

*Preparing to Play Softball  
at the Collegiate Level*

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# FOREWORD

This book has been the foundation of my work with college-bound athletes for over 20 years. It started as a small handbook I used with my clients. Families found it so useful, that in 1993, I decided to expand the book to serve as a resource for anyone looking for information on the college search process, including:

- high school freshmen and sophomores who are thinking ahead to college and who want to ensure they're on track to reach their goal of playing collegiate softball
- high school juniors, seniors, and junior college players who've started their college search and want a central resource to use during their recruiting process
- softball coaches, teams, and organizations who want to be able to answer their players' questions
- high school counselors, athletic directors, and others who offer guidance to college-bound softball players

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The college search process for athletes can be very complicated because the *rules* seem to change so often. This book does its best to stay on top of NCAA guideline changes, coaching changes, and program changes. However, even the best players occasionally make errors! The book is updated annually, but if you spot information you feel is unclear or incorrect, please let me know. **If you're in doubt about any issue related to recruiting, eligibility, etc., at NCAA, NAIA, NJCAA, CCCAA or NWAACC schools, please contact the appropriate governing organization directly.**

For additional information about recruiting, visit the Fastpitch Recruiting Web Source at [www.fastpitchrecruiting.com](http://www.fastpitchrecruiting.com) or email the author at [info@fastpitchrecruiting.com](mailto:info@fastpitchrecruiting.com)

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# INTRODUCTION

The college search process is like peeling an onion—below each layer of information there’s another! This book is designed to help you peel that onion—i.e., to decide whether or not you want to play softball in college, and *if you do*, suggest steps you can take to reach that goal.

Because there are so many factors to consider before choosing a college and a college team, I’ll try to look at those I think are most important. I may answer many of your questions, but I’ll probably raise new ones as well!

As you read, if you have questions or concerns, I suggest you write them down. Then consult one of the resources listed in Chapter 12. They should have the specific answers you need.

The following chapters will:

- describe softball at the collegiate level
- ask questions designed to help you establish your collegiate goals and interests
- look at factors to consider when choosing a college and choosing a team
- discuss academic eligibility requirements
- suggest ways to prepare yourself for collegiate competition
- tell you when and how to contact college coaches, including how to write a letter of introduction and develop a resume
- offer tips for marketing yourself effectively, including how to make a video
- discuss questions to ask college coaches
- give you an overview of the recruiting process, including what to watch out for and what to do if you’re not recruited by a team
- suggest things to consider when choosing a junior college
- take a brief look at scholarships and other financial aid
- provide you with a list of additional resources

## A Word to Community College Players

As a community college player, you may already be familiar with much of the information in this book. You may also have a coach who is doing all he or she can to help you secure a position on a team at a four-year school. I still encourage you, however, to read this book carefully. There is information specifically directed at community college players, as well as ideas and techniques that may help you find a spot on the four-year school team that’s best for you.

\* \* \*

Finally, as you read through this book, you may notice a “See Appendix-” and a number at the end of a sentence. This means there is an article in the Appendix that takes another look at the topic(s) discussed in the previous paragraph or section. For example, (See Appendix-1), refers to Appendix article #1 entitled, *Looking at the Pros and Cons of Playing Collegiate Softball*.

# CHAPTER 1

## SOFTBALL AT THE COLLEGIATE LEVEL

Softball is one of the top intercollegiate sports for women and is growing in popularity and recognition. Right now, twelve hundred four-year colleges and four hundred two-year colleges across the U.S. field intercollegiate softball teams, and new programs are being added every year.

Whether you're an outstanding high school or JC player who's already started hearing from college coaches or simply a good player who loves the game, you can't really decide whether playing in college is right for you without first understanding what it's all about. This chapter will examine several aspects of collegiate softball and suggest ways you can learn more about what it takes to "make the cut."

### Between the Letters and the Numbers

If you've started looking at collegiate softball, you may have heard people talk about Div. I vs. Div. II or the NCAA vs. the NAIA. You may also be wondering what all this means—or does it even matter?

It *does* matter, but not necessarily for the reasons you may think. If you're considering playing college softball, it's very important that you not limit your options by making assumptions about the caliber of a team based on its athletic affiliations. The type of college you choose should depend on your academic, financial, and personal needs. The type of team you look for should be determined by your athletic experience and ability to contribute rather than the team's athletic affiliation or ranking.

As you probably know, the **National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA)** and the **National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA)** are two organizations that act as governing bodies for intercollegiate sports. Both organizations are dedicated to protecting the interests of student-athletes, and both have a wide variety of regulations pertaining to academic eligibility, athletic participation and athletic-based financial aid. (Throughout this book, I'll refer you to the NCAA and the NAIA for guidelines and information.)

But how does a college decide which organization to join and what—if anything—does a college's affiliation tell you about the caliber of its sports teams?

Whether a college joins the NCAA or the NAIA depends on a variety of factors including the size of the school, the number of teams it sponsors, and those teams' scheduling needs. One important thing to remember about a school's affiliation is that while it's safe to make *some* generalizations, there are *always* exceptions.

You probably have heard that the strongest, most successful teams belong to the NCAA's Division I. Some definitely do...and some don't. However, it is safe to say that in most college sports the strongest teams compete at the Division I level. Division I football, basketball, and baseball teams will probably send more players on to NFL, NBA, and major league baseball careers than will teams who compete at other levels.

However, since the strength of only *one* of its teams—for example, football or basketball—may be the determining factor in the division a school joins, it is definitely a mistake to assume that a school’s softball, tennis, or swimming team will be outstanding just because its basketball team is ranked tenth in the nation.

**At the Division I level of college softball, the strength of the team can be affected by several different factors, including:**

- **whether or not a school offers softball scholarships**—and how many it has to give. (Some Div. I schools don’t give any softball scholarships or have only a few. These teams may have a hard time competing with Div. I schools that offer the maximum allowable number of scholarships.)
- **how much recruiting the school does.** (Schools whose coaches invest a lot of time in recruiting, scout top travel tournaments, and pursue the best players in the region or the country may have an edge over those schools whose coaches can’t put as much time or money into recruiting.)
- **how much it costs to attend that college.** (This ties into the scholarship situation. If a private school that costs \$45,000 to attend can only offer two or three softball scholarships, it may be hard for that school to recruit as many top players as a state school that has 12 scholarships and costs only \$13,000 to attend.)
- **how tough the academic regimen is at the school.** (College is never easy, but schools with very tough academic standards—Princeton, Northwestern, Harvard, for example—may have a harder time recruiting. Coaches at these type of colleges usually are looking for top athletes who also have outstanding academic records.)

Any of these factors can affect a coach’s ability to recruit so-called “blue chip” players. If several factors apply to a college, it can be nearly impossible for a school to recruit the players needed to consistently field a top-ranked Div. I team. It’s good to remember that while the best teams in the country may be at Division I schools, not all Division I teams are *automatically* better than teams at Div. II or III schools.

The factors that determine the strength of a Div. I team also apply to most Division II colleges. Division II teams that recruit from strong softball areas or have softball scholarships to offer will usually be stronger than those that have no scholarships or recruit from weaker softball areas. You might be surprised to learn that schools perennially ranked at the top of the Div. II level play *very* competitive softball; nationally-ranked D-II teams consistently beat many Div. I teams, ranked and otherwise!

Of course, as with Division I, the caliber of Division II teams varies. There are also Division II teams that can be beaten by many Division III or NAIA teams.

Teams at Division III schools are somewhat different in that no Division III college can offer athletic scholarships. Consequently, other factors such as the area a team recruits from or the tuition at the school may have more of an effect on the caliber of the team than the availability of scholarships.

Traditionally, top-ranked D-III programs field high quality teams and are usually competitive with many Division II and NAIA teams.

Smaller colleges often choose to join the NAIA and, generally, their teams will be competitive with Division II and III teams. Again, however, there will be some variation in the strength of these teams. Those frequently ranked at the top of the NAIA will probably be competitive with good Division II teams, while other NAIA teams may be more competitive at the Division III level. NAIA and NCAA teams do compete against each other during the year, but each organization has its own conference and national championships.

This competitive diversity means that players with varying skill and experience levels can have the opportunity to compete for a college team. Just remember, before you rule out a team because of its affiliation, look closely at the things about the team—and the college—that affect you personally. One thing which should not factor into your college choice is the athletic organization or division to which a school belongs. Numbers and letters, just like looks, can be very deceiving.

## Making the Transition to a College Team

Just as the demands of college academics come as somewhat of a shock to even the best students, so collegiate softball will be very different from high school—and it's important that you learn what some of the differences are.

As a high school varsity player you probably start practicing in February or March (except in states with fall/winter softball). You work out after school for one to two hours each day. You may play as few as 12 or as many as 30 games during your high school season—perhaps a few more if you go to tournaments or play-offs. (If you compete on a summer team, you may spend a lot of time with that program, but your **high school** softball time commitment isn't likely to be much more than I've described.)

While college athletes have a limit to the number of hours per week they can give to a sport, most programs still require about double the time commitment you made in high school. And some will require much more.

All NCAA teams are allowed a specific maximum number of days per year of practice and playing time. Most programs have some type of fall (non-traditional season) workouts and conditioning. Many teams schedule games or tournaments. The regular season will generally start with workouts in January or February, and competition may extend through May.

Although some college teams play just 25 to 30 games, most teams meet from 25 to 35 opponents—almost always playing doubleheaders. In addition, many teams go to several tournaments during the season, and some will have post-season play. This may translate to over 55 games each spring. One-third to one-half of these will be “away” games—almost always out of the area and sometimes out of the state.

Another time-consuming, but important, aspect of collegiate softball is a team's training program. Here again, there is a wide range of style and type, but even a light training program takes time. At the least, you will probably have to do regular stretching, running, and conditioning exercises. Many coaches, particularly at highly competitive programs, expect daily workouts that include weight training, sprints, and long-distance running.

Teams that have fall practice seasons will usually alternate field practice with conditioning. However, in the spring, most teams will spend several hours each day on the field, with conditioning as an extra component.

## Learning to Balance Athletics and Academics

Every athlete should be in college to get an education and a degree. Because of this, the NCAA and the NAIA require college athletes to carry a certain minimum number of units, maintain a certain minimum GPA, and demonstrate satisfactory progress toward graduation.

High school students who find it relatively easy to maintain a B average while juggling athletics, a social life, extracurricular activities, and a part time job often get to college and are astonished at the work it takes to maintain a C average, play ball, and (somehow) squeeze in a social life.