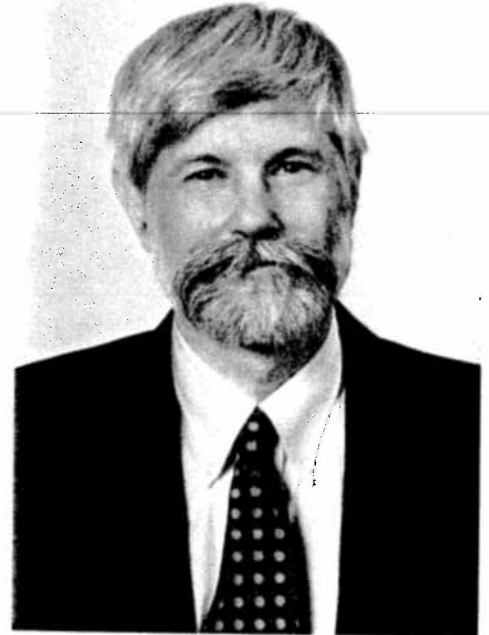


# College Recruiting Decoded

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**S**o, 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 turning 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 28 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 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 at 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 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.

The NCAA limit is five 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 an 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.

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 U.S. 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 ninth 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 three 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 five 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 one 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, IM, text messaging and the like are considered the same as snail mail and are 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 cannot be sent until after the junior year is finished.
- 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 t-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.

## What do I need to do to get to my dream school?

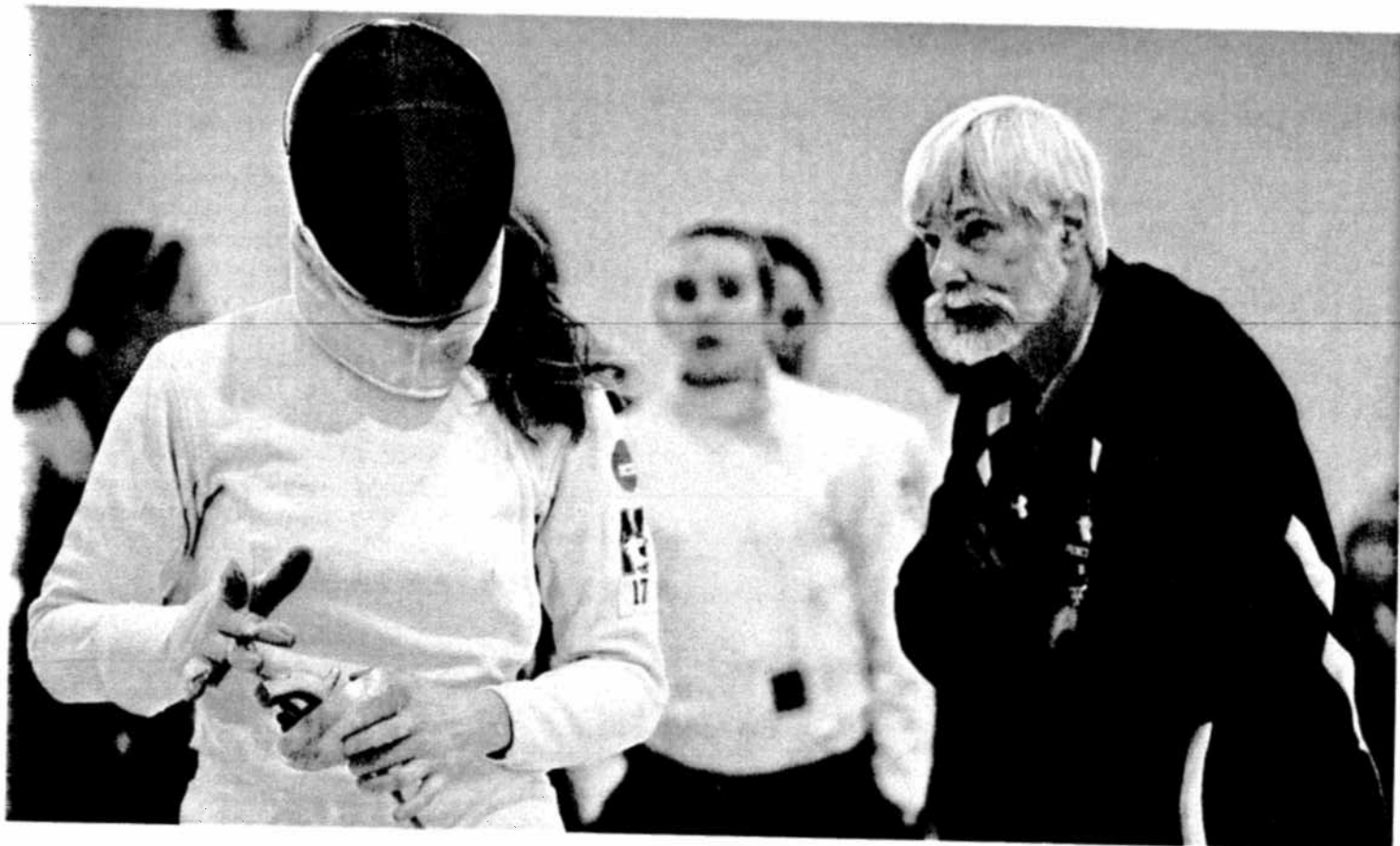
First and foremost, prepare yourself. Most schools that sponsor varsity fencing have rigorous academic requirements. They are going to look for a solid academic record right from the beginning of your freshman year in high school. Do not assume that a sterling fencing career will get you into a great university. It helps, but you have to have the grades too. Schools look for honors and AP classes as well as good SAT/ACT scores.

You also need to prepare yourself athletically. If you want to be noticed by a good program, you are going to have to put some results up on the board, not only in high school, but also in USA Fencing competition. The best programs are looking for athletes who have proven themselves on the strip and most of the top coaches go to North American Cups to see who is there. If you are highly ranked in cadet or junior, it is easy to be noticed. But, if you are not, being at the national meets and working hard can still get you noticed. If you are not that strong a fencer or want to go to a university with a less high-powered program, then you will have to make sure you bring yourself to the attention of the coach, for most of them do not attend the national events.

Second, start investigating universities and their fencing programs. What do you want out of a school? Do they have the academic programs you want? What size school are you interested in and do you want to be in a city or have cows as neighbors? What is the application process? Do they have early decision, early notification, etc.?

What do you want out of a fencing program? Some programs focus on a few elite fencers and others are very team oriented. Most of the strongest programs are Division I. If you go to one of those, you will have strong teammates, but may not get to fence as much in competition. Many of the Division III schools have much weaker programs, so you may get to fence more there, but not get the benefit of stronger teammates, coaching and other perks.

Some programs welcome anyone of whatever skill and some cut. Some run on a shoestring and do not have a lot of travel and equipment, and some are able to fund travel to North American Cups. Take the time to look at the athletic websites of the schools you are interested in and see what sort of program they have. Look at the roster of current athletes and see who they are. In other words,



educate yourself as to the type of program it is. You should do this during your junior year if not before. It is never too early to try and get an idea of where you might like to go.

Now you are ready to contact the coach. Every athletic department's website will have contact information for their fencing coach. Email him or her and introduce yourself. Take the time to write an email that lets the coach know that you know something about their program. That will get their attention. Too many prospectives send out a form letter, which makes it pretty obvious that the fencer is just casting his/her net and has no real interest in your program. Make sure you know whom you are addressing. My nickname is Laurie, a feminine name, but I am a fully bearded male. Simply looking at our website and my picture will prevent your sending a letter to Ms. Schiller.

Some coaches will ignore these types of letters. If you want the coach to respond, you need to get his/her attention. Try to not just ask 'please tell me about your program' which is hard to answer and too general. Construct a letter specifically introducing yourself, including what weapon you fence, how long and where, and any significant results. You may be first team all state New Jersey, but the coach in the Midwest or West may not know that.

Then, ask some specific questions about the coach's program including scholarship availability, competition opportunities, travel, equipment and the like. Giving the coach specific questions to answer increases the probability of a response to your inquiry.

**It is never too early to try and get an idea of where you might like to go.**

In subsequent emails, ask the coach what his/her philosophy is about his/her program and see how you might see yourself fitting into it. Also ask how the coach can help an athlete with admissions. Some can do little, but some can do quite a bit, but they cannot help you if they do not know you are seriously interested. Remember that coaches are trying to get commitments early in the year. If you wait to start contacting coaches in the winter of your senior year, you may find that deadlines are past and slots filled and the coach can no longer help you at admissions.

Once you have established contact with a coach (and be aware that some coaches are not good about replying to prospectives or, they may simply be out of town or very busy, so be persistent), it is a good idea to arrange

a visit either during the spring of your junior year or during the summer. It is really helpful if you do this well in advance, as coaches are busy folks who run camps, attend Summer Nationals and even take the occasional vacation. Just showing up on campus generally ensures that you will not get a chance to meet with the coach or that it will be a hasty and ill-planned meeting. Tour the facilities and ask about admissions and financial aid.

Finally, maintain contact with the coach. If a coach really wants you, he/she will work to get you, but there are only a few top fencers that the coaches are constantly after. If you are not in that group, then you will need to keep in touch with the coach and keep yourself and your interest in front of him/her. If I do not hear from you, I assume you are no longer interested.

So, in a nutshell, be prepared athletically and academically so your choices and options are open to whatever school you want. Be informed about the school and fencing program and be sure to talk to the coach. We have no way of knowing you are interested if you do not tell us. Most of all, understand that recruiting is a process where coach, parents and athlete learn about each other and see if they will be comfortable with each other. ■