

### 3 | Wanting to Play College Sports

**I'd like to play my sport in college, but I also want to go to a good school that suits me. How can I have a great college experience that includes athletics?**

Playing college sports can be a fantastic experience. It is also frustrating and disappointing for many athletes. Here are ideas about how to approach this challenge.

**Avoid “anchoring.”** Choosing a college is multi-faceted, so try not to anchor on a single aspect. Anchoring is overvaluing one factor and devaluing all other aspects in a decision.

As a kid, my family looked at an apartment with a dartboard on the door that fascinated me. I wanted to live in that apartment because I was anchored on the dartboard. This is obviously silly, but even many grown people anchor on one appealing but relatively unimportant aspect of a decision as I immaturely did then. When people anchor on a single factor, they tend not to make good decisions.

**Consider all aspects of your collegiate experience.** Here are three crucial elements of a great college experience for a student-athlete.

■ **The Athlete Experience.** What would it be like to play for these coaches? Would you still want to be at this school if the head coach leaves before you graduate? Do you like the players? You're going to spend a lot of time with your teammates, so it helps a lot if you like each other. What if you don't fulfill your expectations? What if you get injured or spend four years on the bench? Will you still feel good about attending this school?

College athletics is a big commitment. Athletes sometimes feel like they have a full-time job on top of their coursework. Are you ready to take on the workload that college sports require, or might you be happier as a club sport athlete?

■ **The Student Experience.** Are faculty members accessible to students? Are classes mostly huge lectures or are they small enough to get to know your professors? If you know what you want to study, is this school strong in that area? If you're not sure, does this school have a range of studies that might appeal to you?

Are the students people you'd like to spend time with? Do they have different backgrounds and experiences that you can learn from, or are they all pretty similar to you? Are this school's activities, speakers, programs, and cultural activities interesting to you? A school with lots of different things going on is great for widening your horizons.

■ **The Alumni Experience.** When you graduate from a college, you become a lifetime member of its alumni community. It may not be fair, but people may make assumptions about you for the rest of your life by where you went to college. Being part of an alumni community that shares your interests is helpful. Which college will help you develop a rewarding life after graduation? Which college will help you with finding a job in a career that is meaningful to you? If you are interested in wildlife management but most of a school's alumni are in engineering, for example, they may not be much help.

**List your priorities for college and use them in your decision making.** Rate each school with a 1 to 10 score for athletics, academics, and alumni. If geography, social life, cost, proximity to relatives, or another aspect of college is important, rate it also. Use your ratings to help you in your decision-making. As you learn more about each college on your list, you can change your ratings to reflect new information.

**Expand before you narrow.** There are thousands of colleges in the United States and likely dozens that would be a good fit for you. There will come a time to narrow your focus to a few schools. But consider a range of schools before you settle on the smaller number that you want to really concentrate on.

**Ask around.** Ask adults you respect – family and friends, coaches, college athletes – about their college experience. In grade school I wanted to go to the U. S.

Naval Academy. My mom asked a relative of ours to tell me about his experience at Annapolis and in the Navy. After talking with him, I realized that the U.S. Naval Academy was not the best fit for me. I eventually narrowed my choice down to two schools and had a great experience at Macalester College in Minnesota, partly because I knew a lot about what I would experience there.

**Sample the goods.** When you have narrowed your decision, go and visit the finalists. Sit in on classes, attend team practices, stay in the dorm if possible. Employees of the school (coaches, professors, admissions officers) have a vested interest in your liking the school. Students may be more objective, so ask them. Most students, if approached by a prospective student, are happy to share their experience.

**Set yourself up for success.** Once you know where you want to go, here's how to make it more likely you can do so.

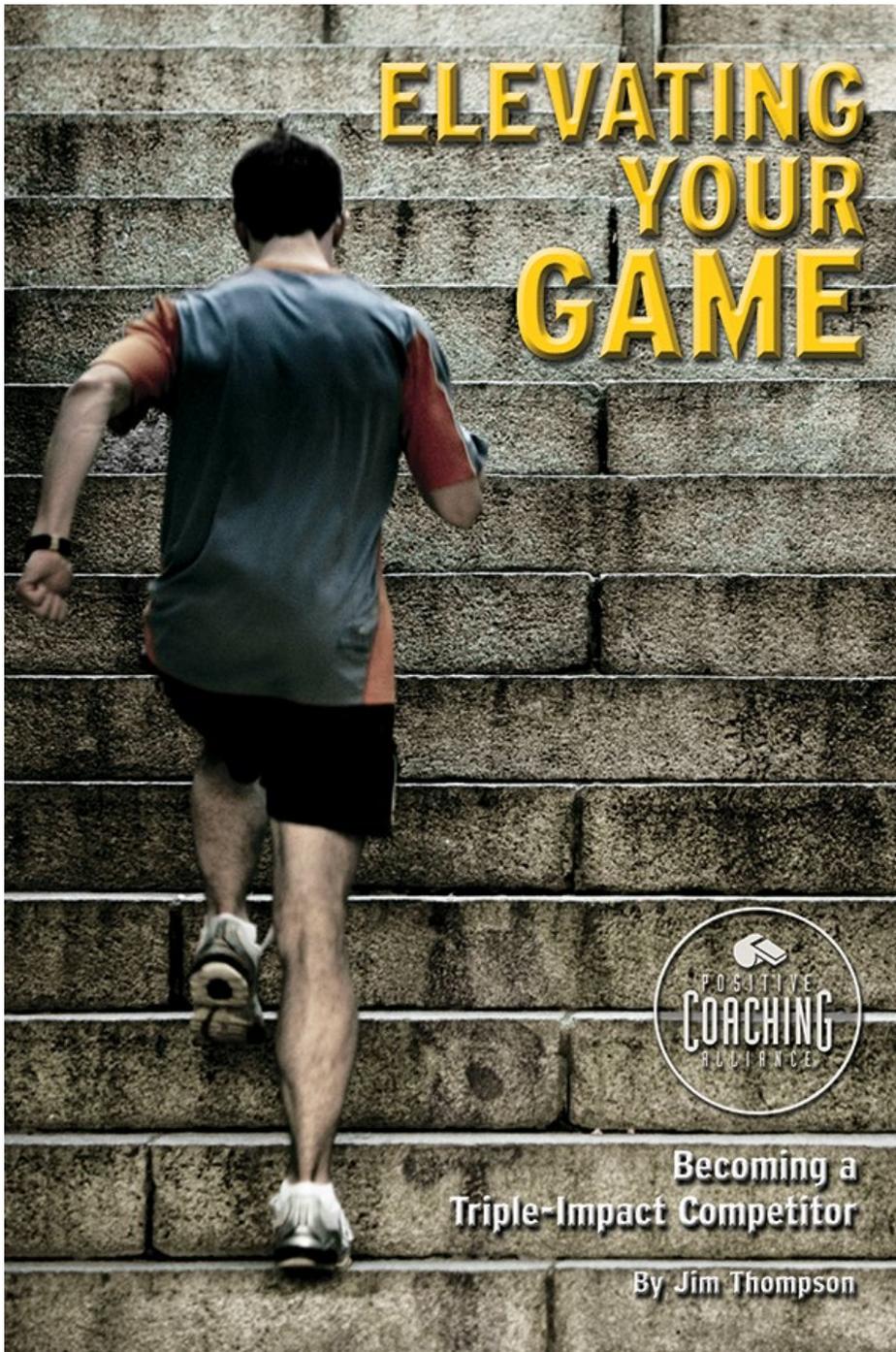
- **Keep your grades up.** The better your grades, the more options you have. Coaches don't want to waste a scholarship or their time and effort on a player who cannot make it in the classroom. If you can't balance athletics and academics in high school, it's not going to get easier in college. Good grades create greater interest in you among college coaches (and college admissions offices).
- **Make sure you are NCAA eligible.** The NCAA has rules for high school athletes, including courses you must take in high school to be able to play in college. Become familiar with NCAA clearinghouse rules at [www.ncaa.org](http://www.ncaa.org). See a school counselor to make sure you are taking the classes needed.
- **Make college coaches aware of you.** Promote yourself. Call and e-mail the coaches of the programs you are interested in. After talking with them, if there is mutual interest, put together a recruiting package including a photo, resume, and highlight DVD. Mail it to the coach with a personalized cover letter.

Learn how to get noticed in your sport. In track or swimming, great times speak loudest. Volleyball players get noticed by playing on

the right club teams and going to the right tournaments. College baseball recruiters go to "showcases" where they watch prospective players. In tennis, your USTA ranking is key. Talk to college athletes in your sport to find out how they got noticed.

- **Be open to different levels.** Athletes can get star-struck about playing at a Division I school when the best combination of academics and sports may be a Division II or III school (which only offers academic or need-based scholarships). Many athletes transfer or quit because they chose a level above where they best fit.
- **Stay focused on your priorities.** Keep your priority rankings in mind. If you attract a lot of attention, you may get a pile of letters and calls. If a school doesn't fit your priorities, remove it from your list. When coaches from those schools contact you, do them a favor. Let them know you are not considering them so they can turn their attention to other recruits.

**Keep an open mind.** As you go through this process to choose a college, try to remain open until you are ready to make your decision. You may find you want a very different college experience than you thought you did at the beginning of this process. And, remember, despite how much your parents, coach, or friends may want you to go to a particular college, you are the one who will live with this decision the rest of your life. It is your decision, not theirs.



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