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Looking for Answers

It doesn't take a genius to understand that navigating the college recruiting process can be overwhelming.

There are pages of NCAA rules about what can happen and when, who can call who and when, and when a student can actually officially commit to play a sport for a school. It's almost like a dating ritual, with National Signing Day representing one huge mass engagement announcement.

Jennifer Noonan, president and founder of College Sports Quest, is a bit like a matchmaker or maybe a pre-marital counselor.

The Corona del Mar High alumnus is a consultant who helps student athletes navigate through the recruiting process, something she experienced first hand as a soccer and volleyball player. Noonan's father actually started the soccer program at CdM in 1981.

When Noonan graduated from CdM in 1986, she had a CIF girls' volleyball title under her belt after playing under current UC Irvine women's coach Charlie Brande. She ended up walking on to the swim team at Arizona State, then playing volleyball for Golden West in 1988. Eventually, Noonan received a bachelor's degree in economics from UC Santa Barbara, and after college, started working for national recruiting service.

Recruiting services, which are unregulated, are one of the many types of businesses that have spun off to get a piece of the recruiting pie. They may serve as a vast Internet database of athletes, which allows a coach to log on to a website and type in the height, weight, and position for whatever sport he's seeking to recruit for.

Noonan's business operates a little differently, and she said the biggest difference is that she provides education rather than exposure. "I felt that families needed more individual attention," said Noonan, who also coached girls' soccer at CdM from 1999-2002. "The goal was to work with families to make sure they're on track and doing the right things at the right time."

Since starting College Sports Quest in 2001, Noonan has consulted more than 500 families and 95% of the student athletes she's assisted have been accepted into the college of their choice playing the sport they chose. Sixty percent of the athletes Noonan has helped have received scholarships and financial aid packages, with the average being about \$20,000 for the first year of college.

The biggest hurdle, Noonan said, is getting athletes and parents to look past Division I colleges to Division II, Division III, or NAIA schools. Only about a quarter of the nation's athletic programs are Division I, Noonan said.

“Nationwide, only one percent are blue chip, top Division-I prospects,” Noonan said. “This is not about sending five girls to a Division I school, but sending every girl to a school somewhere.”

Because of the large soccer atmosphere in Southern California and Orange County, Noonan has become adept with helping soccer players. More girls play high school soccer in California than any other sport. In the 2006-07 season there were 40,895 high school girls participating in CIF-sanctioned soccer.

While soccer players may get guidance from their high school or club soccer coach, Noonan sometimes assists in cases when a non-American coach isn't familiar with the recruiting process.

“It's not just about playing a sport in college,” Noonan said. “It's about sitting down with a young person, putting down a goal, and finding a college that fits them athletically, academically, and for the family, financially.”

To Noonan, there are three main steps to follow once an athlete has started his/her junior year of high school:

Target realistic playing and educational opportunities.

Get in contact with college coaches and be persistent and follow up.

Try to have the college coach come watch you play.