

What Athletic Level Is Right for You?

BY WAYNE MAZZONI

As a former Division I college coach, I have often seen many players walk on a Division I playing field and get cut, when they could have qualified for Division II or III. Likewise, I have seen many athletes play at the Division III level when they were Division I scholarship quality. Misjudging your talent can hurt your college decision-making process and ultimately, your college playing career.

Here are some suggestions to determine the athletic level best for you.

❖ *Ask your high school, summer, and even opposing coaches for a fair evaluation of your athletic talent.* Keep in mind that some high school coaches have a solid understanding of college athletics while others do not; don't base your decision entirely on one person's opinion, but take their critique into consideration when determining a suitable level of play.

It is also of utmost importance that you have a good relationship with your high school coach. College coaches may make decisions based on your coach's evaluation of your athletic talent, as well as judge your character by what your coach says about you.

❖ *Enroll in showcases or summer camps.* This will give you the chance to evaluate yourself against other college-bound athletes as well as provide other coaches a way to see you play and get to know you. Plus, since some of these camps are held at colleges, it can be a great opportunity to discover what you like or dislike about a particular school.

❖ *Ask for the opinions of any college coaches who have seen you play.* Regardless of whether they are interested in you for their program or not, most will be willing to give a fair evaluation of your athletic skill. Again,

don't base your decisions on one coach, but respect the opinion you're given. College coaches have a keen eye as to who fits into their program's talent level.

❖ *Ask former players.* Players who have graduated before you and have continued on to compete at the college level have a good understanding of how your talent will rate. And, if they have played with you, they will know as well as anyone what you are capable of achieving in college-level athletics.

❖ *Determine how you rank on your team and in your competitive league.* When doing this, however, realize that many teams and conferences are not as strong as others. Thus, being the best player on your team or even in your league does not automatically qualify you as a Division I athlete. Further, even if you have limited playing time in high school, this doesn't mean you can't score a scholarship. A talented soccer goalie may not get much playing time simply because the team's starting goalie happens to be the best in the state.

❖ *Attend college games.* It's helpful to watch a few games at each college divisional level. You may think you are a Division III player, but then change your mind after seeing some Division II games. Think about where you fit now and seriously decide whether you have the

skills to later develop into a masterful player at that level.

A special note for those involved in individual sports: It is typically easier to evaluate your level in games such as golf, swimming, and track. For instance, if you're a golfer who shoots 91 and the average round of a Stanford University golfer is 74, chances are it isn't the right school for you.

THE IDEAL SPORTS CAREER

So, how does the typical college athletic career pan out? In my opinion, it's ideal to attend a school where you are limited to little or no playing time in your freshman year, regular playing time as a sophomore, a starting player in your junior year, and a team leader in your senior year. Sure, there are exceptions: Some people become stars right away, others get cut. But if you choose wisely – despite your initial playing time – your college sports career should be a fulfilling one.

Finally, if you aspire to play at a certain school no matter what – like the infamous Rudy, who wanted to play at Notre Dame – don't let anyone talk you out of it. But, be practical, and realistic!

As a recruiting adviser, I would have told Rudy he'd be better off in Division III! ■

Wayne Mazzone is a former Division I coach and author of *The Athletic Recruiting and Scholarship Guide* (Mazz Marketing, 1998, \$19.95). He leads recruitment seminars at high schools and also works with families seeking recruiting help. To get the book or for more information, call 888.333.7097, or visit www.mazzmarketing.com.

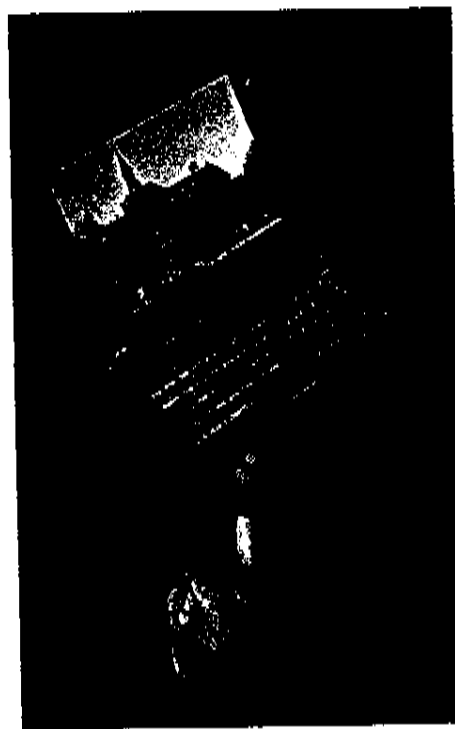
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