

The Rules Of College Recruiting

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So, you are a high school fencer and you want to fence in college. This is a marvelous dream and one that can certainly come true. But, to turn your dream into reality requires negotiating a sometimes complex series of rules and procedures which involve knowing what schools offer fencing, at what level, how and when to contact the coach, what financial aid opportunities exist, and so forth. I have found, after 33 years as a Division I head coach, that most high school fencers, their parents, and their school and private club coaches often do not understand how this system works, which is unfortunate because far too often young fencers miss opportunities to participate in a higher level college program simply because they did not understand or know how to go about finding them. It is my aim in this brief article to give you the basics in how to find the program that is right for you. In reading it, remember one key thing: coaches are

looking for athletes that are going to make their programs better and you are looking for a program where you can be happy and contribute. Recruiting is a process between you and the coach. Be honest about what you want and can offer and do not be afraid to ask questions as to what the coach wants. I have found that an informed honest dialogue between the parties is most likely to end with happy coaches and fencers.

How is college fencing organized?

All but the smallest four-year universities and colleges belong to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and that organization governs all varsity sports at those institutions. A varsity sport is one where the institution certifies it to the NCAA and subjects it to a vast series of rules and regulations. An excellent place to find out more about this is on the NCAA.org website where you can view not only all the rules, but see which institutions sponsor fencing at the varsity level.

Most NCAA sports are organized within one of three divisions (Division I, II, or III). Each division has different rules in respect to the granting of scholarships, eligibility, recruiting, and so forth. Fencing, however, due to its small numbers of varsity teams, is a 'National Collegiate Sport', which means that teams from all three divisions compete together not only in the season, but in the NCAA championship. This means that as you investigate where you might like to attend college, the coaches of those programs have to operate within different rules. Divisions I and II, for example, can offer scholarships (except the Ivy League, which does not offer athletic scholarships in any sport), while Division III cannot. Remember, though, that just because the rules allow scholarships does not mean that the institution allows its fencing program to offer them. The NCAA limit is 5 full ride scholarships for each gender. A full ride, or FRE (Full Ride Equivalency) consists of tuition, room, board, and books. Some sports, such as football, basketball, and baseball, can ONLY give an athlete a FRE, but many sports, including fencing, can divide up a FRE into parts. Therefore, nearly all fencers who receive athletic scholarship aid are getting only part of a scholarship. The NCAA website can tell you which schools are in which NCAA division, but you will have to ask the coach to find out if athletic scholarships are available.

Finally, not all collegiate fencing is conducted at the varsity level. There are many club programs, some of them stronger than some varsity programs, all over the country. Leagues exist for clubs in California, New England, Texas, and the Midwest, amongst others, and there is a national championship run every year by the US Association of Collegiate Fencing Clubs (USACFC) for both men and women. Club fencing is an excellent option for many fencers whose school of choice does not have a varsity program.

What are the basic recruiting rules?

There are only a few basic rules that every athlete and parent needs to know.

- 1) As soon as you begin classes in 9th grade you are considered to be a prospective student athlete and subject to the recruiting rules.
- 2) Contacts: A contact is a face-to-face meeting between a prospective and a coach that goes beyond simple greetings. In practice, prospectives will come into contact with college coaches at fencing events – they might even be your referee – and it is generally considered OK to talk to prospectives as long as the conversation stays away from recruiting topics.
 - a. On campus contacts may occur at any time as long as the prospective's family is paying all of the expenses. This is known as an 'unofficial visit'.
 - b. Off campus contacts with either the prospect OR the parents/guardian may not occur until July 1 after the conclusion of a prospective's junior year in high school. Coaches are limited to 3 off campus contacts, which can include talking at a meet, at the high school, at the home – anywhere. It has recently been clarified by the NCAA that it is NOT permissible to discuss recruiting topics with parents until July 1 after their child's junior year in high school. Coaches can always, however, talk to high school or private club coaches about athletes.
 - c. A contact with an athlete at a competition cannot occur either before or during the competition.
 - d. College coaches may coach prospectives in a private club provided that the prospective lives within 50 miles of that coach's campus (not club location), but recruiting conversations are not to take place.
 - e. College coaches may coach prospectives at camps but all campers must pay the same fees for the camp and recruiting conversations are not to take place.
 - f. After the beginning of classes of a prospective's senior year in high school, a prospective may take five 'official visits' to 5 different schools. An official visit is one where the prospective has already been deemed admissible by the school and the school pays part or all of the expenses of the visit. These generally take place at universities where athletic scholarships are offered.

3) Telephone calls initiated by the coach cannot be made until July 1 after the prospect's junior year in high school and then only 1 per week. The prospective can call the coach at any time but the coach cannot return a telephone call until that July 1 date. Aside from the coach, only an institutional athletic department staff member, such as someone in compliance or academic services, may make that once a week call.

4) Electronic messaging: Email is considered the same as snail mail and is permitted at any time and in any amount. Coaches may send questionnaires and general information on the university to prospects after they begin classes for their junior year. Media guides and other sport specific materials can not be given to recruits. They may now be found on College websites.

5) At no time can a representative of athletic interests (an alum, parent of current athlete, booster of the school) do any recruiting. This includes letters, phone calls, in person contact, etc. Neither can a coach direct one of his student athletes to talk to a recruit, although he/she may give a student athlete's contact information to a recruit and the recruit may contact the athlete on his/her own.

6) The coach may not give anything tangible to a prospective, parent, or guardian including tee-shirts, bumper stickers, use of university equipment, discounted fee to a camp, and so forth unless every applicant to that university (or camper) is entitled to that benefit. The prospective may receive a media guide.

These are the basic rules that govern recruiting. Now you must go and investigate the programs that interest you and contact the coaches to find out what is the best fit for you. ■