telling contradiction to the orchestrated and regimented efforts that parents and their sports-playing children devise to try to harvest the athletic advantage in college admissions.

The evaluation of applicants delved into unseen academic and overlooked athletic attributes, a mosaic of judgments, like whether a Haverford team was graduating its starting goalie or starting center forward or whether the applicant had completed the desired mix of high school classes.

In the most standard cases, recruited athletes were not endorsed during Kannerstein's and Smith's initial vetting because of low scores on the College Board exams - at least as compared with the median score for the last freshman class, which was 1,380 on the two-part SAT exam. Others had high school averages below a B-plus. It was rare, though, that one factor alone mattered.

Perhaps more surprising was how many candidates lost support because of curriculum choices. Some had not taken the handful of advanced placement courses that are preferred by Haverford.

Others had perhaps unwittingly taken advanced placement courses that would carry less weight with admissions. An advanced placement course in statistics, for example, while valued and considered challenging, is not seen as a substitute for advanced placement calculus. Even some coaches have been tutored by admissions to notice that difference, and others like it. An advanced placement course in environmental science, for instance, does not impress as much as one in physics, chemistry or biology.

Others dropped to the second half of the list of recruited athletes because they came off poorly in their interview with an admissions office representative.

"Some of the things that kids will say in interviews, the red flags that are raised, are unbelievable," Smith said. "You'll say to yourself, 'You're kidding me, right?' And I will know: That kid is not getting in."

Kannerstein, as an associate dean of the college and as acting dean of admissions last year, has access to the interviewer's notes and frequently cross-checks them against his list of athletes. He recalled a prospective student who bragged about breaking into his neighbor's kitchen when he was hungry. The prospect added that his neighbors could never figure out what had happened to their food.

Other candidates might not have visited the campus for the interview, a faux pas if the applicant lives within 150 miles of campus. It suggests a lack of interest.

There were many other variables, including the ones that elevated a candidate on the list, meaning that the athletic department would ultimately lobby hard to try to have the student admitted. For instance, two applicants were considered two-sport athletes. That is usually discouraged at Division I powerhouses but is customarily viewed as a benefit at Division III institutions.

Another applicant was considered a bit of a stretch academically based on test scores and grades, but she was learning a third language beyond English, and that impressed Kannerstein. Because the coaches also submit a wish-list ranking of their potential recruits, the fact that the applicant was ranked second by a coach was a contributing factor, too.

A top coach's ranking gave a similar boost to another candidate who had taught herself sign language and who had worked with deaf students. Another applicant was considered the best soprano in her state. Another was a talented writer, something Kannerstein determined by typing the applicant's name into an Internet search engine, revealing articles that he had written for his school newspaper.

Frequently, the variables were entirely sports-related. Because the softball team needs a catcher, that could lead to pushing to accept a student who plays that position.

"We can and have gone to admissions and said, 'We have to admit a goalie in field hockey or we won't have a team,' " Kannerstein said. "It doesn't mean they'll automatically admit a goalie, because nothing

is guaranteed, but they will listen. It's a contributing factor."

Certain teams are losing more players to graduation, or will in another year. Those teams get some priority because they need to replenish their rosters. Some coaches work harder or have more success at finding talented athletes with top academic credentials. These coaches have built up credibility with the admissions department.

Fran Rizzo, the women's cross-country coach for the past 16 years, said he rarely endorsed an applicant with a score lower than 1,400 on the old SAT exam.

"One time I made a real exception, because she was a great athlete," Rizzo said. "It turned out to be the biggest mistake of my career. Plus, she only lasted one year with us."

Although Kannerstein and Smith, while consulting with coaches, attempted to identify priorities from each sport's list of potential players, every candidate on the first list of 71 submitted to Kannerstein was forwarded to the admissions office as a recruited athlete. Every admissions officer reading applicants' files would receive a copy of the overall list, with rankings by sport, and an applicant's file would additionally be labeled on the cover as a listed athlete. Applicants with significant music or artistic talent also have their files marked.

Lord said Haverford's admissions office sometimes accepted athletes who were ranked below others on a coach's list or admitted none from a coach's list. Unlike some Division III institutions, Haverford does not have a slot system guaranteeing admission for a certain number of recruited athletes, frequently about 75 for small liberal arts colleges.

"While people see athletics as a concrete hook, in the end, there is no definable way to be sure a candidate will be admitted," Lord said. "It is never as simple as people want to make it."

Kannerstein, however, said he was hoping that "50 to 60 very good athletes" would be in the next freshman class.

Haverford's lacrosse coach, Mike Murphy, submitted an early-decision wish list of 20 names, which could represent his entire recruiting list for the year.

"Some of those 20 are going to be real long shots with admissions," Murphy said. "And I've told those recruits that. But most are strong applicants, and some that are borderline have other things going for them, like support from an influential alumnus, or they are from a minority group or their parents didn't go to college, which is another factor that can help a candidate."

Of the 20 candidates, 12 were A students and 7 were B-plus students. The group, including those Murphy was uncertain about, averaged about 1,320 on the SAT. Murphy considered four on his list potential college all-Americans. He also wants a goalie (three applied) and a left-handed attackman (one applied).

Until the early decision acceptance and rejection letters are mailed in mid-December, Murphy said he would agonize over how admissions was viewing his list - the result of six months of heavy recruiting.

Murphy, through Kannerstein and Smith, will also be communicating with, and lobbying, the admissions department as the staff reads applicant files.

"It's an excruciating time," Murphy said. "When I lose a kid I'm excited about and have spent half a year getting to this point, I get a sick feeling in my stomach. It's like losing a game, the same feeling. You lose a couple kids, you feel like you've lost a couple of games. And maybe you have."