

The Do-It-Yourself Athletic Scholarship

By MATTHEW FUTTERMAN

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Kirsten Bladek had a problem.

Three weeks into her senior season on the Monarch High School volleyball team in Colorado, the 5-foot, 10-inch setter found herself warming the bench. Her dream of an athletic scholarship seemed dead -- especially since her family couldn't afford the \$1,000 or so that many parents pay these days to hire a private athletic-recruiting counselor.

But then in September, Ms. Bladek spent \$39.99 to post her athletic resume; and pictures of her playing on the Web site beRecruited.com. The shots, combined with videos posted later, highlighted her ability to set the ball from in front of her forehead, with arms thrust out like Superman in flight. That display, combined with some telephone campaigning by Kirsten and her mother, got college coaches to start paying attention.

"I've been getting so many calls from random numbers, half of them I'm scared to pick up," says Kirsten, who recently took an all-expenses-paid visit to New Mexico Highlands University, where she was offered a scholarship.

Ms. Bladek's experience highlights the changing landscape of athletic scholarships. Coaches and recruiters easily notice top-tier talent in big-name sports. But mid-level high-school athletes or those in lesser-known sports often pay high-priced private consultants to connect them with coaches. With fees ranging from \$700 to \$5,000, the system has been expensive for students and inefficient for coaches -- who get scouting recommendations only on kids who can afford to pay the consultants.

Now, do-it-yourself services have emerged that allow student athletes to showcase their abilities for a fraction of the price. Aside from beRecruited.com, other sites include Prepchamps.com, TRUpregs.com (owned by CBS Corp.'s MaxPreps unit), ActiveRecruiting.com, Collegecoaches.net and SportsWorx.com. There are also numerous sport-specific sites.

These sites are particularly active now, the peak of the college-application season. And many seniors are finding it harder than ever to get into -- and pay for -- college.

College coaches have grown more willing to scout talent on the Internet, especially since the sites don't charge them to view the profiles. At Jamestown College in North Dakota, nine freshmen on the football team this year traveled from distant states, including Arizona, Texas and South Carolina, to attend the 1,100-student liberal-arts school located 100 miles west of Fargo. The coach found them on beRecruited.com and offered them scholarships.

The site "allowed us to get to kids who never would have thought of us," says Jason Challeen, assistant football coach and recruiting coordinator at Jamestown. "We don't have to waste a lot of time cold-calling coaches looking for kids anymore."

High-Quality Video

The do-it-yourself networks vary in size and cost. Some are free but others cost as much as \$700, depending on the amount of video and guidance users need. All the sites include instructions on posting a profile and uploading video in much the same way users post video on Google Inc.'s YouTube.

So far, beRecruited.com is the largest new recruiting network, with 300,000 students and 12,000 coaches registered as users, according to the company's Jeff Cravens. SportsWorx, which also sells private consulting services, says its database of 1,900 students in 20 states has attracted searches by 6,000 coaches at 1,300 schools. Matt Brandmeyer, general manager of the College Coaches Network (Collegecoaches.net), which specializes in football, basketball and volleyball, launched in August and cites connections with 700 coaches.

With many of these sites, for example, a soccer coach in New Jersey can view some game film of a player in New Zealand, who ends up on her roster 10 months later. Or a track coach in Mississippi can plug in the specifications of the sort of runner he needs -- say, a quarter-miler, with a personal best of 49 seconds, a 3.5 grade-point average and a 24 ACT score, and a Web site produces a list of candidates.

The sites owe their existence both to technology and the cost of private consultants, such as National Collegiate Scouting Association, known as NCSA, and Collegiate Sports of America, known as CSA-PrepStar. Such services have blossomed in recent years as education costs spiraled and the country's youth-sports culture became a big business, with private coaching becoming nearly as common as math tutors.

NCSA, for example, aggressively markets its staff of more than 100 former college athletes and coaches, saying the company has direct contacts with 1,700 college athletic departments. Its services start at \$795, but can approach \$5,000 for families that want more hand-holding and the highest-quality highlight video.

Founded in 2000 by Chris Krause, a former Vanderbilt University football player, NCSA scouts evaluate the students' athletic prowess, review their academic transcripts and come up with a list of schools where they can realistically hope to make the team and receive financial help. Both NCSA and CSA-PrepStar say they won't take on a student who isn't good enough to play at the next level.

NCSA is assisting nearly 4,000 seniors this year, Mr. Krause says, each paying \$1,500, on average. The company says students who are successfully recruited receive financial assistance worth on average \$15,400 per year. CSA-PrepStar has 3,000 current clients paying between \$1,000 and \$2,995 each, and cites a 90% placement rate. On average, students placed by the company receive scholarships that cover 60% to 70% their tuition, the company says.

Scouting Talent

"Anyone who wants to can register themselves as a qualified athlete on a Web site," says Jeff Duva founder of CSA-PrepStar. "The college coaches need the scouts to differentiate."

Indeed, athletic-consulting services can be effective, even though they get mixed reviews from some coaches. While the services do plenty of work gathering and presenting the athlete's credentials, it's up to the student to follow up with coaches and schools.

Jim Catanzaro, defensive coordinator at Division III Lake Forest College in Illinois, says he learned about six of the 30 members of this year's freshmen recruiting class from a private recruiting service. But Becca Kohli, the head field hockey coach at Quinnipiac University in Connecticut, called recommendations from the high-priced services "unnecessary money."

"If kids are good enough, they don't need it," Ms. Kohli says.

George Washington University associate women's soccer coach Neel Bhattacharjee says NCSA recommends about 10 players to him each year of varying quality. So far, one, Taryn Dietrich, a freshman midfielder from California, has ended up on the team.

"There are some kids I look at their video and say, 'No way,' but they do broaden the pool of people we're able to look at," Mr. Bhattacharjee says of NCSA.

Still, many coaches -- especially those in the lower divisions of collegiate sports -- say schools and students can get the same benefit accessing the growing number of Web sites where students are posting video and athletic resumes. A personal letter expressing interest in a particular school and asking them to evaluate the footage on these Web sites is usually enough to garner a look from coaches.

Also, some of the sites have social-networking features that allow fans, girlfriends, boyfriends, family members or anyone else to post messages on athlete pages -- a potential turn-off to a college coach if there is offensive material. But if the athletic resumes and game footage are impressive, coaches are now more than willing to pay attention without a middle-man.

Doug Ahlers, whose son, Andrew, is a solid but undersized linebacker at Civic Memorial High School in suburban St. Louis, says he chose to use beRecruited.com over more-expensive recruiting services that tout themselves as experts.

So far, using only beRecruited.com and making plenty of personal inquiries, Andrew Ahlers has generated strong interest from six different schools, with offers of as much as \$40,000 in financial aid.

Parents as Experts

"I decided I would become the expert in all this," says Mr. Ahlers, who is a schoolteacher.

So did Rosie Eckburg, whose daughter, Alisha, is a 1,000-point career scorer as a guard at Canyon Crest Academy in San Diego. Ms. Eckburg shunned the high-priced consultants and followed a do-it-yourself guidebook she purchased at Recruit-Me.com.

Alisha Eckburg targeted 30 schools, and garnered serious interest from six. She recently accepted a scholarship at San Jose State University.

"You really can do this stuff yourself," Ms. Eckburg says. "To pay someone \$2,000 just seems crazy."

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