

## **College recruiting in the COVID era** (published 9/13/20)

The college selection process for high school students has always been complicated, and the COVID pandemic has made it worse. By the time COVID arrived in mid-March 2020, the majority of Class of 2020 graduates had made their college decisions. However, the Class of 2021 is experiencing the full force of COVID, ranging from cancellation of ACT and SAT tests to the suspension of on-campus visits at schools that are fully remote or simply locked down to outside visitors. While many colleges are permanently or temporarily waiving standardized test scores, it's difficult to get a sense for a college without walking the campus, meeting people and observing classes.

The college selection process is further complicated for athletes who want to compete in college. At the Division 1 level, an NCAA committee has repeatedly extended the recruiting dead period, from March 2020 to at least April 15, 2021, which means that coaches can't have in-person meetings or make in-person observations of recruits. Across all collegiate divisions, coaches are being furloughed at schools that have cancelled fall sports, which reduces the likelihood that they'll respond to athlete e-mails.

For distance runners, virtually no one in the Class of 2021 had a spring track season, which typically provides coaches with a reliable gauge on an athlete's talent level. The summer USATF season was also cancelled in most states, and at least 8 states (California, Delaware, Maryland, Nevada, North Carolina, Oregon, Pennsylvania and Virginia) have postponed the fall 2020 cross country until at least November. In addition, school districts also have the option of cancelling fall sports, just as the Omaha Public Schools and Cleveland Metropolitan School District have done.

Without a doubt, these historic events will significantly impact college recruiting for this year's senior class. To gain a better understanding of that impact and what seniors can do to mitigate that impact, I reached out to four collegiate cross coaches for guidance. Chris Gannon (Creighton), Brady Bonsall (UNK), Matt Beisel (Concordia) and Nick Ekel (Iowa Central) provided the following feedback.

### **Coaches are facing uncertainty too**

Before coaches set their recruiting goals each year, they need to know how many departures they'll have. With the NCAA and NAIA granting additional eligibility to fall athletes even if they have a delayed season next spring – and with the majority of distance runners qualifying for medical redshirts at some point in their college career – cross country rosters are now filled with runners who could compete in their 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> year of college. Collegiate runners will have to decide which of three options they'll take: enter an uncertain COVID job market, pursue a professional degree, or transfer to another college. That will be a difficult decision to make, and their decisions will likely not be made until late in the spring. Consequently, coaches may not finalize their returning roster until April or May.

Roster sizes vary widely and these potential holdovers will impact each team differently. As my sons have investigated collegiate running programs, we've seen men's roster sizes ranging from 10 to nearly 40, although under 20 seems to be the normal for Division 1. Larger rosters are common at the D2, D3 and NAIA level, in part because many college administrators view sports as a valuable recruiting tool to attract and retain students for four years. For example, the Concordia track program has 174 athletes (men and women) this fall, which is approximately 15% of its total enrollment. For colleges that view

athletic programs as a college-wide enrollment tool, the COVID holdovers may have little impact on the number of athletes added this year.

However, Division 1 programs are more likely to be concerned with budgets and Title IX (male/female ratios) considerations. While many D1 runners don't earn athletic scholarships, D1 athletic departments are often run like a business, and cross country teams are assigned a wide variety of costs, including academic support staff, gear, travel, training table, facility use, strength and conditioning staff, medical costs, stipends, and the cost of those limited athletic scholarships. Thus, even if a large cross country roster includes students paying tuition that will be a net positive to the college's bottom line, within the athletic program that large roster may be viewed as a budget-busting problem.

Another factor to consider is that the loss of football and basketball revenue in 2020/2021 will have an outsized impact on Division 1 programs that count on revenues from TV contracts to support non-revenue sports. Akron, UConn and most recently Minnesota have cut their cross country and/or track programs (along with other sports) to offset losses from their football programs. These program cuts will reduce the relatively small number of Division 1 spots that were previously open to Class of 2021 runners.

Divisions outside of D1 have different scholarship rules that play in the favor of athletes. For example, in the NAIA, athletic scholarships don't count towards the team's limit (12 full track and 6 XC scholarships per gender) for each athlete who has a GPA of 3.6 or higher in the previous academic year. In addition, colleges only have to count half of the institutional aid provided to athletes with a GPA between 3.3 and 3.6. Those rules allow NAIA schools to carry large rosters as long as most of their athletes maintain high GPAs. In turn, smaller schools often also don't face entry limits at meets until the conference championships, so being on the team usually means that you're competing rather than just practicing.

### **Be proactive**

With so many athletes having limited performance data – particularly track-only athletes as well as cross country runners with sparse results posted at athletic.net and MileSplit – this year more than ever there are going to be good runners who are not on a coach's radar. Coach Bonsall gave the example of athlete who ran a 2:10 800 meters as a sophomore – a time that wouldn't normally get his attention. However, the athlete e-mailed him this summer and shared his training and developmental progression, and Coach Bonsall subsequently spoke to his high school coach. Those discussions led Coach Bonsall to believe that the athlete would have run a sub-2:00 if there had been a 2020 track season, and thus is someone whom he should be recruiting.

The first step in the recruiting process is simply to let college coaches know you're interested in their colleges. Coach Beisel noted that a sometimes challenging step in the recruiting process is obtaining athlete phone numbers and e-mail addresses, and just having those two items allows him to follow up. Coach Gannon prefers to receive as much information as possible in that first e-mail, including name, address, e-mail, phone, date of birth, high school name and address, graduation year, GPA and test scores, high school coach and contact information, intended major/career, non-athletic activities, and the date and times for the athlete's top two performances in their running disciplines. That introductory e-mail will likely be a long one, and it will also reveal how articulate you can be in writing.

Perhaps most importantly, send those e-mails sooner than later. If coaches hear from you for the first time in the February of your senior season, they may already have a full list of promising athletes that they been engaged for months. If they're busy with track season and other responsibilities, February may be too late for them to fully explore whether you're a good candidate for their program.

### **High school coaches can help**

In addition to recommending programs that might be a good athletic and academic fit for an athlete, high school coaches are also a reliable recruiting resource for college coaches. A high school coach can share observations about work ethic, training load, physical development and performance trajectory that may not be publicly available. Coach Beisel and Coach Bonsall said that they will also give credence on time trial results reported by the coach on Athletic.net or during a phone conversation. Coach Ekel went one step further by suggesting that athletes who have missed seasons should ask their coaches to help facilitate time trials. (I suspect that a few non-OPS athletes might be glad to help OPS athletes in these time trials.)

A relatively new high school coach may not be completely familiar with the college recruiting process, but they will always be an asset and advocate for the athlete. The athlete should share their 'wish list' of colleges with their coach and ask for their help with the recruiting process. However, student athletes should not wait for their coaches to do the work the student should be doing. High school coaches also double as teachers, so they don't always have time to respond or forward communication from college coaches.

One side benefit of the COVID era is that college coaches may give more weight to swing factors – which Coach Beisel described as grades, character and values. While they'll pick some of this up in phone discussions and on-campus visits, they'll also rely heavily on feedback from your high school coach. If you're not treating your high school coach with the respect he or she deserves, you may be wasting a key asset in the recruiting process.

### **Don't panic to commit once you have an offer...**

I've already started to see announcements of athletes are who are committing to colleges, but most high school seniors (including non-athletes) don't make a decision until the spring. The commitments likely to catch your attention on Twitter or Instagram in September are high-profile athletes who showed huge potential as a freshman or sophomore. Don't fret; they're outliers. Most teenagers continue to develop throughout high school, recording their best performances as juniors and seniors. Colleges typically require that seniors place an enrollment deposit by May 1 (although that deadline was extended by many colleges this past spring), and all four coaches expect that they may see later decisions this year – perhaps in the January to April range – if most athletes are having difficulty visiting college campuses in the fall. This extra time will not only allow coaches to get a better handle on their roster numbers, but it will also allow athletes to post times during the track season that may boost their profiles.

### **...but make a decision as soon as you're ready**

While student athletes may make decisions later than normal due to COVID, Coach Gannon advises them to make a decision as soon as they are confident in the college, coach and fit. He recommends this for several reasons:

- Finalizing the college decision reduces the stress on the high school students and allows them to enjoy the rest of their senior years without worrying about the recruiting process.
- Coaches at every level make more scholarship and walk-on offers than the number of spots they need filled, and at most schools there are hard limits on roster spots. When my oldest son was a senior, one coach was direct with him during a February discussion: "I have six spots to fill and I've extended offers to ten kids. If the six spots are taken before you accept, I won't have a spot for you." Coach Gannon noted that coaches with limited spots to offer are "going to look for the most secure offers they can make and take them as early as they can." Reputable programs will tell recruits how many spots they have and where the athlete sits on their recruiting board.
- Once a student athlete signs their national letter of intent (NLI), this locks them in to the school, but it also guarantees the grants and aid that has been offered. As schools scrutinize their athletic budgets – which may become a bigger issue if the college basketball season is impacted by COVID – having guaranteed aid is a helpful. (Note, however, that if a program isn't offering athletic financial aid, then a NLI isn't binding. Binding NLI's also aren't allowed in D3 and the NAIA.)

According to Coach Beisel, there is another benefit to committing earlier than later: once a commitment happens, the level of the relationship between the coach and the committed athlete can begin to develop at a deeper level. In addition, it allows the committed student-athlete to begin connecting with fellow committed student-athletes, so that when they arrive on campus in the fall, they have deeper bonds (and perhaps a roommate) with their future teammates.

Coach Beisel noted that in past years, most girls commit to Concordia in the October-February range while boys are more typically November-March. Since it's unclear how COVID will impact recruiting timelines, he suggests that student athletes discuss with every college coach they contact about what they expect their offer and commitment timelines will be this year.

### **You may be competing against a 22-year-old for a roster spot**

With shrinking D1 budgets and an abundance of athletes with an extra year of eligibility, the NCAA transfer portal and the graduate transfer market will be busier this year than ever. This is largely a D1 issue, but it's a big one. If a college coach has to choose between you and a 22-year-old with two years of remaining eligibility and an impressive list of high school and college performances, the 22-year-old is a safer option than rolling the dice on a high school senior with limited results.

Despite that challenge, coaches are still willing to take chances on late blooming, high-potential athletes. The 'hits-and-misses' ratio will likely skew more towards the 'misses' with this year's senior class, but there will be ample opportunities to excel at the D2, D3, NAIA and JUCO levels.

### **College coaches will have work harder to evaluate talent**

All four coaches agreed that in the absence of ample performance data, they're simply going to have to work harder to identify recruits and evaluate each recruit's potential. Whereas in past years a recruit might simply jump off the computer screen due to their Athletic.net profile, the college coaches will now need to supplement athlete-provided information by reaching out to high school coaches. Without Spring 2020 track results, college coaches will also have to give more weight to Fall 2020 cross country results. Unfortunately, cross country results are less objective than track times because of differing course difficulty, course distance and levels of competition, so coaches will rely on historical times for those courses and well as how an athlete finishes compared to athletes with known results. For example, as a two-time defending State champion, Liem Chot of Lincoln North Star may be a reliable measuring stick to evaluate other Nebraska runners that he races.

Evaluating Class C and D runners can be especially difficult since some of the best runners in those classes either don't have full teams, don't have training partners with similar talent and/or don't race on well-known courses. College coaches realize that having high-level training partners yields high-level performance, so they expect runners from small high schools to see a notable jump in performance by the end of their freshman year. The jump for Class A runners may be less pronounced, and at times being in Class A may be a morale buster. Coach Beisel noted that there are dozens of Class A runners who can compete well at the collegiate level, but they often leave the sport because they measure themselves solely against the top competitors in Class A.

Coach Beisel also added that, even though there is some guesswork involved, most collegiate coaches should be able – from a professional standpoint based on years of past experience – to look at high school freshman and sophomore marks on sites like Athletic.net and MileSplit and reasonably predict how athletes will progress. However, he noted that some coaches don't upload meet results, so some of the best athletes in those classes may only have their state marks and results of one or two invites total listed under their names.

### **Keep your options open**

Coaches have never recruited in a pandemic, so their viewpoints today may be proved wrong six months from now. However, they all discouraged athletes from focusing on one or two dream schools at the expense of other options. In light of all the issues mentioned above – and the uncertainty about how an athlete may perform in this pressure-filled year – it's best to cast a wide net in the college search. Athletes should investigate public and private colleges, in-state and out-of-state, and from all different levels. Some of Nebraska's best distance runners over the past five years have attended D2, D3 and NAIA schools. However, there have also been strong runners who set their sights on running at the D1 level, and then they ended up not competing at all in college because they hadn't fully explored their other options.

Although neither of my sons have used the NCSA recruiting service, Coach Beisel reported that he has found it helpful, particularly in connecting with out-of-state athletes. If a Nebraska high school student is looking to leave the state but doesn't have specific schools in mind, the NCSA service may help the student attract interest from schools he or she hadn't considered. Coach Gannon observed that the free NCSA account is as helpful as the paid version, and that athletes should be sure to use their personal e-

mail account (not their school account) instead of the NCSA-provided e-mail account. Coach Beisel has numerous examples of missed connections with prospects interested in Concordia because they didn't check their NCSA e-mail accounts or never received an e-mail sent to their school account because of the school's tight firewall.

### **Evaluate your academic options first**

Above all, the coaches emphasized that a student athlete should first focus on identifying schools that match the academic and social aspects that they want. Do you want to attend a big school or smaller one, and in a big city or a small community? Which colleges offer the major(s) that interests you? Do you want to attend a faith-based school? Is it close enough to home – or too close – to fit the dynamics of your family life? Can you afford it based on the academic merit aid and financial-need aid that could earn?

The college selection process is difficult, but NETC already has two documents that may help. We've written the article "Navigating the College Selection Process for Distance Runners", which can be found at [https://589f63ec-6c8e-4930-adcb-2f81a244a5c2.filesusr.com/ugd/4d3a62\\_3daee432834843b1aad91db22a1c13c5.pdf](https://589f63ec-6c8e-4930-adcb-2f81a244a5c2.filesusr.com/ugd/4d3a62_3daee432834843b1aad91db22a1c13c5.pdf). In addition, we keep an updated list of local distance running programs at [https://589f63ec-6c8e-4930-adcb-2f81a244a5c2.filesusr.com/ugd/4d3a62\\_7f2edabaaf4447c69170a3b9331a617b.pdf](https://589f63ec-6c8e-4930-adcb-2f81a244a5c2.filesusr.com/ugd/4d3a62_7f2edabaaf4447c69170a3b9331a617b.pdf).

### **Don't forget the JUCO option**

Cross country programs at community colleges (more commonly known as junior colleges, or JUCO) often fly under the radar, and 90% of what I know about JUCO programs was what I learned by interviewing Coach Ekel for this article. (I am not embarrassed to admit that the other 10% comes from watching five seasons of "Last Chance U.") However, in my discussions with OPS athletes who aren't able to compete this fall, a few said that they are already exploring junior colleges, and Coach Gannon, Bonsall and Beisel all agreed that JUCO is the best option for some athletes. Here's a brief primer on why JUCO programs may be appealing:

- Community colleges focus on offering two-year associates degrees, and they're often supported by state and local governments. As a result, tuition tends to be much lower. Iowa Central's annual tuition for in-state and border-state residents is around \$6,000, or about \$2,000 less than in-state tuition for Iowa and Iowa State. The annual tuition costs at Iowa Western in Council Bluffs, at \$204 per credit hour, appear to be around \$6,500. Southeast Community College, the only Nebraska JUCO offering a cross country program, seems to have even lower tuition, charging \$102 per credit hour compared to \$259-\$321 per hour at UNL.
- In addition to offering traditional core classes in business and liberal arts, JUCOs also offer trade programs such as welding, carpentry, culinary arts and dental hygiene. All of these programs can lead to a two-year associates degree, a valuable credential especially if an athlete's collegiate journey is derailed before they earn a bachelor's degree.
- JUCOs are an excellent option for NCAA and NAIA 'non-qualifiers,' who are student athletes who don't meet the minimum academic standards to immediately play at the NCAA/NAIA level. For

example, the NCAA requires a GPA of 2.3 in core classes and an ACT score of 18 (the ACT is being waived for the Class of 2021 due to reducing testing availability). The NAIA requires students to achieve two of three marks: a 2.0 GPA in core classes, in the top 50% of the graduating class or an ACT score of 18. In order to compete at a NCAA or NAIA school, academic non-qualifiers must first earn an associate's degree from a JUCO.

- There are typically no walk-on standards for a JUCO cross country program. As Coach Ekel noted, "I'm excited to recruit anyone who wants to do the work, wants to be part of a team, and is willing to live by the expectations and rules we've established." If a young man has a 5:45 1600 PR but wants to be part of a team, Coach Ekel will welcome him and push him to improve. In contrast, Iowa Central's scholarship standards for men are fairly rigorous – 1:53 (800), 4:20 (1600) and 9:30 (3200) – but Iowa Central is able to attract walk-ons who want to attain those marks by training with faster teammates.
- According to Coach Ekel, JUCO coaches are the only college coaches being paid to ensure that student athletes leave for another school. These schools have the infrastructure in place to help all students – whether they are academically strong or weak – gain the tools they need to be successful in life or at their next college.

### **It's up to you**

While the recruiting landscape has been disrupted by COVID and there may be fewer D1 spots for Class of 2021 distance runners, now is the not the time to be passive. The population of college-aged Americans is falling, and colleges have never been more aggressive in recruiting students to fill their classrooms. High school runners have a tremendous number of opportunities to compete collegiately within and outside Nebraska. It's up to you to seize one of those opportunities.

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