

## **Before you sign on the dotted line...**

[Questions to ask before you accept an athletic scholarship]

Making a decision about post-secondary education is often challenging. For athletes who have been contacted by an American university or college with a scholarship offer, the decision making process becomes even more difficult. There are many Canadian athletes who have attended school in the United States and have had successful academic and athletic careers. However, there are also many who have returned to Canada disillusioned, having spent considerable funds without enjoying athletic or academic success.

Before accepting an athletic scholarship, parents and athletes should know the answers to the questions posed in this document. The chances of making a good decision will be improved if you are able to answer the questions provided in this document. Do not hesitate to contact the coaches or recruiting personnel of the institution that is offering the scholarship to gather some of the answers to these questions. Use the Internet and library to gather answers to other questions

The questions in the document are grouped into the following general categories: Financial; Academic; the Volleyball Program; the Coaching; Family and Friends; Miscellaneous. A number of the questions have been taken from NCAA web sites.

## Executive Summary

Making a decision to accept an athletic scholarship to American universities requires a great deal of information gathering and is not as straightforward as many people believe. This document presents many questions that should be answered before accepting an athletic scholarship. The questions are grouped into several categories.

### **Financial Issues:**

Make sure that you know exactly all of the details of the athletic scholarship that is being offered. Scholarship offers vary a great deal. Most people think a “full ride” is good for four years, but athletic scholarships are available on a **one-year, renewable basis**.

### **Quality of the Volleyball Program:**

There are close to 1000 universities offering NCAA volleyball programs in United States, (Division I, II and III.) There is **tremendous variability** in the quality of these programs.

### **Quality of the Coaching Staff:**

The qualifications and abilities of NCAA coaches vary a great deal. Some are well paid, very competent coaches while other coaches have few or minimal qualifications and may coach more than one sport at the institution. Since your daughter will be working very closely with her new coach it is critical that the abilities and style of the coach are known and understood.

### **Academic Concerns:**

Some universities in the United States are recognized as being among the best academic institutions in the world, while the quality of others could be described as marginal. Obtaining a degree from a university outside of Canada requires careful scrutiny to determine whether or not additional certification will be required to work in Canada.

### **Family and Friends:**

Carefully consider your daughter’s ability to cope in a new highly competitive NCAA sporting environment when she leaves the comfort of her family, social network and support groups. The transition to post-secondary education can be challenging far from home.

### **Miscellaneous Aspects:**

Attending university in a foreign country can be an outstanding experience or nightmare. Make sure you have information about all the aspects that affect student-athletes before accepting an athletic scholarship.

# Financial

*[Is the “free ride” really free?]*

- **What exactly does the scholarship cover [tuition, room and board, textbooks, lab fees, other ancillary fees, incidentals]?** You can not assume that the scholarship will pay for all of these. It is important to understand what expenses are not covered by the athletic scholarship so you can arrange to pay them.
- **How long does the athletic scholarship last?** Most people think a “full ride” is good for four years, but athletic scholarships are available on a one-year, renewable basis. *[NCAA web site]*
- **Under what circumstances can a scholarship be reduced or cancelled?** Suppose the coach wants to use your daughter's scholarship for another player. Can the scholarship be pulled for reasons like “poor performance” or “bad attitude”? Since “poor performance” and “bad attitude” are very subjective measures, what recourse do you have with this situation arises? Coaches should be able to give you some idea of how players are evaluated from year to year and how these decisions are made. The institution may have a policy governing renewal of athletic scholarships. Ask if such a policy exists and read it. What happens to the scholarship if the coach decides your daughter is not playing well enough?
- **Will I be required to pay “room deposits” for my daughter’s accommodation in residence?** If so is this fee refundable? Are there any other “deposits” that must be paid?
- **Does the scholarship cover summer school tuition, room and board and other fees?** It is not uncommon for athletes to take summer school to remain eligible or to catch up because they did not take a full course load during the regular academic term.
- **Is my daughter eligible for additional financial aid?** Are there any restrictions? Sometimes a student-athlete cannot accept a certain type of scholarship because of NCAA limitations. If your daughter will be receiving other scholarships, let the coach and financial aid officer know so they can determine if you may accept additional dollars.
- **What are my opportunities for employment while I am a student?** Find out if you can be employed in season, out of season or during vacation periods.
- **Is the athlete required to work at summer sports camps hosted by the institution?**
- **If training camp begins in mid-August before the campus residence opens, who covers the costs?** Are athletes required to live on-campus? Does the scholarship cover off-campus housing or will my daughter be required to live in residence for four years?

## **Financial** [continued]

- **Are there academic criteria tied to maintaining the scholarship?** Some institutions add academic requirements to scholarships (e.g., minimum grade-point average or number of courses completed).
- **What scholarship money is available after an athlete's eligibility is exhausted to help athletes complete their degrees?** It is not uncommon for a student on an athletic scholarship to take less than a full course load each year due to the heavy demands of the training program. The missed courses can be made up by doing summer school or by returning for a fifth year of school. If a fifth year of school is required to complete her degree does the scholarship cover those costs? Because your daughter is a "foreign student", tuition for an extra year can be very expensive. Some colleges assist student-athletes financially as they complete their degrees. Ask how such aid is awarded.
- **Who is financially responsible if I am injured while competing?** What type of medical insurance is provided by the university your daughter is attending? Who is expected to cover the cost of medical insurance for the years that your daughter is away? You need to understand the financial obligations if the athlete suffers an injury while participating in athletics.
- **Is any scholarship money available if I suffer a career-ending injury?** Not every institution continues to provide an athletics scholarship to a student-athlete who can no longer compete because of a career-ending injury.
- **Will my scholarship be maintained if there is a change in coaches?** What happens to the scholarship if the coach gets fired or accepts a job at another institution? Will the new coach still want your daughter on the team? A coach may not be able to answer this, but the Athletic Director should be able to.
- **Who covers the cost of your daughter's trips home for holidays and for the summer break?** How much will it cost to travel to the United States to see my daughter play?
- **Does signing a National Letter of Intent guarantee that my daughter will play on a team?** No. Signing a National Letter of Intent does not guarantee an athlete playing time or a spot on the team. Rather, by signing a National Letter of Intent, the institution with which you signed agrees to provide athletics financial aid for the academic year.  
*[www.national-letter.org/faq]*
- **How much does it cost to write the SAT exams?** These are required before you can attend an American university.

# The Volleyball Program

*[What is the quality of the volleyball program my daughter will be joining?]*

- **What conference does the team play in and how is this conference rated compared to other conferences?** There are close to 1000 universities offering NCAA volleyball programs in United States, (Division I, II and III.) There is tremendous variability in the quality of these programs.
- **What has the team's record been over the last few seasons?** Be very careful of “rebuilding” recruiting pitches with new coaches and young teams that offer promises of how much better things will be in the near future. As one NCAA coach said – ‘beware the worst teams in a very good conference and the better teams in bad conferences’. In the first case it takes too long to get better as the other teams are too good. In the second case the quality of the team is probably not good enough overall to benefit good players.
- **How many players have received conference or national All-Star awards?**
- **Has the team participated in the conference championship or national playoffs?** How did the team’s conference perform in the National Championships over the past few years?
- **How many players have received academic awards in the past few years?**
- **How many players have graduated on schedule in the past few seasons?**
- **How long has the coach been with this team?** The changeover rate in coaches is quite high in less successful programs [the mid to lower level programs]. Volleyball may not be a priority for an institution with a high rate of coaching changes.
- **When does the head coach's contract end?** How long does the coach intend to stay? Do not make any assumptions about how long a coach will be at a school. Coaches, like employees in other businesses will change employers when a better position is available. If the coach leaves, does this change your mind about the school/program?
- **Will my daughter be a starter in her first year?** If your daughter is told that she will be a starter in first year that should give you an indication of the quality of the program. It is flattering to hear that your daughter is a superstar blue chip player; however that is the exception rather than the rule. If your daughter is a starter in her first year at university, the odds are that the program is not particularly strong. It is a fact in all sports, that moving from one level to the next, [i.e. high school to university], usually requires a transition period of a year or two. Be wary of programs that offer a starting spot to first-year students because it probably means the program is not that strong or the recruiter is trying to “sell” you. If your daughter is one of the best players on her new team, how much more will she improve?
- **Why is the program/coach recruiting in Canada and not closer to home?**

# Coaching

*[How can I assess the quality of the coach?]*

- **What is the coach's philosophy of sport?** Success in the NCAA system is measured by a team's performance in competition. Coaches in many programs are under considerable pressure to improve their win/loss records quickly. Preseason schedules are often designed to improve the team's record. The success of the coach is dependent upon the win/loss record of the team. The athletes can be considered employees of the institution who will be pressured by the coach to perform well since the coach's job security is based upon the performance of your daughter. In simplistic terms your daughter is a commodity that the coach needs to maintain his/her job. There can be a great deal of pressure placed on the athletes to train long and hard to ensure successful performances. As all the other teams in the conference have similar demands, the pressure to perform can be intense.
- **What coaching style does the coach use?** Every coach has a particular style that involves different motivational techniques and discipline. You need to know if you can work with coach's style. Try to find out more about what the training sessions are like. The NCAA rules state that a recruit cannot play/practice with the team until a Letter of Intent is signed, which makes it very difficult to see what a potential new coach is really like. Ask to see a practice in person and if that is not possible ask for a recording. Once you have narrowed down a choice of schools ask for references and find a way to get references from former players or coaches in other conferences. If you speak with current players they will usually say good things about the coach since their scholarship may be jeopardized if they are critical. It is very important that you know a great deal about the coach as your daughter will be working with them very closely over the next few years! Are you comfortable with the person who will influence your daughter a great deal while she is at the institution?
- **How many teams/sports does the coach coach?** If the answer is more than one sport that indicates that volleyball is not a priority at the institution. Request a copy of the coach's resume. Visit the school's web site and view the information that is posted about the coach on the volleyball pages of the school's athletic department.
- **What are the coach's offensive and defensive philosophies?**
- **What coaching seminars and clinics does the coach attend?**
- **Does the coach attend professional development clinics on a regular basis?**
- **Does the coach present at coaching conferences/seminars** [not the summer camps or player development clinics that many schools run to raise funds]?
- **What personal development seminars/workshops does the coach attend?**
- **What was the coach's most memorable moment in coaching?**

## Coaching [continued]

- **From which coaching experience did they learn the most?**
- **Who is the coach's role model/mentor?** Successful people often model themselves after someone. Who is this coach's role model?
- **Has the coach had experience working with the USA national team program?**
- **How did the coach learn to be a good coach?**
- **What positions will my daughter play on the team?** It is not always obvious. Most coaches want to be flexible, so you might not receive a definite answer.
- **What other players may be competing at the same position?** The response to this question could give you an idea of when you can expect to be a starter. It should also show you that there will be competition for playing time.
- **Will my daughter be red-shirted in her first year?** The school's policy on red-shirting may impact your daughter athletically, academically and financially. Typically, four years of academic classes are required to obtain a bachelor's degree at an American college or university. A student's sport eligibility is based on this timetable. Therefore, a student-athlete may only represent a school in any given sport for a total of four seasons. However, a student-athlete may opt to "Redshirt" for one year. "Redshirting" allows the student-athlete to spread those four years of eligibility over five years. In a "redshirt" year, a student-athlete may attend classes at the college/university and practice with an athletic team; however he or she may not appear in games. Using this mechanism, a student-athlete has up to five academic years to use the four years of eligibility, thus creating the phenomenon of "fifth year seniors." Will the scholarship cover all five years if my daughter is red-shirted in her first year?
- **What expectations does the coach have for training and conditioning?** This will reveal the institution's commitment to training and conditioning programs.
- **Why is the coach recruiting players from Canada instead of developing their own players through a club program?**
- **Who is recruiting your daughter, the head coach or an assistant coach who specializes in "selling" the program?** If an assistant coach is the recruiter, make sure that the head coach has seen your daughter play or else there may be an unpleasant experience waiting when your daughter shows up at the training camp and is not the type of player the head coach was expecting.

## Academics

*[Will a degree from an American university degree be applicable in Canada?]*

- **What profession does your daughter wish to pursue for the future and where does she see herself working with her degree?**
- **Will your daughter's degree be recognized in Canada?** For example, what will be required if your daughter wants to be a teacher or practice law or physiotherapy in Canada? Will she have to complete more years of university in Canada? This obviously means additional costs. For some general types of degrees this is not a problem. For other types of degrees and for degrees from some universities it can be problematic. Any educational degree earned in the United States which requires certification should be examined closely as it may require re-certification or additional training within the jurisdiction in which the degree will be used. The amount of additional certification required will vary and should be checked out before accepting a scholarship. Obtaining a degree from a university out of the country requires careful scrutiny.
- **How good is the Faculty/department in the major your daughter has chosen to pursue?**
- **How many students are in the Faculty/department?**
- **What credentials do faculty members hold?**
- **What percentage of players on athletic scholarship graduate?** The response may indicate the school's commitment to academics.
- **What academic support programs are available to student-athletes?**
- **How many courses/credit hours should be taken in season and out of season?** It is important to determine how many credit hours are required for a degree and what pace your daughter will follow to obtain her degree.
- **Are there restrictions in scheduling classes around practice?** NCAA rules prevent student-athletes from missing class for practice, however athletes may be told not to schedule classes during practice times. This means athletes won't be missing practice but it may mean they won't be able to take the courses they want.
- **Is summer school available in the major my daughter is taking?** Will it be paid for by the scholarship? Athletes may need to take summer school to meet academic and/or graduation requirements.
- **How much time/studying does it take to prepare for the SAT exams?** Where will I have to travel to write the SAT exams?

## Family and friends

*[How well will you and your daughter cope?]*

- **Is your daughter prepared for the transition to a highly competitive environment that is NCAA sport?** Students often find the transition to university life a challenge when they attend a Canadian university close to home. Students who accept an athletic scholarship will find that this transition is complicated by the fact that the athlete is further away from home and in a foreign country. Will she be able to cope?
- **If you have been actively involved in the academic and athletic activities of your daughter how will the separation affect your daughter?** Does your daughter need you for support or can she cope on her own? Does she get “homesick” easily?
- **Can your daughter afford to travel home for holidays celebrated by Americans** [e.g. Thanksgiving] or will she be alone on campus while everyone else has gone home?
- **What are the chances that my daughter will develop a long-term relationship with an American?** It is fairly common for people to meet their “significant other” while at university. If your daughter is attending an American institution on an athletic scholarship then the odds are fairly good that she will establish a relationship with an American. If the relationship develops further, anecdotal evidence indicates it is often the Canadian who moves permanently to the United States. This will likely mean more trips down south to visit your extended family.

## Miscellaneous

*[Other things to consider.]*

- **Why is your daughter interested in going to the United States?** What does your daughter want to be doing 5-10 years from now? How will the academic and volleyball combination being considered achieve this goal? Athletes often make decisions about accepting athletic scholarships based upon external factors (e.g. perceived status of a scholarship, climate or location of the institution) without giving serious consideration to “who they are” and “what they want to accomplish”. Having a well-defined “perspective” about one’s self will help make a good decision.
- **How comfortable are you with your daughter being an “employee” at a foreign institution in a foreign country?** Whether one likes to admit it or not, a scholarship is a contract for services. Your daughter is being paid to work as an athlete. While few coaches will admit it, your daughter is a commodity that the coach requires to maintain a job. The NCAA is a very competitive environment. The coach’s job depends upon the win/loss record of the team, which ultimately rests in the hands of your daughter’s performance. A conflict may arise as the coach wants to spend extra time practicing and your daughter wants extra time studying.

## Miscellaneous [continued]

- **Will the significantly shorter NCAA volleyball season affect your daughter's volleyball development?** This may not be a factor if your daughter is not interested in playing competitively following her university career. The American university volleyball season begins in mid-to late August with training camp and finishes in late November for most teams or in early December for the best teams. Most teams train during the spring semester but are limited in the number of hours that they can spend training. The Canadian university volleyball season begins in September and finishes in late February for most teams in early March for the best teams. This longer season allows more time for improvement.
- **If my daughter is interested in playing on the Canadian national volleyball team how well accepting a scholarship to the United States affect this?** In theory it should have little affect on your daughter's ability to be involved with the Canadian national team. However, the reality is that very few players who have attended school in United States have been involved with the Canadian national team during their years at an American institution or after they graduate from the American institution. While there may be many factors to explain this, historical evidence shows little involvement by scholarship students on Canadian national team programs.
- **If things don't work out in the United States is there any problem returning to a Canadian institution?** Athletes returning to Canada must sit out **365 calendar days** from the last competition they played before they are eligible to play in Canada. This is a long time for a young athlete. There may also be problems receiving transfer credits for the academic courses completed in the United States. This varies a great deal and depends upon the academic courses completed and the Canadian institution to which the athlete returns.
- **How does an NCAA scholarship affect my daughter's beach volleyball career?** If an athlete is interested in competing in beach volleyball they will not be able to do that in any serious way as an NCAA athlete. Their beach career will be put on hold until they are finished school. NCAA athletes will miss Provincial Championships and will always miss the Nationals Championships because of the NCAA season. Missing the National Championships means few opportunities to become a National Beach athlete and/or compete internationally during the 4 or 5 years while your daughter is an NCAA athlete. In addition many U21 or U19 World Beach Championships occur in August/September, so even if they qualify they will likely not be able to attend since it will interfere with the NCAA season. If your daughter attends a CIS school they should be able to compete nationally and internationally in beach volleyball.

- **If my daughter signs a Letter of Intent for an American university can she change her mind and attend another university?** Yes, if you enter a university or college in Canada. However, if you attend an American school you must attend the university with which you signed the Letter of Intent.
  - **What happens if I want to transfer to another American school?** You may not transfer without the permission of your current school's athletics administration. Ask how often coaches grant this privilege and ask for an example of a situation in which permission was not granted.
  - **How will the NCAA playing rules affect my daughter's volleyball development?** The NCAA playing rules (libero serving, 12+ substitutions) have created situations of increased specialization [less playing time], which is detrimental to an athlete's overall development.
  - **Will my daughter be able to get a summer job if she has a scholarship?** This may be difficult with the American academic schedule, especially if she is required to take additional courses to make up for a lighter course load taken during the regular academic term.
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