

WANNA PLAY IN COLLEGE?

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1 / How good are you?

Serious about turning pro. Top programs can be excellent training grounds because of strong competition, facilities. Ultimately your scores on the course and in the classroom will determine coaches' interest. Without suitable grades you won't be admitted or stay eligible.

Good enough to play and earn a degree. Combining the two is the best of both worlds. Plenty of opportunities exist for players with their noses in books—and for those who cannot break 100. NCAA Division III, mid-to-low Division II and NAIA (four-year) schools provide spirited competition even if the scores are not as low as in Division I.

I'm not certain. Don't sweat indecision. Be aware of opportunities at NAIA (four-year) and two-year schools. Athletes and non-athletes face difficult career choices. Your work ethic will determine where your game (and education) take you more than where you go to school.

Freshman. Early starts allow plenty of time to research options, consider what's important to you (special majors, proximity to home, etc.). Some coaches spend two, three years assessing a recruiting class before NCAA rules allow them to send letters or material to prospects—Sept. 1 of their junior year.

Sophomore. Get research and self-evaluation process moving. Refine list of target schools. Good news: NCAA coaches can't phone until July 1 after junior year, so you control your contact with coaches.

2 / What's your year in high school?

Junior. No time to waste. Use the Web to learn about colleges you want to pursue. Your play the summer before your senior year can influence coaches, but some will be down to a short list of prospects and show little to no interest.

Senior. Way behind. Telephone communication with schools and coaches ASAP is vital.

I do. Understanding what you can afford in tuition, other costs will keep you realistic about options.

I don't. Time for a dollars-and-cents talk. A family wouldn't search for a car, home without knowing its budget. Same with schools.

3 / Do you know your family finances?

TIP / A budget for search expenses (phone calls, campus visits, tournament entries) is good preparation for smart money-management. Financial aid from a better academic school that's not offering athletic scholarships, such as in Division III, might be wiser than an athletic scholarship in Divisions I, II.

TIP / Personalize cover letters by stating why you're interested. Coaches can spot form letters (they often end up in the trash). Make sure your playing résumé includes the date, finish, course yardage and Rating/Slope.

4 / How many schools are you contacting?

Five to 15 schools. Indicates you spent time trying to identify your best matches.

16 to 35 schools. Nothing wrong with casting a wide net, but can you explain your reasoning for each school? Plus, every college means more time spent on selection.

36 or more schools. Trim your list. Start making hard decisions that lead to your final choices.

• Yes. You made wise selections. Nurture the dialogue with coaches. Ask plenty of questions.

• No. You aimed too high. Many coaches have only a few open slots each year yet hear from hundreds of kids. Reassess academic, athletic abilities to find suitable schools.

5 / Are coaches giving positive feedback?

TIP / If you are in your junior or senior year, you already have an indication of your academic and golf ability. Don't waste coaches' or your time by sending letters and/or résumés to colleges where you don't match up in both areas.

6 / Are you aware of eligibility and recruiting rules?

• No, I'm not. Even compliance officials in athletic departments struggle with eligibility, recruiting regulations. Download the NCAA's "Guide for the College-Bound Student-Athlete" from ncaa.org to follow strict guidelines for high school core courses. Also, if you're considering Division I or II, register with the NCAA Initial-Eligibility Clearinghouse when junior-year grades are posted. There is no clearinghouse for NCAA Division III, NAIA or two-year schools.

7 / When should you visit schools?

• Unofficial. Take as many visits as you like, any time; you pay expenses. Many families work these into vacations. Let coach and admissions department know when you'll visit so they can arrange a tour, meeting with an academic advisor.

• Official. One visit at up to five schools once you've started senior year, schools pay expenses. Highly structured by college, NCAA regulated.

TIP / Best to get a feel for campus life when school's in session. Make notes during, after each visit. Ask plenty of questions. Remember, it's a two-way interview: While you're checking out the school, the coach and team are gauging whether you fit the program.

>YOU DO THE TALKING. Coaches want to meet your parents but want to speak with you in at least 90 percent of phone calls, campus visits. You should fill out any paper work, questionnaires: Coaches can spot a parent's work.

>WHAT YOU SHOOT IN HIGH SCHOOL, JUNIOR EVENTS ISN'T WHAT YOU'LL SHOOT IN COLLEGE. Courses are longer, tougher, and you'll play in poor weather. Add at least two or three shots to your average to gauge what you'd shoot as a college freshman.

>MOST NERVE-RACKING MOMENT OF ENTIRE SELECTION PROCESS? Coaches watching you play. They like to see solid play, but they learn more when you're having trouble or in bad weather. Learn to stay positive, give your best effort whether a coach is watching or not.

>HOW MUCH IS WEATHER A FACTOR IN YOUR CHOICE? Are you prepared to leave a warmer home climate to study and compete in colder weather? Conversely, students from colder climates might get burned out with daily competition in good weather.

>MAKE SURE YOU'RE COMFORTABLE WITH FINAL CHOICE. NCAA penalizes athletes for transferring, reneging after signing a letter of intent. Coaches who make take-it-or-leave-it offers of a scholarship or roster spot, or pressure you toward November's early signing period, might not place your best interests first.



For more on how to select a college, click golfdigest.com/rankings/2007/collegesguide

✓ YOUR CHECKLIST

- > Keep grades up all four years of high school.
- > Take PSAT by sophomore year; SAT and/or ACT by junior year.
- > Prioritize college preferences by size, location, academic reputation, golf program and other factors you consider important.
- > Learn how to convert your scores to college scores based on yardage, course difficulty at collegegolf.com.
- > Register for NCAA Initial-Eligibility Clearinghouse at end of junior year (D-I or II).
- > Take official recruiting visits (paid by school) after start of senior-year classes. Division I schools must receive test scores, transcript before paying for official visit.
- > Early Letter of Intent signing period is one week in November of senior year.
- > Submit FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) immediately after Jan. 1 of senior year.
- > Late signing period runs mid-April to Aug. 1.

✓ WEB RESOURCES

- NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) ncaa.org
- ACT (American College Testing) act.org
- NCAA Initial-Eligibility Clearinghouse ncaaclearinghouse.net
- FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) fafsa.ed.gov
- NAIA (National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics) naia.org
- College Financial Aid finaid.org
- NJCAA (National Junior College Athletic Association) njcaa.org
- TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) toefl.org
- SAT collegeboard.com
- Golfstat (compiles comprehensive college scores) golffstat.com

✓ ANOTHER MUST-HAVE



Contributing Editor Dean Frischknecht first published the annual Ping American College Golf Guide in 1989. The manual is widely regarded as the ultimate source of information on every intercollegiate program in the United States. It now appears online at collegegolf.com.

The site provides expanded information and advice on college selection and recruiting, along with program descriptions, contact information and recent scores for all two- and four-year NCAA, NAIA and NJCAA schools offering intercollegiate golf. It also features an interactive score conversion program that adjusts a junior's scores to the college level and projects finish in championships.