



FREE RECRUITING GUIDE

FOR ATHLETES IN GRADES 9 THROUGH 12

THE RECRUITING CHECKLIST

A grade-by-grade system for earning a college roster spot and an athletic scholarship. Built on the rules as they exist now, not the ones your parents were told.

GRADES

9 - 12

LEVELS

D1 - JUCO

PHASES

3

VERIFIED

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FOUR THINGS THAT ARE NO LONGER TRUE

Most recruiting advice online is out of date. Four rules changed recently enough that acting on the old ones will cost you a roster spot.

1 YOUR SAT SCORE DOES NOT MAKE YOU ELIGIBLE

The NCAA permanently removed standardized test scores from Division I and Division II initial eligibility. There is no sliding scale anymore. It is gone. Eligibility now rests on your NCAA core courses and your core GPA. Test scores still matter for admission and for academic scholarship money, which is often the larger check, so do not skip them. Just understand the difference: the test does not clear you to play.

2 SCHOLARSHIP LIMITS WERE REPLACED BY ROSTER LIMITS

As of July 1, 2025, Division I schools that opted into the House settlement no longer have sport-specific scholarship caps. They have a maximum roster size instead, and they can fund every athlete on it. Every NCAA sport is now an equivalency sport, which means partial scholarships exist everywhere, including in sports that used to be all or nothing.

3 ROSTER SPOTS GOT HARDER TO GET, NOT EASIER

This is the part buried under the "more scholarships available" headline. The new roster caps are lower than the rosters many programs used to carry. Thousands of Division I spots were eliminated when the caps took effect. The walk-on path, which used to be a real back door, is narrowing sharply in non-revenue sports. More money, spread across fewer chairs.

4 THERE IS A NEW ELIGIBILITY CLOCK

In June 2026 the NCAA approved five seasons of competition within a five-year clock for Division I, for athletes who enroll no later than the academic year of their 19th birthday. It takes effect for all student-athletes in fall 2027. If you are considering reclassifying, a post-grad year, or a gap year, this rule now has teeth. Confirm the current version with a compliance office before you decide.

THE ONE THING THAT DID NOT CHANGE

You can contact college coaches whenever you want. The NCAA recruiting calendar restricts **coaches**, not **you**. A freshman can email a Division I coach today. That asymmetry is the most useful fact in this guide, and almost nobody uses it.

KNOW YOUR TARGET BEFORE YOU BUILD A PLAN

You cannot run a checklist without a target. The academic bar is different at every level, and the paperwork is different too.

LEVEL	ACADEMIC BAR FOR FIRST-YEAR ELIGIBILITY	WHERE YOU REGISTER
NCAA D1	16 core courses, 2.3 core GPA , 10 of the 16 finished before senior year (7 in English, math, or science). Those 10 lock and cannot be retaken. Graduate on time.	NCAA Eligibility Center, Certification Account
NCAA D2	16 core courses, 2.2 core GPA . No test required.	NCAA Eligibility Center, Certification Account
NCAA D3	The school sets its own standard. Meet admissions and you are eligible.	NCAA Profile Page (free)
NAIA	A final 2.3 GPA on its own, or two of three: 2.0 GPA, top half of class, 18 ACT / 970 SAT.	PlayNAIA.org (separate from the NCAA)
NJCAA	High school graduation or equivalent. Colleges set their own additional standards.	The college directly

TWO THINGS ATHLETES GET WRONG CONSTANTLY

YOUR CORE GPA IS NOT YOUR SCHOOL GPA

The NCAA recalculates using only NCAA-approved core courses, on a straight 4.0 scale. Your weighted 4.2 from AP classes and your PE grade do not travel. Pull your high school's NCAA-approved course list from the Eligibility Center site and check every class against it before you register for the year, not after.

THE 10/7 RULE IS A TRAP DOOR

Ten core courses locked before senior year, seven of them in English, math, or science. Miss it and senior year cannot save you. This is the most common way a good athlete becomes a non-qualifier.

Build to the D1 standard even if D1 is not the goal. Clear that bar and you have cleared every bar below it. Aim at the D2 line and a late D1 opportunity is gone before it arrives.

01

ELIGIBILITY

ACADEMIC AND ELIGIBILITY

This phase decides whether you are allowed to play. Nothing in Phase 2 or Phase 3 matters if this one fails. Coaches cannot recruit an athlete who will not be certified.

- Core courses, core GPA, and the 10/7 rule
- When to register with the Eligibility Center
- What to do in each grade, 9 through 12
- Why your GPA is worth more money than your film

9TH GRADE

- ☐ Get your high school's NCAA-approved course list. Sit with your counselor and map all four years against it now.
- ☐ Understand that **every grade from this semester forward counts**. Freshman year is not a warm-up. It is 25 percent of the GPA that decides your eligibility.
- ☐ Start a folder, physical or cloud, for every report card and transcript.
- ☐ If you are already behind, fix it this year. Credit recovery is possible now. It gets very hard after sophomore year.

10TH GRADE

- ☐ Audit your core-course count. You should be roughly 8 of 16 through by the end of this year.
- ☐ Calculate your **core GPA** by hand, core courses only, unweighted 4.0 scale. If it is under 2.3, this is the emergency, not your 40 time.
- ☐ Verify the 10/7 progression: which ten courses will be finished before senior year, and are seven of them English, math, or science?
- ☐ Take the PSAT. Not for eligibility. For academic money.

11TH GRADE

- ☐ **Register with the NCAA Eligibility Center.** Create a Certification Account, not the free Profile Page, if you are targeting D1 or D2.
- ☐ If NAIA is on your list, register separately at PlayNAIA.org. They are different organizations and one does not talk to the other.
- ☐ Request your official transcript be sent to the Eligibility Center once junior year grades post.
- ☐ Take the SAT or ACT for admission and academic aid.
- ☐ Confirm your 10 locked courses are complete and correct before the seventh semester begins. After that date they are frozen.

12TH GRADE

- ☐ Apply for admission at every school on your list. A coach cannot recruit you onto a campus that will not admit you.
- ☐ Complete the FAFSA the day it opens. Athletic money is usually stacked on top of need-based and academic aid, and the stack is what makes the number work.
- ☐ Have your counselor upload your **final** official transcript with proof of graduation.
- ☐ Confirm your Eligibility Center status reads **Final Certification**. Do not assume. Log in and look.

02

EVALUATION

ATHLETIC DEVELOPMENT AND FILM

Film gets you evaluated. Development gets you kept. Coaches are not watching your highlight tape the way you think they are, and knowing how they actually watch it changes how you build it.

- The first 20 seconds decide everything
- Why full-game film is the real currency
- Training the trend, not the snapshot
- Where to compete and where not to bother

THE FILM RULES THAT ACTUALLY MATTER

Coaches watch the first 20 to 30 seconds, and they are looking for a reason to stop watching. Build the tape for that reality, not for your teammates.

- ☐ **Jersey number and a spotlight or arrow in the opening frame.** If a coach has to hunt for you, the tape is over. Do not make them work.
- ☐ **Best play first.** Not a build-up. Not a montage. Not music that takes 15 seconds to land. Your single best rep is the first thing on the screen.
- ☐ **Three to five minutes maximum.** Anything longer says you do not know which of your plays are actually good.
- ☐ **No slow motion, no transitions, no filters.** Every effect you add reads as compensating for something.
- ☐ **Have full-game film ready.** Highlights get you a first look. Full games get you an offer, because that is where a coach sees what you do when the ball is nowhere near you. Keep at least two full games unlisted and linkable.
- ☐ **Update every season.** Old film showing a younger, smaller version of you actively hurts.

THE TEST A COACH APPLIES IN TEN SECONDS

Can I find you, can I tell what position you play, and did the first clip make me want a second one? That is the whole evaluation at this stage. Everything else on your tape is decoration.

DEVELOPMENT, BY GRADE

9TH AND 10TH: BUILD THE ENGINE

- ☐ Play multiple sports. Early specialization correlates with injury, not with scholarships, and college coaches say so out loud.
- ☐ Start a real strength program with a qualified coach. Movement quality first, load second.
- ☐ Establish baseline testing numbers for your sport and position: speed, jump, strength, and the sport-specific metrics that matter at your level.
- ☐ Do the mobility and injury-prevention work now, before something tears.

11TH: PROVE THE TREND

- ☐ Re-test every metric. Coaches recruit the **slope**, not the snapshot. A 4.9 that used to be a 5.3 is more interesting than a 4.8 that has not moved in two years.
- ☐ Compete where your target level actually evaluates. Research where the coaches on your list go. One correct event beats six wrong ones.
- ☐ Attend camps run by the schools recruiting you, not the showcase that emailed everyone in your zip code.
- ☐ Get an honest evaluation of your level from someone with no financial interest in flattering you.

12TH: STAY AVAILABLE

- ☐ Do not get hurt doing something avoidable. Availability is the last ability that gets evaluated.
- ☐ Keep training through signing. Offers get pulled over reported conditioning.
- ☐ Keep the film current through your senior season.

RECRUIT THE SLOPE

Two athletes post the same number. One has been flat for two years. The other improved every single test. Coaches take the second one every time, because they are not buying who you are. They are buying who you will be in three years. Measure early so you have a slope to show.

03

CONTACT

COACH OUTREACH AND COMMUNICATION

You are not waiting to be found. Being found is not a strategy. The recruiting calendar restricts when a coach may answer you. It does not restrict when you may write.

- When coaches may contact you, by division
- The email that gets opened
- What kills it in under five seconds
- The questions to ask before you commit

WHEN COACHES MAY CONTACT YOU

This depends on your **sport** and your **division**, and the difference is real. Look up your exact sport on the NCAA's official recruiting calendar. Do not rely on a blog, including this one.

LEVEL	WHEN COACHES MAY BEGIN RECRUITING CONTACT
NCAA D1	For most sports, June 15 after sophomore year (football, basketball, baseball, and others) or September 1 of junior year (many others, including softball and lacrosse). Official visits open August 1 before junior year.
NCAA D2	More flexible and consistent across all sports. Electronic contact is broadly permitted earlier, with in-person contact opening June 15 after sophomore year.
NCAA D3 and NAIA	Effectively unrestricted. They can talk to you now.
Service academies	Different rules, opening earlier, July 1 before junior year.

AND NOW THE IMPORTANT HALF

None of those dates restrict you. You can email a Division I coach as a freshman. They may only be able to send back a camp brochure or a questionnaire, but your email is in their system and your film is in their inbox. The date restricts their reply, not your send. Coaches are building their boards long before they are allowed to call you.

OUTREACH TIMELINE

9TH AND 10TH

- ☐ Build a target list of 20 to 30 schools across three tiers: reach, realistic, safety. Athletic fit, academic fit, and financial fit all have to work. A school that fails any one of the three is not on the list.
- ☐ Fill out the online recruiting questionnaire for every school on the list. Free, allowed at any age, and it creates a record in their database.
- ☐ Clean up your social media. Coaches check. This is not a rumor. Athletes come off boards for what they post.
- ☐ Send your first introduction emails. Expect generic replies or silence. Send them anyway.

11TH

- ☐ Email every school on your list with updated film in the first message.
- ☐ On the day contact opens for your sport, June 15 or September 1, send a fresh email to your top targets. Coaches are waiting for that date too.
- ☐ Follow up every three to four weeks with something new: new film, a new test number, a new transcript. Never follow up with "just checking in."
- ☐ Get your high school or club coach to make calls. Coach to coach carries more weight than anything you send, because it is a reference from someone with a reputation at stake.
- ☐ Take unofficial visits.

- ☐ Cut the list. If a program has not responded to four quality emails and a coach call, they are telling you something. Believe them and reallocate the effort.

12TH

- ☐ Narrow to 10 to 12 realistic programs and go deep instead of wide.
- ☐ Get every offer in writing. **A verbal offer is not binding on anyone.** It becomes real when you sign the athletic aid agreement, and not one minute before.
- ☐ Sign during the appropriate signing period for your sport.

THE EMAIL THAT GETS OPENED

Coaches get hundreds of these a week. Most are deleted in under five seconds. This is the format that survives.

Subject: 2028 C Midfielder | 4.4 GPA | Highlight Film | Sarah Chen

Coach Miller,

I am a 2028 center midfielder at Plantation High School in Plantation, Florida. I am writing because I watched your team play at the Sunshine Classic and the way your midfield plays out of pressure is how I want to play.

Film: [link]

Academics: 4.4 weighted / 3.9 core GPA, 1250 SAT

Athletic: 5'6", 2.9 mile, 4.9 forty

Club: Weston FC ECNL, Coach Dan Ruiz, (954) 555-0134

Schedule: ECNL Showcase, Orlando, Nov 14 to 16

My club coach can speak to my work rate and my film is above. I would welcome the chance to be evaluated.

Sarah Chen
(954) 555-0199

WHY IT WORKS

- **The film link is above the fold.** It is the only thing they actually want.
- **One specific, verifiable sentence about their program.** "I watched your team play at X and Y impressed me" proves you are not mail-merging 200 coaches. "I love your school's tradition of excellence" proves you are.
- **Your club coach's phone number is right there.** You just removed a step from their job. Coaches call coaches.
- **Your schedule is included.** You just told them exactly where to go to evaluate you.
- **It is short.** Respect for their time is itself a signal about you.

WHAT KILLS IT INSTANTLY

- **Sending it from a parent's email address.** Coaches recruit the athlete. A parent's name in the "From" field reads as an athlete who is not driving their own process.
- **"Dear Coach."** No name means no research means delete.
- **Attachments.** They do not open them. Link everything.
- **Getting the coach's name, school, or division wrong.** It happens constantly and it is instantly fatal.

QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE YOU COMMIT

Most families never ask these. It costs them. Ask every one, out loud, and write down the answers.

- ☐ Where do I sit on your board right now, honestly? Am I your first choice at this position or a fallback?
- ☐ **Has this school opted into the House settlement, and what is the roster limit for this sport?** This is the new question that separates informed families from everyone else. It determines whether the spot is real.
- ☐ Is this offer full, partial, or preferred walk-on? What is the number?
- ☐ **Is the scholarship guaranteed for four years, or renewed annually?** What happens to my money if I get hurt in October?
- ☐ How many athletes at my position are you signing in this class, and who is already ahead of me?
- ☐ What does academic support actually look like in season?
- ☐ What is the graduation rate for athletes in this program?

ASK THE ROSTER LIMIT QUESTION

Since roster caps replaced scholarship caps, a program's honest answer about roster size tells you more than any compliment about your film. A coach who will not give you a straight number on where you sit and how many bodies are at your position has already answered you.

THE GRADE-BY-GRADE SUMMARY

The whole system on one page. Put it on the refrigerator.

	ACADEMICS	ATHLETICS AND FILM	OUTREACH
9th	Map core courses with your counselor. Every grade counts.	Multi-sport. Start real strength work. Baseline testing.	Build the target list. Fill out questionnaires. Clean up socials.
10th	About 8 of 16 core done. Calculate core GPA by hand. PSAT.	Re-test. First real highlight film.	First intro emails with film. Expect silence. Send anyway.
11th	Register with the Eligibility Center. Lock 10/7 before the seventh semester. SAT or ACT.	Prove the improvement trend. Camps at target schools only.	Hit the contact date hard. Follow up every 3 to 4 weeks with new information. Coach-to-coach calls. Unofficial visits.
12th	Apply. FAFSA day one. Final transcript. Confirm Final Certification.	Stay healthy. Keep film current.	Narrow to 10 to 12. Ask the hard questions. Get it in writing. Sign.

IF YOU DO ONLY FOUR THINGS

Protect the core GPA. Register with the Eligibility Center junior year. Put your best rep in the first five seconds of your film. Email coaches before they are allowed to email you back.

THE PART NOBODY PUTS IN THESE DOCUMENTS

About 7 percent of high school athletes play in college at any level. About 2 percent play Division I. Those numbers are not a reason to quit. They are a reason to be strategic instead of hopeful.

THE MONEY IS USUALLY NOT WHAT YOU THINK

Outside of a handful of scholarships in football and basketball, most athletic aid is partial. A 25 percent athletic scholarship stacked on academic aid and need-based aid is a far more common outcome than a full ride, and at many schools the academic money is the bigger number. Your GPA is worth more dollars than your highlight tape. That has always been quietly true. Roster limits have made it louder.

D1 IS NOT THE GOAL. THE RIGHT FIT IS THE GOAL.

An athlete who plays 30 minutes a game at a Division II school that fits them academically, that the family can afford, and where they graduate, beats an athlete who redshirts, transfers twice, and leaves a Division I program with no degree and no eligibility. Nobody asks what division you played in ten years later. They ask whether you finished.

THE WALK-ON PLAN IS NOT A PLAN ANYMORE

If the strategy has been "get on campus and earn it," understand that the door you were counting on is closing in most non-revenue sports. Roster caps eliminated thousands of Division I spots. Have the honest conversation about level now, not at signing day.

BUILD THE ATHLETE. THE PLAYER FOLLOWS.

Everything in this guide is downstream of one idea. Chase the scholarship and you will make short-term decisions that cost you. Build a better athlete, protect the grades, and be easy to evaluate, and the opportunities find their own level.

A note on accuracy. NCAA, NAIA, and NJCAA rules change every year, and several changed in the last 24 months. Everything here was verified against current published rules as of July 2026. Before you make a decision that matters, confirm it at ncaa.org/eligibility-center, at [PlayNAIA.org](https://playnaia.org), or with a college compliance office. Do not let any document, including this one, be your last word on a rule.



THE BETTER **ATHLETE**

Build the athlete. The player follows.

COACH ERICK FENELUS

FOUNDER, THE BETTER ATHLETE

THEBETTERATHLETE.IO

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