



College Athletics and Scholarships for Track and Field - What's it all about?

by Donna Dye

2/3/09 -- Track and field athletes in the US high school Class of 2009 start signing college scholarship offers tomorrow. DyeStat will be aglow with the bright eyes and smiling faces of student athletes signing the national letter of intent as family, coaches and friends look on. It's a great time for celebration, excitement and relief. For most, the road to this point has been long and hard as student athletes struggled to meet the eligibility requirements for admission, sports and scholarships. No one gets an easy pass. But the rewards are great for both the athlete and parents alike.

To help younger athletes who are interested in the "next level" of competition and an athletic scholarship, we will be doing a series of articles for the college bound student athlete. Now is the time for the Class of 2010 to be working toward next year's signing period. The series starts with this overview and will be followed by more specific topics. The road to college athletics is filled with many do's and don'ts. We hope to make things easier by explaining the process and pointing to the right place for direction.

How Does It Work?

Control and management of intercollegiate athletes is divided between athletic associations and colleges. The athletic associations are made up of colleges that agree to follow the mission, rules and regulations of the association. In this process, athletic associations govern athletic entry and play while colleges govern admissions, and, of course, academic programs. **In practical terms, that means that an athlete must be certified eligible to participate in college sports by an association, and be accepted for admission by a college or university.** Meeting association eligibility requirements does not meet college admissions. The college awards athletic scholarships, not the athletic association.

The Process

Both the college and the association establish requirements and rules for entry. It may differ from one association to another, but basically, students must meet such requirements as:

1. Graduate from high school,
2. Meet core course requirements,
3. Achieve a certain level on the Standard Achievement Test (SAT) or the American College Test (ACT) and
4. In some cases, achieve a specific grade point average.

Because there is such an emphasis on 4-year academic achievement, preparation should start in the freshmen year. At the same time as preparation in the academic area, students must achieve on the track or field. By the senior year in high school, students are courted by college coaches. (There are

rules about that process too. We'll deal with that later.) And, in the senior year, students start seeking admission, to colleges of interest for both academics and sports. After calls, visits and conversations, college coaches select potential recruits and make offers. **Once the student agrees to an offer, a National Letter of Intent is signed during the approved signing periods. The Letter of Intent acknowledges the offer and commits the student to attend the college for one year. (Even though the Letter of Intent is for one year, colleges generally renew each year.) Once the Letter of Intent is signed, other colleges may not contact the student.**

It's always important to remember that both athletic and academic success contribute to earning financial assistance. Many college athletic programs work with college admissions to develop aid packages for athletes that combine athletic scholarships with other forms of financial assistance, such as academic scholarships, student loans and work study.

The Associations.

When thinking about college athletics, most people think National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). But the NCAA is one of many associations, each with its own purpose, rules, and requirements. The three most known associations are: NCAA, the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) and the National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA).

The NCAA

The NCAA is the largest association. Many sports fans are all too well familiar with NCAA bowl games and March Madness. The NCAA has 1,051 member organizations grouped into divisions: Division I with 331 members, Division II with 291 members and Division III with 429 members. Student athletic eligibility requirements are different for each division. To learn the differences among the divisions including the number of sports that must be available to both men and women and what division teams they play. See: <http://www.ncaa.org/wps/ncaa?ContentID=418> for more specifics. To learn what schools are members of the NCAA go to: [NCAA](#)

There are three major NCAA eligibility requirements : graduation from high school, successful completion of NCAA approved core courses, acceptable grade point average in core courses and meeting the sliding scale requirements for the grade point average and Standard Achievement Test (SAT) or American College Test (ACT). Specific requirements are different among the three divisions.

The NCAA Eligibility Center manages the process for prospective student eligibility including the National Letter of Intent. High School students interested in competing in athletics must register with the NCAA Eligibility Center. For more information see [NCAA Eligibility Requirements](#).

While at the NCAA site, check out the 2008-09 Guide for the College Bound Student. This is a must have for learning and understanding the NCAA requirements. It can be viewed or downloaded on the [website](#) or requested in hard copy by calling 1-800-638-3731.



The NCAA and the NCAA Letter of Intent

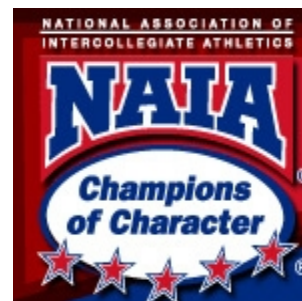
The NCAA Eligibility Center defines the Letter of Intent as a **“binding agreement between a prospective student-athlete and an institution in which the institution agrees to provide a prospective student-athlete who is admitted to the institution and is eligible for financial aid under NCAA rules athletics aid for one academic year in exchange for the prospect's agreement to attend the institution for one academic year.”** Neither the student nor the educational

institution is required to sign a Letter of Intent. But the Letter of Intent helps to solidify the agreement between the parties, and a signed letter of intent ends recruitment by other colleges. The NCAA specifies time periods when the Letter of Intent can be signed; for the Class of 2009, the period runs from February 4 to August 1. For more information, see [Letter of Intent web page](#).

Many colleges awarding athletic scholarships do not participate in the National Letter of Intent (NLI) process. While most of the NCAA members (610) are also members of the NLI, some are not. Ivy League, Military Service Academies, Division III Institutions are not members of the NLI. Other organizations not part of NLI are NAIA colleges, preparatory schools and junior colleges.

The NAIA

The National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics or the NAIA has nearly 300 member organizations in the United States and Canada. The mission of the NAIA is to **“promote the education and development of well-rounded students and productive citizens through intercollegiate athletics.”** There is one athlete division for all sports except basketball which has two divisions. Many, but not all of the member colleges, are small private institutions with religious affiliation. **While the NAIA members offer athletic scholarships, there are very few full athlete scholarships.** Most NAIA members offer combinations of athletic and academic scholarships and other financial aid. See [NAIA Members](#) for more information.



Eligibility requirements for participation in the NAIA include graduation from high school and 1) minimum score on the ACT or SAT, 2) acceptable high school grade point average, and 3) graduate in the upper half of the student athlete's high school graduating class. For more specifics and interpretation of the eligibility requirements see the NAIA [A Guide for the College Bound Student-Athlete](#). It should be noted that the NAIA eligibility criteria is less restrictive than the NCAA and the colleges have more open entrance requirements.

The NJCAA

The National Junior College Athletic Association or the NJCAA has more than 500 member organizations in the United States divided into three athletic divisions. **Its mission is to “promote and foster junior college athletics on intersectional and national levels so that results will be consistent with the total educational program of its members.”** The NJCCA has four provisions for eligibility including graduation from high school or General Education diploma and/or other factors that need to be

considered. See [2008-2009 Eligibility Rules Pamphlet Section 4](#).

The NJCAA offers financial assistance and scholarships. **Many student athletes who don't have grades or test scores high enough to meet the NCAA requirements, start their college career at the junior college level where they can improve their academic standing while continuing to compete athletically.** There are specific requirements for this move and can be found on the NCAA website.

The NJCAA does have a Letter of Intent program. However, the program is not affiliated with the NCAA. The NJCAA website provides [Information for the Prospective Student-Athlete](#).

How Many Scholarships are out There?

The answer is complicated and depends on the following factors: number of scholarships available and/or allowed, funds available, the number of scholarships which roll over each year, the number that become available through graduation or drop out, and the number of suitable and available athletes.

Some figures. The NCAA members determine the number of scholarships awarded up to the limit allowed by the NCAA. **For each Division I track and field program, the NCAA allows 18 scholarships for women and 12.6 for men. For Division II the numbers are 12.6 for both women and men. (Cross Country and Track and Field are considered as one sport.)** Division III programs offer only academic scholarships and other financial aid which may be awarded to athletes.

The followed NCAA chart shows how many colleges in the NCAA have cross country and/or track and field programs:

Sport	Div I Men	Div I Women	Div II Men	Div II Women	Div III Men	Div III Women
Cross Country	301	327	241	270	372	393
Indoor Track	243	294	113	128	225	231
Outdoor Track	269	307	162	174	267	274

The NAIA has 300 members; the number of scholarships is determined by the college. As noted above, the NAIA generally provides athletes with financial assistance through a variety of resources.

Within the 500 NJCAA membership, each institution sets the number of scholarships it offers up to the **NJCAA limit of 10 combined men and women for cross country and 20 combined men and women for track and field.**

It may be tempting to add up all of the numbers and arrive at a yearly figure. However, that would be very misleading. There are several factors involved in determining the number of scholarships available each year:

- **Funds available** -- This may fluctuate from year to year at each college. Money for college sports, including scholarships, comes from a variety of sources raised by the college, the association and college support groups such as booster clubs and alumni groups. Sports programs within a college compete for the money. Usually, the majority of funds go to such sports as football. **Sometimes, colleges don't award the maximums because the college does not have enough money.**
- **Needs of the team** -- A college's need in a given year depends on the number of athletes already on scholarship and events already covered. For example, a college is not likely to recruit a distance runner if it needs a jumper.
- **Title IX of the Civil Rights Law** -- Title IX prohibits exclusion from participation in sports based on gender. Efforts to make sure that women have equal opportunity to participate in sports affects the number of scholarships, and the number of sports offered at colleges. To keep the balance between the budget and Title IX compliance, some colleges: (1) limit the number of scholarships for both men and women, (2) limit scholarships for men, (3) drop some sports altogether, or (4) drop a men's program in a sport. Title IX applies to all athletic associations.
- **Partial Scholarships** -- Athletic scholarships can be split among more than one athlete. For example, if a scholarship at an NCAA college is worth \$12,000, the college could award 12 partial scholarships of \$1,000 each. The NJCAA, however, limits the number of scholarships to 20 athletes total.
- **Academic Scholarships** -- Athletes may be on athletic or academic scholarship or a combination of the two. **In the NCAA, regardless of the kind of scholarship, an athlete on scholarship is counted against the NCAA team scholarship limits.**
- **Walk Ons** -- College students are permitted to "walk on" the team. "Walk On" athletes participate in track & field for the love of the sport while paying for college with private funds or other kinds of financial assistance. "Walk On" may sometimes earn a scholarship after the first year.

So the answer to how many is--many; but for the exact total, it depends.

How many high school athletes earn athletic scholarships?

Very few when compared to the number of graduating athletes. Athletic scholarships are limited. Using the NCAA figures above, for Outdoor Track and Field in Divisions I and II, there were 431 programs for men and 481 for women. **That would mean a maximum of 5,430 athletic scholarships available for men and 8,658 athletic scholarships available for women.** So that is a little more than 14,088 potential college scholarship slots. Yet, there are more than 1,500,000 athletes on high school cross country and track teams during 2006-07.* Some percentage of the 1,500,000 are seniors and of those a smaller percentage are interested and talented enough for a scholarship. **Still, the number seeking a scholarship is far greater than scholarships available.**

According to NCAA recent statistics, about 2 percent of high school athletes are awarded athletics scholarships to compete in college. So individuals and families seeking athletic scholarships must be realistic about their chances. But it is also important to keep in mind that it is very possible to couple an

athletic scholarship with an academic scholarship.

** Figures from the National Federation of High School Athletic Associations*

Next Steps. Although athletic scholarships are limited, high school athletes should not be discouraged easily. Instead, athletes should motivate to earning one of those limited scholarships on a college team. Now, armed with the basics, it's time to begin. For each year of high school there are steps to take toward participating on that college cross country and/or track team. The next article in this series will cover what to do each year in high school. In the meantime, take a look at the association sites especially the NCAA's Guide for the College Bound Student Athlete.