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High School Female Recruiting Guide To College Soccer

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HIGH SCHOOL FEMALE RECRUITING GUIDE TO COLLEGE SOCCER

By

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for
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Thesis Summary

Ask any athlete how she got to where she is today. Did she play on an Olympic Development Team (ODP), or did she get recruited from a showcase tournament? There are a variety of paths when trying to play collegiate soccer, and one path is not better than the other. Even the thirty girls on the same college team may experience a vastly different recruiting process, but, somehow, they all end up in the same place.

This paper offers mere overall guidance to the recruiting process for female high school soccer players, with helpful tips to use along the way. The process should begin in high school, as early as freshman and sophomore year, and I hope to show you the preparation that should go into a successful recruiting process. I wish to advise you on when and where to start the process. I hope to help you create and narrow down your list containing the schools of your choice. To do so, I provide information to navigate through the process in both soccer and non-soccer related areas. I expect to shed some light on the importance of unofficial visits. Lastly, I hope to clear the way for you to enjoy the exciting, yet challenging, process of finding the right school.

Please keep in mind that this is a NCAA-regulated process, and there are rules to follow. I have enclosed several of the important rules that will severely affect your level of communications with the coaches, but this, by no means, is an all-inclusive list of the appropriate rules. A website has been included for additional information.

Some of my tips may relate to you, and some may have no bearing on your decision. I just hope to guide you and open up your mind as you begin the process to finding the perfect school for you.

Good luck!

High School Female Recruiting Guide to College Soccer

I cannot imagine the last four years of my life if I had not played soccer at the University of South Carolina, a Division 1 school in the competitive Southeastern Conference. I almost did not go through with it. In my senior year of high school, I froze at the thought of moving twelve hours away from my family—my home base and support system—to a school where I knew absolutely no one and a team that had just made it to the Sweet Sixteen round of the 2009 NCAA Tournament. I doubted my abilities to succeed on my own and on such a successful team. My club soccer coach and parents foresaw what I would have missed out on and convinced me to overcome my doubts: *It was the best decision of my life to play a sport in college.*

Why Should You Play?

The life of an athlete is not for everyone, but it definitely was the life for me. First, it is an opportunity to travel to different schools every other weekend. I would leave class on a Thursday afternoon in South Carolina and travel to Kentucky and Tennessee for the weekend; I even went to Boston, Los Angeles, and San Francisco in my soccer travels. My teammates and I loved seeing other campuses and soccer stadiums. Second, it is an opportunity to form an incredible bond with girls, a bond that is as strong as a family's. You spend hours upon hours with these girls every single day. You come to know your team very well, to care for them, and love them. Third, it is an opportunity to challenge your ability as a player to grow and progress. I did not plateau as a college player; I learned a lot from my coaches and worked hard to develop each season in order to help my team improve. Fourth, it is an opportunity to join the elite community of high

school girls that continue on to play in college. For the 2011-2012 school year, studies found only 9.6% of high school females make it all the way to the collegiate level in the United States (O'Rourke). You can be a part of that. Lastly, it is a chance to take some or all of the financial pressure off the growing costs of an undergraduate education. Full scholarships are hard to achieve, but most programs break the scholarships into percentages to help as many players as possible.

When Should You Start the Process?

As early as possible! Parents or fans may think that freshman year of high school is too soon for coaches to start recruiting, but the fact is, the coaches will still recruit young. Get ahead of the game, and do the groundwork to set yourself up for a smooth process. My second cousin, Peter Kinsella, a Notre Dame graduate, sent his twin daughters to play soccer at Vanderbilt University. He spent a lot of time crafting advice for his girls, their teammates, and anyone who requested it. By the time I asked for his advice, Kinsella had established a motto: *“The more time you allow yourself, the better the process should be for you.”*

Where to Start?

Take a deep breath. There are hundreds upon hundreds of schools in the United States. If it is your dream to play college soccer and you are willing to put in the work, there is a school out there for you. Start with a broad list of schools—do not try to narrow the list down until later in the process. If you do not know where to begin, look at soccer rankings to find some of the top, middle, and lower schools. A quick Google search will yield many different rankings. The specific spot for each school is not as important as understanding the bigger picture of who generally ranks in which position and the quality

of a program. Comparing the rankings from year-to-year can be helpful in discovering which teams usually end up in the top 10 or whichever area in which you focus.

If you need a place to begin, <http://www.nscaatv.com/rankings> is a good website to use. If you scroll down the main page, it provides you with the previous season's rankings for NCAA D1, NCAA DII, NCAA DIII, Junior College I, Junior College III, and NCCAA DI. Browse through to get that broad list of where you want to play. Keep your options open; I will provide factors to narrow down the list next.

Factors to Consider When Narrowing the List

The Coaches- The coaches play a crucial role in a player's experience and enjoyment of a college sport. They become your surrogate parents away from home. They discipline you, guide you, develop you, and care for you. The amount of time spent with the coaches is indescribable, and I highly encourage you to spend as much time with them as possible before committing. Each coach has a "recruiting" side and a "coaching" side. You will most likely see the first side a lot, and I emphasize the importance of seeing the second. A coach expressing his "recruiting" side is trying to court you for his program. He may not be as honest or forthcoming and will most certainly be on his best behavior. A coach expressing his "coaching" side will be in his natural state. This will take place during practices or games. If at all possible, try to attend at least one of the events mentioned to witness how a coach yells, corrects, or praises his players. If you decide to play soccer for his program, you will only see the "coaching" side after that, so you must be comfortable with his style.

The Team- The amount of time you spend with your teammates is even more astronomical than the amount of time you spend with your coaches. A soccer team is like

a close-knit sorority...except you are competing with your fellow teammates and best friends for playing time. It can be difficult to balance a friend who is also a competitor, but it is an important balance to achieve in order to enjoy your time. When looking at a school, focus on the younger players on the team (the freshmen and sophomores). I grew attached to a senior and saw her as a great mentor, but unfortunately, by the time I arrived at USC, she had been graduated for two years. You will actually join the younger ones when you play, so try to get a good sense of their personalities on and off the field.

The Campus- There are a variety of factors to consider in regard to the school's campus. Mainly, the campus population size is an important issue for many people—how big or how small do you want your school to be? Other issues include the size of the campus itself. Some people are not fortunate enough to have a car in their early years of college, so pay attention to the capability of walking from place to place. If one is fortunate enough to have a car, check out the parking situation on and off campus. Will you need a parking pass, and if so, check the costs associated with that. Another option is a bike. However, some campuses are extremely hilly and make biking unappealing. Some of these may not be relevant to you, and that is fine. Use these to think of other issues that are significant to you.

Surrounding City and City Life- Many parents would like an understanding of student safety. Many schools have emergency posts around campus, which is comforting. You can also look into the campus police presence and campus shuttle service. On a different note, consider the size of the city or town in which your college is located. In some situations, the city is the college, which means there is no city life outside the college campus. In other scenarios, the college is located in a capital city, like Boston,

where there are a variety of activities outside the campus. Consider the cultures of the different locations, such as the stigma of Southern hospitality versus Northern fast-paced life. Again, these may not be important to you specifically, but are some smaller things to think about.

Geographic Location- Besides the type of city that the college is in, you need to seriously consider the state in which the college is located. Some people may want to stick close to home, while others may enjoy traveling across the country. There are girls from South Carolina on the team who stayed by their families, and girls from Washington, California, and Texas who crossed the country to attend school. Think about how important it is to have your parents or family members sitting in the stands for you. Do not be afraid to branch out, but understand the sacrifice. Fortunately, at least for my team, the group of parents was truly special, and they were dedicated to “adopting” kids whose parents could not make it to every game. My roommate is from Canada, so her parents could rarely make the trips down South; however, she was always invited to dinner after the games with us. Other programs behave similarly. The team truly becomes your family, so it takes off some of the pain and sacrifice of leaving your family behind.

Other Sports- Lots of hype surrounding the college life deals with football games and the tailgates. Look into the other major sports, or even all the other sports, and find what is important to you. Many people feel that having a football team is a necessity, while it barely crosses other girls’ radars.

Area of Study- If you have an idea of what you would like to study, make sure the schools you are interested in have a program for that area. Several transfers occur because a student-athlete realizes too late that there is no program for engineering,

nursing, etc. It is okay if you do not precisely have your major picked out, but then it is important to pick a school with a variety of options.

Life Without Soccer- Sadly, sometimes it does not work out for a person to play soccer all four years. For whatever reasons (medical, personal, etc.), girls decide to quit the team and are now attending the school as a regular student. I highly suggest picking a school where you think you would feel comfortable if you no longer played the sport. (This is where all the previous factors come into play.) I strongly recommend not choosing a school solely for the soccer program—or even coach, as sometimes they quit or transfer before you get there.

Navigate Through the Process: Soccer-Related

Evaluate Yourself- The first thing to do may be tough and uncomfortable, but you need to obtain a realistic understanding of your level or skill, and especially of your commitment. Evaluate yourself; ask club and high school coaches and well-respected older players. Be honest with yourself and set reasonable expectations. For the purposes of my experience at the Division I level, I will only claim to understand the level of commitment it takes to play at a school that finished at No. 15 in the 2013 season. It is like a full-time job—balancing classes, practices, games, traveling, meetings, proper sleep cycles, balanced healthy lifestyle, weightlifting, fitness sessions, study hall, and more. It is a busy—but very rewarding—life choice: Understand which level of collegiate soccer you wish to devote your time.

Evaluate Your Club/Travel Team- Your team does not have to be the number one team in the state, but it needs to be a team that garners attention throughout the season. Coaches will not attend games where the competition is weak; they want to attend

tournaments where they can view as many potential prospects as possible. Such tournaments for the greatest exposure include college showcases, Regional tournaments, or National tournaments. Try to find a team that consistently qualifies for those top tournaments, or arrange being a guest player on a team that does.

Email- Contact the coaches from the schools that are on your list. Generally, all schools will have the coach's email address on their website. If you look at the University webpage, follow the site to Athletics and click Women's Soccer. Multiple header links will pop up on the Women's Soccer page, including a link to the Roster, Schedule/Results, Coaching Staff, Statistics, etc. (This will be a great source for particular information about each program, so keep this website in mind.) Upon clicking the Coaching Staff, you should see a small biographical section for each coach, along with his/her contact information. If a school is missing this section, you can typically check the Staff Directory on the school's main website or the school's athletic homepage.

Once you have found the coach's email address, there is the important matter of what to include. Always have an opening paragraph for introducing yourself, listing several main facts, and expressing interest in the school. Examples of "main facts" to include are your name, age, state, and club team. After the introductory paragraph, have a main paragraph listing the next tournament in which you will be playing. Be sure to include team name, jersey number, jersey color, and all field numbers. Make it as easy as possible for a coach to find you. I once heard that a coach watched the wrong girl the entire game and ended up offering her teammate a scholarship thinking it was the player who had been contacting him. Whoops! Include as much information as possible, and make it as accurate as possible. Attach a Player Profile, which is discussed in-depth in

the next section. Close with a paragraph that lists other tournaments where you will play, and thank the coach for his time.

Please keep in mind that—depending on your year in school—the coach may be unable to respond to you. I have included more about the NCAA rules in restrictions on page 12.

Player Profile- A player profile is like a mini-résumé. First, list your name and birth date, followed by your club name and jersey number. Many helpful profiles include a picture of you in the upper-right corner of the page. Second, after the quick facts, list your GPA, high school, and any test scores (ACT or SAT) you may have at that point. Third, have individual sections for Club Soccer Experience, High School Soccer Experience, and ODP Soccer Experience (whichever apply to you). For each section, include championships won and individual awards (MVP, All-Tournament Team, Captain, etc.) received based on that team. Additionally, be sure to include a reference for each section; give the appropriate contact information for a coach from each team. Make it easy for the college coach to contact each person. Fourth, after listing major soccer experiences, include any other sport participation. For example, I played basketball and listed my experience and awards for that. Coaches appreciate well-rounded athletes. Lastly, feel free to include a few facts that demonstrate your personality.

Follow Up- If you saw the coach or knew he was there, email and thank him for coming. You can also ask what he thought and receive feedback on strengths or areas of improvement. (Again, please keep in mind that there are NCAA restrictions regarding communication in the recruiting process, so the coach may not be able to respond.) If it is true, let them know which camps you will be attending in the future. You may also wish

to schedule a visit to the campus or school. Make sure to stay in touch with the coach. Update him before each major tournament, and follow the similar format as listed previously. The coaches receive emails from many players all the time, so the more familiar your name and setup is, the better.

Player Film- This is optional. Many players include film of their play as a helpful resource for the coaches. If you choose to do this, do not just edit the games to include only your play or your best play from each game. That is not what the coaches only want to see. Show portions of the game where you are involved. Even if it is a clip where you lost the ball, include the part after where you hustled to win it back. Coaches want to see how you move with and without the ball.

Navigate Through the Process: Non- Soccer-Related

Academic Grades- I cannot stress the importance of receiving good grades. It is crucial to put yourself in the best position possible academically. Do not create an unnecessary liability; many coaches do not want to jump through all these hoops for a player to get admitted into the university when there are several other prospects who may be just as good on the field and are in better academic standing. Upon completion of your junior year, have your official transcript sent to the NCAA Eligibility Center. (Also note: The NCAA requires transcripts from all of your high schools if you attended more than one.) Your final transcript must also be sent to the NCAA Eligibility Center after your high school graduation. Please check the NCAA website (listed on page 13) for more detailed instructions regarding “Core Courses” required in high school and the minimum GPA.

Academic Tests- Many schools accept the ACT, SAT, or both. Be sure to find out which one(s) you need, so you do not have to take one test unnecessarily. For example, I was only required to take the ACT, so I never took the SAT. Be sure to take these by your Junior year of high school. It gives you a good indication of where to look for schools and helps college coaches assess scholarship opportunities. When signing up for the test, use the NCAA Eligibility Center code “9999” as a score recipient, which sends your official score directly to the NCAA Eligibility Center (NCAA).

NCAA Rules

The National Collegiate Athletic Association is the organization that oversees and enforces the rules of college sports. If you want to play in college, there are several important rules that will affect your recruiting process.

Several rules center on the communication allowed between the coaches and prospects. Before September 1st of your junior year of high school, coaches are only allowed to communicate in writing and are limited to sending information about the school’s camps and a questionnaire. NCAA prohibits any other contact that is of recruiting nature, such as off-campus contact or recruiting emails before September 1. Off-campus contact includes tournaments, so understand that a coach may not be allowed to say more than a passing hello or nod, even if you have developed a more in-depth relationship. *Please do not be offended.* The coach is just abiding by NCAA rules. After September 1st of your junior year, coaches are free to send recruiting material.

Kristin Borrelli, the Associate Director of NCAA Compliance Services at the University of South Carolina, says, “NCAA legislation applicable to phone calls is even more restrictive.” You may call the coach, but if he misses your call, he is not allowed to

call back. In a situation like this, it is usually best to email the coach a few hours before you intend on calling and letting him know when you plan to call. If you forget to set a time and he misses your call, be sure to leave a voicemail with your name and school year. If you are of age but do not let the coach know that, he will most likely not return your phone call as a precaution because he is unsure if that is allowed. After July 1st following your junior year, coaches are allowed to make phone calls once a week and off-campus contact is allowed.

After the beginning day of your senior year, official visits are allowed, with a maximum of five official visits to D1 schools. Borrelli defines an official visit as “a trip funded in whole or part by the institution.” If you sign your national letter of intent, receive admission and/or financial aid in writing, or send the college your financial deposit, the NCAA allows the coach unlimited phone calls and contact (NCAA).

After the first semester of your junior year, you must register with the NCAA Clearinghouse, or the NCAA Eligibility Center, at www.eligibilitycenter.org. For more information involving this process, the rules discussed above, and other requirements of the NCAA, please visit <http://www.ncaapublications.com/productdownloads/CBSA.pdf>, which provides in-depth explanations.

Unofficial Visits

An unofficial visit occurs before your senior year of high school. This visit can coincide with a camp or be any visit you set up with the coach. It is unofficial because the school cannot pay any stipend for travel, accommodations, or meals. You can schedule as many unofficial visits as you want. I recommend doing as many as you can and meeting as many players as possible. Again, especially take note of the team’s freshmen and

sophomores, since those will be the players leading the program when you get there. Meet the athletic trainer, academic advisor, and strength/conditioning coaches if possible. You will spend a lot of time with these people over your four years, so it is a good idea to get a sense of each person.

Meet all the coaches and get a feel for whom you can trust. You want a genuine coach who openly communicates his expectations without constantly feeding you a “sales pitch” just to get you to attend the school. Look for honesty on how they feel about you and your fit into that program. Specifically ask how they see you coming in and the likelihood of playing time. They should never guarantee anything to you because a lot can and will change within the years you look/commit and when you finally get there. The coaches should be able to give you an honest assessment of your play and of your prospective role for the team. For example, when I was going through the process, my college coach said he would not guarantee me a starting spot because I still needed to put work in to reach that level. However, he said that two seniors would be graduating in the midfield spot that I played, so if I put the work in, then a spot would be available. I cannot stress how important it is to look past the platitudes offered by the coach and figure out where you will fit in with the team.

Additionally, in regard to the coaches, you need to get a sense of how the team views them. Talk to the players about the coaches, and not just the ones that they direct you towards. Get a feel for what the girls think about them on and off the field. For as much time as you spend with the coaches, they become your “parents away from home”. As described by a soccer parent: “The coaches become your primary source of information and discipline. They will set the rules that you will have to live by, and they

will be your biggest advocates.” Start establishing a positive relationship with them early because they control your scholarship, *which is assessed and renewed annually*.

View a game or practice when you visit the school. As mentioned earlier in this guide, it is crucial to seeing the “coaching” side of the coaches. You can evaluate if you will feel comfortable playing under that type of regime. Furthermore, you need to evaluate if you can fit into that team’s style of play. For example, possession is my strong point and speed is not. I stayed away from teams that focused on a long ball or “kick-and-run” approach. I needed a team that valued possession and composure, and it was necessary to see games in order to figure that out.

Scholarships

An appealing aspect of collegiate soccer is the opportunity to have some, or all, of your education paid for by the school. A major note to consider is that full athletic scholarships are extremely rare. Many teams are awarded a number of full scholarships—the number determined by NCAA—and the scholarships are further broken into pieces to offer aid to several players at once. This is why it is important to both start early and receive good grades. Starting early ensures getting a jumpstart on the financial aid before the coaches guarantee it to someone else. Receiving good grades allows the coaches to look at academic aid to add to your package to further help entice you into playing for their school. Good grades also makes you more appealing to the coach because it allows them to bring in other players on some of the scholarship covered by your academic scholarship.

Verbal Commitment

A verbal commitment can happen at any time before the official signing date in February of your senior year of high school. When I was in the recruiting process, it was common for girls to commit in their junior year. However, these days, the time coaches want a commitment from you is inching more towards sophomore year. The fact remains that it is still your decision, so do not feel pressure to commit before you are ready. The coach will want to lock in players early, so he may attempt to get you to decide soon or give you an early deadline. There are factors to consider like the loss of offer or the amount of money, and you need to weigh those against if you feel ready to commit. Nonetheless, there usually is more flexibility in the decision timeline, so keep the coach informed and decide when you are ready.

After you tell a coach you accept that particular offer, you need to inform any other coaches you had been communicating with seriously (Kinsella). If they were focusing their efforts on you, it is important to let them know you have decided on a different school, which allows them to turn their attention elsewhere. It is natural to be nervous before this type of phone call, but it is a kind gesture. Ultimately, this is a business, and they will understand and almost always be courteous. It is extremely important to continue to treat those coaches with respect because it creates a strong network for you in case you need those relationships in the future. Some things may not work out, and if you ended on a positive and respectful note, there may be a transfer opportunity for you (Kinsella).

Please keep in mind that a verbal commitment is not binding—on either end. A coach/school may rescind a verbal commitment for a variety of reasons, and you have the

freedom to change your mind. Though rare, it is not uncommon for girls to change their minds before signing a binding agreement. It is not encouraged, so I would recommend feeling comfortable and certain before verbally committing. However, if you truly feel differently about a school later on, you are not held to that commitment. I just want you to be aware that the rescinding can go both ways, and always remember that a verbal commitment is made in good faith.

Binding Commitment

As mentioned before, the written agreement will take place on the official signing date sometime in February of your senior year. It is called a National Letter of Intent. You will sign the contract that list of details of your commitment to the school. This binding commitment opens up further doors of communication, allowing coaches to send a fitness packet (which you should strictly follow!), nutritional information, and other important information regarding team details from any of the team's staff. Borrelli adds, "A binding commitment also puts in place a recruiting ban on all other institutions for that potential student-athlete."

Physical Preparation

In order to compete at a higher level, you need to be preparing your body along the way. University of South Carolina Athletic Trainer, Stephanie Rosehart, has been with the women's soccer team since 2006, and she offers a variety of advice in her favored motto: "Eat right, sleep right, train right." Firstly, your body needs fuel, and she enlists the use of Internet to find plenty of dietary resources. Secondly, regeneration and recuperation are vital to consistent performance in collegiate soccer. A proper sleep cycle is crucial to allowing your body the time it needs to rest and work its way back to an

energetic starting level. Thirdly, Rosehart has accumulated a variety of experience in dealing with injuries, most notably regarding the dreaded ACL tear that is increasingly affecting female soccer players today. She believes injury prevention training should begin as young as thirteen to fourteen years old, and included in that is jumping and landing properly to “create good muscle memory.” She suggests looking into programs or personal training to bridge that gap between the level you are currently at and the collegiate level. Fourthly, Rosehart stresses ramping up the training and spending time in a weight room to create a “balanced, fit body.” She also supports multi-sport athletes because playing another sport gives areas of your body a break while still exercising at a high level. Finally, your body is your biggest strength and tool when playing a sport, and she cannot stress enough the importance of taking proper care of it.

Mentality

Do not be afraid of the long, perhaps tough, journey ahead. There are plenty of schools out there, so do not be discouraged. Enjoy the process. Do your best on and off the field to ensure the best recruiting position possible. I hope this guide provides you with the steps towards beginning a collegiate career!

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