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So your dream is to play your sport in college, and someone told you that your first step should be to make a list of your favorite colleges.

It makes perfect sense. It's never bad to start with a plan.

But did this person tell you *how* to compile your list? There are 4,000+ colleges in America. How in the world do you know where to start? What makes certain schools your "favorites?" Is it the uniforms they're wearing on television?

One thing's for sure: compiling your list of top colleges can be a daunting task. But it really doesn't have to be if the goal is to assemble a group that matches up well with your athletic abilities, appeals to your academic interests and offers the overall experience you're looking for in a college. That and, it's always nice if these schools actually *want* you, too.

Creating a "bad" list of top schools might not seem like a monumental pitfall, but it can certainly derail your collegiate strategy and waste a ton of time if your plan gets off on the wrong foot. So to shed some light on the topic, I'm giving you five (5) of the more common mistakes. Hopefully, they'll help you avoid them altogether and come up with a strong list instead.

High school players and their parents can get 'caught up' in lunch time and cocktail party talk of 'where are you going' rather than finding the best fit for the athlete. (Athletes need to) choose a place that really wants you, and where you can become an All-Conference and All-American player. You need to find a fit, not a place that looks and sounds good when telling people where you're going.



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Mistake #1: Division I or bust!

Athletes often feature a Who's Who of major Division I colleges/universities in their initial college list, and the reality for many is, it's simply not a *realistic* list. In fact, in many cases, the list is completely disconnected from the athlete's "true" athletic/academic credentials.

Look, everyone dreams about the "Big Time" and you should aim high until it's clear that the opportunity is out of reach. Just understand that only about 1% of America's varsity athletes will put on a Division I uniform next year. And by the time you're a junior in high school, many of these opportunities have already been offered to the nation's top prospects.

Even if you're not a Division I caliber prospect, that doesn't mean there isn't a fantastic college home for you out there.

Ball State University (NCAA Division I) Head Football Coach, Pete Lembo, says, "Parents must try to keep their expectations realistic for their children. Very few high

school players have the physical tools and skill set to play at the highest level. However, there is a place for every high school player to fit in on the college level if they have the grades, standardized test scores and passion for the game."



Mistake #2: Ten schools ought to do it, right?

Wrong. Listen kids, 10 schools should be the *end* of the process a year or more from now. It's not the beginning! If the goal is to have choices – to end up with multiple college offers – then targeting 10 schools is typically not going to achieve your goal. It's certainly not what experts call “casting a large enough net.”

At minimum, you need to start with a college list that features 10-20 times this amount. That's right, we're talking about 100-200 schools. Why so many? Because there are too many variables out of your control: annual position needs, admissions standards, scholarship availability, coaching changes, and not to mention, you might be competing with thousands of other kids for just a few spots.

Bottom line, college coaches are constantly narrowing their lists, changing their recruiting depth charts and assessing their current needs. Remember, recruiting is the lifeblood of their success and can mean the difference between keeping or losing their jobs. So your strategy needs to be aggressive and your initial college list needs to be substantial. And if you aren't sure how to compile a list this size, then you need someone who can help connect you with these coaches. Because at the end of the day, your “Top 10 List” is not your starting point – it's the final outcome.

Mistake #3: It “looks” good... so it must be a great fit for me!

Of course, I'm referring to influences by the media, friends and family. Athletes, you're going to be attracted to schools for various reasons, and while everyone has their own unique set of priorities, the most important thing to remember here is that the school you attend should be the best fit for YOU; not anyone else. This is about your future, not what sounds good when you're talking to your friends. This is about your experience, not where your mom or dad went to school. Just because a team has flashy new uniforms doesn't make them a great fit!



Here's a great exercise for you and your parents. We call it an ***opportunity comparisons chart***, and it's basically an inventory of your interests and how each college/university compares to one another using a numerical value. Plenty of people use an Excel spreadsheet to do this because they can include as many colleges as they want and automatically add up scores, but you can scratch this on a piece of paper just as well.

Of course, you may still end up choosing your “perfect fit” school closer to home, which is great if it’s the *best* fit for you. In the beginning, though, it’s always wise to consider opportunities outside a 500 mile radius.

As a general rule of thumb, we encourage student-athletes to consider areas all across the country when looking at schools. For one, most 16 & 17-year olds change their minds, and so schools they often like from first glance are typically not schools they *end up* liking. And since kids don’t always know what they’re looking for in a school, their preliminary college choices are often based off what they *hear* or *think*, as opposed to what they *know*. So the more coaches kids can interact with, the more perspective and knowledge they can gain. The more they can learn about themselves and the more the process itself reveals to them, the better they can position themselves moving forward.

Additionally, it’s important to realize that college recruiting is perception-based and in most cases, “offers breed other offers.” The more interest kids receive from various colleges, the more *leverage* they ultimately possess. If college coaches around the country are legitimately interested in you, not only will it enhance your recruiting experience by opening more doors, it also validates your ability level for those coaches who may have passed on you otherwise. So if you want to improve your chances of receiving offers from schools in your backyard, make sure you’re recruited heavily by schools far away (and vice versa).

Finally, it’s important to understand some basic college demographics. Nearly 79% of all colleges in the US are east of the Mississippi. So when a west coast prospect starts drawing a line through east coast opportunities, for example, s/he starts to exponentially limit her/his college options. Simply put, there are fewer schools (and therefore fewer roster spots) for kids that want to stay in the west. If you’re not a major D1 caliber player with a spot on a Pac-12, Mountain West or WAC roster, don’t give up. There’s a number of amazing opportunities likely waiting for you out east, so take the time to learn about those schools and you might just find exactly what you’re hoping for.

Mistake #5: Smaller colleges, like Division III schools, don’t offer athletic scholarships so I’m not even going to include them on my college list.

Somewhere along the way, a grave misconception developed here. Apparently, since Division III schools cannot award athletic scholarships, these opportunities are perceived as far less prestigious and rewarding than Division I or II schools.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

As mentioned earlier, if you were blessed with the talent level to be considered a Division I prospect, then shoot for the stars! However, there are plenty of Division I-caliber players who elect to play Division III.

Parents must try to keep their expectations realistic for their children. Very few high school players have the physical tools and skill set to play at the highest level. However, there is a place for every high school player to fit in on the college level if they have the grades, standardized test scores and passion for the game.



Pete Lembo
Head Football Coach
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True, Division III schools cannot award scholarships on the basis of athletic talent. However, like all college coaches at every level, they must recruit to stay competitive and maintain job security. The fact is, Division III financial aid awards are simply packaged with non-athletic line items, such as endowments, academic scholarships, grants, loans and/or need-based aid. While their recruiting budgets are typically tighter than larger college programs, the rules governing D3's are far less stringent, so their recruiting strategies and incentives are limited only by the institutions they represent. Bottom line, you might get a better offer at a Division III school, so don't automatically rule them out if they offer great fit opportunities.

In an article published in New Jersey's *The Record*, Audrey Kahane writes:

"While playing sports at a Division I or II school may be more prestigious, there are advantages to a Division III school. Athletes can still get extra consideration in the admissions office at Division III schools, and even though these colleges don't offer athletic scholarships, they can offer academic scholarships. Playing for a Division III team might mean more playing time, which is important when you love a sport, and the satisfaction of being a big fish in a small pond. Since Division III schools tend to be smaller colleges, athletes may find more personal attention, smaller classes and greater ease in socializing with the rest of the college community."

Student-Athletes, when you look at your initial list of possible college choices, ask yourself some key questions:

- **For the most part, are the colleges/universities on my list good fits for me?** *Try the opportunities comparison and see how many match up with your athletic abilities, academic credentials and personal priorities.*
- **Which of the coaches on my current college list are interested enough to want to know what's going on in my life?** *If the answer is "zero", then your list isn't doing you much good and you need to formulate a better plan immediately.*
- **Will I be happy sitting the bench in college, or do I want to see early & significant playing time?** *You've worked hard to get to this point. You're among the elite 5% who gets to play their sport in college. Would you be happy riding the pine at a big school or being a fixture in the starting lineup at a smaller school?*
- **How do college coaches currently evaluate me? Do I even know what they think of me?** *If you aren't sure how good you are, see if a local college coach will evaluate your film, or attend a couple college camps and ask for written evaluations. Knowing the truth about how you compare with other prospects will save you lots of time and ensure a much more productive college recruiting experience. Also do as University of Kentucky coach, Brian Green, suggests. "Match yourself against the top of the collegiate scale. Match your skills with a player from a major Division I school that plays the same position. See where you stand, and be realistic!"*
- **What is my action plan if the coaches on my college list don't want me?** *It's likely that you'll experience some disappointment in the recruiting process. It's part of the game. But if you have a strong plan in place, you'll be well-prepared to position yourself for great fit opportunities.*



Rex Grayner is a former Division I and Division III college pitcher and earned his Master's degree in Sports Management from Central Michigan University. Since 1994, Mr. Grayner has been educating parents and helping qualified athletes enhance their collegiate opportunities.



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