

THE ATHLETE'S EDGE

## Results Can Be Jarring as Recruiting Carousel Stops



Ryan Donnell for The New York Times

Prospective undergraduates, including athletes, visited the various student activities tables during the open campus day at Haverford College last month.

By **BILL PENNINGTON**  
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The elaborate, wavering recruiting dance between talented high school athletes and college coaches has ended for another year. When the music stopped this month, athletes began settling into select available spots, as in a nationwide game of musical chairs. At elite small colleges, where rigorous admissions standards made the scurrying for places especially frantic, the indistinct rules of the recruiting game only heightened the tension. Coaches, weighing the odds and their credibility, endorsed prospects who had spent years building athletic résumés to give them an edge in admissions. But in the end, even within one institution, the results were wildly

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unpredictable.

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Ryan Donnell for The New York Times

A prospect, Nick Farina, 18, of Chicago, visited Tom Donnelly, Haverford College's men's cross-country and track coach.

For the past 12 months, officials at Haverford College, a small, selective college outside Philadelphia, gave The New York Times access to its athletic recruiting and admissions process, an examination that revealed a system that is both methodical and mystifying.

"The nature of the process gets more organized every year," said Greg Kannerstein, Haverford's longtime athletic director, who will become dean of the college for the next three academic years. "The parents are more savvy, the athletes are polished, and the institutions are meticulous. But if anything, it gets harder to predict, which of course, is the one thing everyone is hoping to be able to do."

Kevin Friedenber, a highly recruited lacrosse goalie from Needham, Mass., thought he had played the recruiting game perfectly, from showcase events to coaches' interviews. He sent a binding early-decision application to Haverford. An A student who said he had scores equivalent to 1,380 on the two-part SAT, he also had the backing of Haverford's coach, Mike Murphy, who submitted a ranked list of favored applicants to the admissions office.

But Friedenber was rejected in December.

Scrambling to reconnect with coaches he had spurned, Friedenber applied to 10 colleges and universities in the next 15 days. He was put on the waiting list of three and accepted by seven, including his new top choice, Swarthmore College, Haverford's chief rival. Statistically, Swarthmore is more choosy than Haverford.

"The whole thing will just make you crazy," Friedenber said. "The recruiting process stinks."

Alex Guy of Easton Md., another top lacrosse player, also applied via early decision to Haverford, and was high on Murphy's list. Guy, an A student with SAT scores equivalent to 1,250, was deferred to the regular admission period this spring, he said, because he received two C's in advanced placement courses in his first semester as a senior. He wrote letters to Haverford's dean of admissions, even as he reluctantly applied to other colleges. After Guy

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raised his grades, Haverford accepted him.

"People say that being a recruited athlete is the key to getting in," Guy said. "But if that's so, how come I was deferred? I wasn't getting in until I did something else."

Casey Ennis of Chester, N.J., was a recruited shortstop and early-decision applicant to Haverford, whose baseball coach, Dave Beccaria, was pursuing shortstops. An A student who said last fall that his SAT scores were equivalent to 1,300, Ennis was rejected. Last week, he was still considering an offer to attend another Haverford rival in Pennsylvania, Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster, Pa. But Ennis was seriously considering a postgraduate year at a private prep school.

"I'd be a year older and wiser, maybe 15 pounds heavier," he said.

But he would have to make another lengthy summer tour of recruiting showcases and reapply to colleges. "I'd start all over again," he said. "That's O.K."

#### Surprises Amid Rejections

Half a dozen other athletes, veterans of a grueling yearlong process of self-promotion and delicate negotiation with coaches, have decided to take the prep-school route since being rejected by Haverford.

On some level, they will continue to seek the hard-to-define edge that athletics can bring to a college application.

Haverford plays in Division III, which prohibits athletic scholarships. But like most small colleges, Haverford allows coaches to seek additional consideration for hundreds of applicants they consider potential star athletes.

The admissions office makes the decisions, and coaches are prudent to back only athletes whose academic credentials are in the range of Haverford's typical standards. But athletic prowess unquestionably helps in admissions.

Of the 20 Haverford sports that submitted lists of recruited applicants, 16 athletes ranked No. 1 by a coach were accepted.

Of the 3,359 applicants to Haverford during the regular decision period, 823, or 25 percent, were admitted, with 89 of them recruited athletes, said Jess Lord, the dean of admissions and financial aid.

Haverford set a target of 315 students for the incoming freshman class, which will be made final from the waiting list in the next few weeks. Thirty recruited athletes who were accepted in the regular decision period have agreed to attend. They join 37 recruited

athletes who were accepted in December, when 43 percent of all early-decision applicants were accepted.

That brought the total of recruited athletes admitted to 67, or about 21 percent of the incoming class. Lord, however, estimated that athletics had played some role in the admission of about 15 percent of the class, or roughly 50 athletes.

"Many applicants who were recruited athletes also possessed characteristics, qualifications and achievements that would have made them welcome in our class regardless of whether they were an athlete," he said.

Predicting the influence an athlete's presence on a coach's list has in admissions discussions is complicated, Lord said, and he used the Friedenberg case as an illustration.

"It's just telling in a way about the whole process, because Swarthmore must have seen something that we didn't," Lord said. "Or perhaps he was thought of more highly in a lacrosse sense."

For Friedenberg, the turn of events presented him with "four years and four games to get back at Haverford." Swarthmore's lacrosse coach, Pat Gress, called it a case of good timing.

"We needed a goalie," Gress said in a telephone interview. "We had a spot for Kevin on our list, and we supported him in admissions and it worked out. But it isn't often that someone gets into one of those two schools and not the other. I was surprised."

Surprises seemed universal to the interplay between athletes and admissions departments.

One potential Haverford recruit, No. 2 on a coach's list, was accepted and appeared close to making a commitment to attend. At the last minute, she announced she was going to [Harvard](#), which was a shock to the Haverford coach.

The athlete later sent an e-mail message to the coach, Lord said, to explain that all her advisers had said it would be "virtually suicidal" to disclose that she had applied to Harvard because it would demonstrate a lack of interest in Haverford. Lord did not provide the athlete's name. The identities of applicants in this article have been revealed only with their permission.

Lord and Kannerstein, the athletic director, said they don't hold it against applicants who apply to other top institutions unless they show no genuine interest in Haverford. Lord said he would write to the Harvard-bound athlete's high school to express his disappointment with the way her situation was handled.

There were other surprises. Beccaria, the baseball coach, never got the catcher he sought for more than a year. Instead, he got several pitchers. "Not a bad thing, I guess," he said,

smiling.

### Jobs Depend on Teenagers

Coach Jen Ward, whose 2006 team earned Haverford's first berth in the [N.C.A.A.](#) softball tournament, also wanted a catcher. She began her pursuit by sitting for hours in sun-baked bleachers at a dozen showcases last summer. In April, not long after her team won 14 of 17 games and clinched a playoff spot, a catcher committed to Haverford.

Murphy ended up with 14 recruits but noted a trend. Several recruits had admissions advantages besides athletics: they came from distant states like Texas and Minnesota or were considered minorities.

Tom Donnelly, whose men's cross-country and track program is the most decorated sport at Haverford, said he had a good recruiting year. It included the admission of the middle-distance runner Nick Farina of Illinois, who made an impassioned plea to admissions officers after being deferred during early decision.

Fran Rizzo, who coaches the successful women's cross-country and track teams at Haverford, called some of his recruiting results "a sore subject." Two of his top prospects were rejected, including one that was accepted by Brown University.

Sometimes the surprise is a happy one. The women's basketball coach, Jim Osborne, received notice from the admissions department last month that an incoming freshman was interested in basketball. She is an all-league player from one of Connecticut's better basketball-playing regions. As it turns out, she is also a top sprinter and an all-state soccer player.

This kind of story used to be common in Division III, although Kannerstein said he believed the hyperorganized culture of American youth sports had changed recruiting everywhere.

"We used to look for kids to develop into good college athletes," Kannerstein, who has been at Haverford for 30 years, said. "Now we pick among the polished athletes."

Kannerstein and Lord said that each year, the edge an athletic résumé yielded an applicant at top small colleges like Haverford was diminishing.

"I think the 'Game of Life' and 'Reclaiming of the Game' books have had an effect," Kannerstein said, referring to two recent publications critical of the role athletics plays in admissions at Ivy League and other leading institutions. "Maybe even the events at [Duke](#) this year have people questioning a little bit: What are we getting into here?"

It has not stopped the Haverford coaches from gearing up for another recruiting cycle, which begins in earnest the first week of June. But last week, seated in her office, Amy

Bergin, the volleyball coach, had time to look back.

A year ago, she had a database of more than a thousand potential recruits. Month by month, traveling the country and contacting athletes, she winnowed it. Her goal was at least five or six new players. Several of Bergin's prospects were eventually accepted by Haverford, but last week she learned that only two had chosen to attend.

"You go home and cry, maybe pound a couple beers," Bergin said with a laugh when asked how she took the news. "It's no fun sometimes when your job revolves around the decisions of teenagers.

"But what the girls go through is no picnic. They're 17 years old, bombarded with advice, and some college coaches play mind games with them. The pressure builds. I can hear it in their voices. I've got a good team coming back and our program is solid, so we'll be fine. But I wonder about everybody else who went through this process. What did it mean in the end?"

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## How Much Help Is Too Much?

By BILL PENNINGTON  
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Colleges and universities in Division III, the [N.C.A.A.](#) classification praised as the closest to the traditional spirit of amateurism, are prohibited from awarding athletic scholarships. But there is widespread suspicion among Division III coaches and athletic administrators that some member institutions reward their top recruits with financial aid related to athletics, even if it is labeled as need-based or merit aid.

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"They can package it any way they want or call it anything they want," said Wendy Smith, the women's soccer coach and associate athletic director at Haverford College. "But every year, an awful lot of phenomenal athletes get money. They call them leadership grants, citizenship grants or interview grants — I guess that means the athlete had a good interview — but it goes on."

Mike Murphy, Haverford's lacrosse coach, added: "Colleges just buy athletes for their programs. It's become especially true for athletes with good academic credentials. If you're a school that's in the top 50 academically and you can get an athlete who's qualified for the top 20 schools academically by upping that kid's financial package, you've not only added a good athlete, you've added higher SAT scores and a higher G.P.A. to your incoming class. That's good for your U.S. News & World ranking, too."

Visit the athletic department at almost any Division III institution and it will not be hard to find a coach lamenting the recent loss of a top recruit because of a superior financial package elsewhere. And it is not only college coaches who believe negotiating with athletes is common in Division III.

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Frank Greco is the athletic director and women's basketball and softball coach at Central High School, a selective and athletically successful Philadelphia public school. Greco said it was common for leading Division III colleges, and Ivy League institutions, to negotiate with top prospects.

"Those schools will start with one financial aid number, and it will grow," Greco said. "I've called college coaches on behalf of my players and said, 'She wants to come to your school, but somebody else is offering more.' And 8 out of 10 times, they will come up with a little more. They'll say they found another \$3,000. Next thing you know, her commitment letter is in the mail."

The pervasive opinion that many members are bending the no-scholarship rule — a bedrock principle on which Division III was founded in 1973 — helped establish a landmark National Collegiate Athletic Association pilot study of Division III financial aid practices last year. The findings were released in April after 431 members provided data on financial aid awarded to first-year recruited athletes and first-year nonathletes.

The study, which will continue indefinitely, revealed that at 86 percent of the participating Division III institutions, the aid given to athletes was comparable to that of the general student body. At 57 institutions, or 13 percent of the participating members, athletes received about 7 percent more aid than nonathletes, or roughly \$1,100. A few institutions were considerably above those numbers, which represent medians, not averages, in the study.

As a group, however, the 431 Division III institutions gave less aid to athletes than to nonathletes who had stated similar financial need. The median difference was \$434 less to athletes, or 3.15 percent.

Dan Dutcher, the N.C.A.A. vice president for Division III, said that the study was an important first step and that it would most likely be refined. He suggested that the N.C.A.A. could examine financial aid by sport instead, and he acknowledged that the compiled data did not disprove a common accusation: that some members use substantial sums of money on a few select athletes.

But speaking of the notion that Division III institutions routinely break the athletic aid prohibition, Dutcher said, "It's interesting that when people bring that up, it's never at their school but one down the road."

In the wake of the study, 25 Division III institutions with apparent violations were reported to the N.C.A.A. enforcement staff. Dutcher said that the cases were not being treated as major infractions and that the N.C.A.A. would not release the names of the institutions under review.

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In some cases, the violations were inadvertent, Dutcher said. For example, an admissions department's ratings system for applicants may consider athletic prowess. But if that rating is then used for financial aid decisions, it is a violation.

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