

## **Navigating the College Selection Process for Distance Runners**

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“Collegiate athlete.” The phrase sounds so noble. Soon after they pick up their first ball, many young Nebraskans begin dreaming about playing collegiate football, volleyball or basketball. But sometime around junior high the reality hits. You’re not tall or thick – you’re short on fast-twitch muscles – and you eventually gravitate towards distance running. You fall in love with the sport but realize you’re not going to be the next Galen Rupp or Shalane Flanagan. It doesn’t matter. Regardless of your ability, you can be a collegiate distance runner.

My oldest son, now a college freshman, hadn’t run more than a mile before his 7<sup>th</sup>-grade track season. However, he quickly found that he loved running and was good at it, and by his sophomore season he began thinking about competing in college. I soon began looking for advice on how the distance running recruiting process works, and I eventually learned two things: (a) the absence of recruiting guidance specific to distance running makes the college selection process even more difficult for students, and (b) the colleges in and near Nebraska offer incredible opportunities to continue competing at the collegiate level.

In addition to the information I collected during my son’s college selection process, I’ve supplemented our experiences by reaching out to high school coaches, college coaches and high school athletes to write this article and to create the companion piece, “The College Distance Running Guide for Nebraska High School Athletes” that is posted on the Nebraska Elite website. I welcome feedback on this article and the college guide, and I’ll periodically update both documents to maintain their accuracy. My hope is that the information I’ve collected can help athletes and parents have realistic expectations about the recruiting process and the life of a college distance runner.

### **Distance running is different**

It doesn’t matter how you access it – by TV, the internet, Twitter or Facebook – but the majority of recruiting news you see is about Division 1 athletes committing to high-profile sports like football, basketball, volleyball, baseball and soccer. It’s as if millionaire coaches are handing out full-ride scholarships to any great athlete they meet. In reality, full-ride athletic scholarships are quite rare, and virtually everything you hear about college recruiting does not apply to distance running. High school distance running has never been about glamour, fame or fortune, and that doesn’t change in college.

However, before we dive into the recruiting process, let’s address how students should decide where to attend college.

### **A priority list for picking a college**

*“You go to college to go to college.”*

That wise counsel comes from Gabby McGinn, a Millard West graduate now attending Washington University, a highly-selective D3 college in St. Louis that also happens to be a national powerhouse in distance running. There are about twenty people in the US who can make a living as professional runners; the other distance runners have to get a real job after they graduate. Consequently, the first step in picking a college doesn’t have anything to do with who has the best uniforms, facilities, schedule or coach. The first step in your college selection process is to create a list of colleges that suit your academic profile, career interests and financial means.

Every athlete approaches this list-making process differently. My son and I started with a list of the top 50 business schools in the country, and we narrowed the list from there. He wanted to run Division 1, and he was open to moving far away but doesn’t want to attend a mega-university. Similarly, Jake Ralston, the Papio South alum who now runs at Kansas, narrowed his potential list to schools that offered engineering programs. It’s important to ensure that a college actually offers what you want

to study; for example, only one of the Ivy League schools offers an undergraduate business degree. If running is important, you should also confirm that the college has a distance program; prestigious Northwestern doesn't offer men's track or cross country, and USC in California doesn't offer men's cross country.

Dustin Llewellyn, NETC co-founder and longtime distance coach, challenges his athletes with this question: "If you have a season-ending or career-ending injury at some point in college, is this a college you would still want to attend?" If the running program is the sole reason an athlete wants to attend a certain college, Coach Llewellyn encourages them to consider all the other aspects of college, including college size, distance from home, climate and city size.

Matching a student's academic profile and career interests is paramount. If high-achieving students plan to go to law school, they should be evaluating schools where students have a high acceptance rate into law programs. If the student wants to become a doctor, his or her undergraduate program should have offer highly-respected science degrees that lead to strong MCAT scores.

Jake Norris, a Papillion Lavista alum now competing at Northwest Missouri State (Maryville), emphasizes that students have to keep an open mind during the college selection process. "For most of my visits, I found that I didn't like the colleges I expected to like, and I did like the schools where I wasn't expecting to be impressed."

### ***"Don't be saddled by debt the rest of your life"***

When you review the companion College Distance Running Guide, you'll quickly see that the annual cost of college varies significantly. While state-supported schools often have the lowest 'retail price,' it's important to understand what factors might help you reduce the cost of college. Do you have strong ACT scores and a high GPA that would help you qualify for merit-based aid? Are you from a low-income family that will qualify for need-based

aid? Are you a member of a minority class that is underrepresented at a particular college where there may be more scholarship aid available to you? The answers to many of these questions won't be readily apparent, but nearly all of the college coaches I contacted are looking for motivated students. Each college tends to have its own criteria for awarding financial aid, but several coaches reported that most of their distance runners had qualified for full-tuition academic scholarships due to their grades. Once you've narrowed down your list of schools, you can find scholarship information for most colleges with a little digging. For example, Nebraska-Kearney's financial aid website includes a graph where you can determine whether your ACT score and GPA qualify you for a full-tuition Regents' Scholarship. Augustana University's financial aid website features a similar ACT/GPA grid.

While high school students are often shielded from their parent's financial situation, it's important that parents set early and honest expectations about how much money, if any, they can contribute towards the cost of their child's college expenses. These discussions may lead to an assessment of how much student debt is realistic. Too much student loan debt can be crippling, but a family should be able to target the amount of debt that a student can support based on their career plans.

Don't sell yourself short. You are a distance runner. The discipline and focus that made you love distance running has probably made you a good student and should make you eligible for academic scholarships. Colleges want good students because they're more likely to graduate and be successful alumni.

### ***"Why do you want to run in college?"***

Jeremy Haselhorst, the girls' XC coach at Papio South, pushes his athletes to articulate why they want to run in college. Is it to continue to improve and maximize their potential, or is to continue the camaraderie that they enjoyed in high school? Coach Haselhorst and others are quick to warn that

the collegiate running experience can be markedly different than high school, so athletes should be looking for those differences when they interact with college coaches and potential teammates. For example, if a high school coach is nurturing, patient and tailors a training program for each runner, the athlete should be prepared for a different experience if the college coach has a no-nonsense, high-mileage approach. Collegiate running typically requires more mileage, more time and more commitment, and it is a year-round sport due to indoor track season. Students need to fully understand the level of commitment needed to run in college.

Distance running is not sexy – there is more pain and preparation than glory and victory. Do you love running or do you love achievement? This is an important distinction, because it’s often difficult for college freshmen to compete with upperclassmen, particularly when freshmen are first exposed to the temptations associated with living away from home. If a student goes to a highly-competitive program, he or she may need to adjust expectations about how successful they will be in their first few years.

During her selection process, Alana Sesow, now a junior at Augustana, placed a high priority on how she meshed with coaches and current athletes. She felt that since these were the people she be with for at least three hours a day for practice – and for entire weekends during meet season – she had to be able to see herself as part of that group. Her friendships with teammates and her relationship with her coach were doubly important this fall because she was injured for most of the cross country season.

The coaches and athletes with whom I spoke all agreed that runners can be challenged at any NCAA level, from a Junior College to Division 1. For some runners, running at a Division 1 school is their goal. Others will find that competing at the NAIA National Championships is far more gratifying. There truly is a place for everyone.

If you’re not a high-achieving runner in high school – perhaps you’ve never medaled at a district meet – you can still run in college. Multiple college coaches – including those from Midland, Hastings and College of St. Mary – told me that they will welcome any athlete who is a good student and is willing to work hard at the sport.

Shannon Stenger, the boys’ coach at Papio South, always encourages his athletes to consider running in college. “It’s a big commitment to run in college, but if you try it and it doesn’t work out, at least you tried. Don’t kick yourself later in life and wish that you would have tried to run collegiately. Whether you’re successful or not, it is an opportunity to learn and grow.”

***“Will colleges give me an athletic scholarship?”***

Some colleges will give you athletic scholarships or pay for books or cover part of your housing costs, but you’re more likely to earn an academic scholarship. As I noted on the previous page, the financial aid package for collegiate distance runners generally includes more academic aid than athletic aid. The College Distance Running Guide lists the minimum ACT/GPA needed to be considered for an academic scholarship at the schools that responded to my inquiries – and the minimum ACT is generally in the low 20’s. Students who score 28 or higher can often earn significant scholarships.

The number of available distance running scholarships will vary by college. The NCAA limits the maximum of full scholarships that can be awarded by XC/T&F programs. In December 2017, the website [www.scholarshipstats.com](http://www.scholarshipstats.com) listed the following max scholarships by Division:

Division	Women	Men
Division 1	18.0	12.6
Division 2	12.6	12.6
Division 3	0.0	0.0
NAIA	12.0	12.0
NJCAA	20	20

Some D1 schools may direct most of their XC/T&F scholarships to multi-event athletes in the jumps, sprints and throws, with the expectation that most distance athletes can earn academic scholarships. Other programs like Tulsa and Loyola Marymount are so distance-focused that they either don't offer jumps, sprints and throws or they don't offer many scholarships to them.

In the grid above, the NJCAA (JUCO) limits apply to headcounts, so those colleges can only have 20 individuals on scholarship. For the other divisions, the limits represent the total number of scholarships, and those scholarships can be divided into fractions so many athletes receive them. In addition, the NAIA limits above apply only to varsity athletes; the schools can have an unlimited number of junior varsity athletes on scholarship. As the table reflects, Division 3 colleges cannot offer any type of athletic scholarships.

It's important to note that there can be additional rules regarding scholarships. The Ivy League does not allow athletic scholarships in any sport. The GPAC (which has five member schools in Nebraska) limits athletic scholarships to full tuition. The US Military Academies provide full tuition to all of their students regardless of whether they are athletes.

Given the scholarship limits above, Division 1 distance athletes will often receive a fractional athletic scholarship or, more likely, just an invitation to be part of the college's distance program. This is particularly true at highly-selective schools where the coach may say, "if you get accepted, you can run here."

While the general assumption is that the higher NCAA divisions feature the best the runners, this is not always the case. Chadron State is in the same conference with Adams State, a perennial D2 powerhouse that could beat most D1 teams. The NAIA has produced an impressive number of Olympians. In Fall 2017, D3 Wartburg's team included a freshman who ran a 9:07 3200 as a HS senior, and D3 Luther featured a female runner who

ran a 4:55 1600 in high school. Athletes have many different ways to define success, and every division offers opportunities to reach new goals.

Most Nebraska colleges continually process applications but may have firm deadlines for competitive scholarship applications. Colleges that have lower acceptance rates – think Notre Dame, Northwestern, Duke – often have application deadlines, generally around October 31<sup>st</sup> and January 1<sup>st</sup>. Students who apply by October 31<sup>st</sup> typically receive a response from colleges in mid-December, so how is it that some athletes sign Division 1 National Letters of Intent on Signing Day in November? It's because college coaches, particularly at highly-selective schools, are given a certain number of admission slots to award to athletes who otherwise might not meet the college's strict admissions standards. The coaches have so few of these slots that they often save them for exceptional runners – say, a 4:10 miler – but they may welcome a 4:20 miler who gets admitted during the normal selection process.

It's possible that college coaches will not follow up even if you feel you would be a good fit. When that happened to Mazie Larsen, a Gretna senior committed to Baylor, she took it as a positive: "Rejection is closure for both parties. Waiting for a coach to decide if he wants you is really hard and annoying, but you also shouldn't waste a coach's time if you're not interested." You want to shorten your list as quickly as you can, and rejection helps you get there.

### **Tips from coaches and athletes**

During the past year, I've realized that the athletes and high school coaches who have gone through the recruiting process have a wealth of information. They provided the following guidance:

1. Start early. During your junior year, make a list of schools that fit your profile. Your senior year will be jam-packed, so use your junior year and the following summer to take unofficial or official visits to colleges on your list. You're a

student first, so take the standard tours everyone takes and picture how you'd fit in. If the school is far away and you're close to the school's walk-on standards, e-mail the coach to see if one of his/her staff or athletes would be willing to meet with you for 30 minutes while you're on campus. Explore the city. The first visit may not have a huge impact, but it will make a second visit far more productive. Alana Sesow visited 10 colleges before her senior year, and Gabby McGinn suggests going on as many as you can.

2. Use the Internet. Every college program will have a recruiting questionnaire and varying levels of information about their program. Write down the team's roster and find their high school times at [www.athletic.net](http://www.athletic.net). Look for walk-on standards. Find the coach's e-mail and mailing addresses. Beyond the college website, there are other good resources. The recruiting service [www.ncsasports.org](http://www.ncsasports.org) has some good general information for free; they also offer paid recruiting support, which I don't think is necessary in distance running. The NCAA provides useful information at <http://www.ncaa.org/student-athletes/future> that might help you.
3. Talk to your parents about whether they can support you financially. Ask for their opinions. While it's your decision, your parents often understand you better than you do. Mazie Larsen commented, "Don't scoff at your mother when she tells you to investigate a school. It just might be the 'one.'"
4. Register for the NCAA Eligibility Center. In order to take official D1 or D2 visits or sign a National Letter of Intent, you have to register with the NCAA. The fee is \$90. You'll have to provide quite a bit of information; while college recruiting questionnaires will ask for your NCAA Eligibility ID Number, the colleges can't see any of that information you've uploaded to the NCAA. The main purpose of this process is to

assure colleges that you're academically eligible to compete in college.

5. Contact the programs that interest you. Athletes report that they typically received timely responses to letters, e-mails and phone calls they sent to coaches unless the athlete was clearly outside the college's walk-on standards. Share your ACT score, GPA, track times and academic interests. Some programs may not respond to juniors until they've solidified their senior recruiting class, so it may be more productive to wait to reach out during the spring semester of your junior year. At the D1 level, coaches can no longer have in-person, on-campus contact with an athlete until September 1<sup>st</sup> of their junior year, after which official visits can begin. In addition, D1 coaches can't reply to e-mail, text or phone calls prior to September 1<sup>st</sup> of the junior year, although the athlete can call the coach.
6. Ask for advice. If your high school coach doesn't have experience in placing a runner in a college program, he or she probably knows another coach or athlete who has been through it recently. Coaches who know you well and who have experience in this area will probably be able to guide you towards programs that may be a good athletic fit. However, it's up to you to decide if academic fit is right.
7. Simplify as much as you can. You have hundreds of options for college – including the 24 colleges listed in the College Distance Running Guide – but don't waste time chasing the programs that won't return your call, where you don't have high enough academic marks, or where you can't afford the tuition. Keep a spreadsheet that lists your target schools, their academic rankings, total costs, coach contact information, communications you've had thus far, and even a summary of the times their current athletes ran in high school.

8. Make a list of questions. If a college is interested in you, at some point a coach will ask what questions you have. Will you be redshirted? If you're interested in the honors program or a difficult major, are there current athletes in those programs? Do their runners take study-abroad trips? Based on your training history, how would the coach transition you to collegiate running? Does the school provide athletic scholarships in future years if you were to improve?
9. Talk to the coach as much as possible. In a work setting, there is a common saying that 'employees quit managers, not companies.' The same goes for distance runners. During the season, an athlete will likely spend more time with his or her coach than with any other adult. If there's mutual respect, the athlete can thrive. If the athlete doesn't connect with the coach, he or she will likely transfer or quit the team.
10. Use your official visits wisely. 'Unofficial visits' are unlimited but the only expense the college can incur is providing up to three tickets to an athletic event (D1) or five tickets and meals (D2). Theoretically, you could make an unofficial visit to the same school every week, but the coach may get sick of you. However, aside from the caveats listed above, if the college pays for transportation, meals and/or lodging for you or your parents, it is usually classified as an official visit. For D1 schools, the NCAA allows five official visits per athlete and only during your junior and senior years. Athletes can make unlimited official visits to D2, D3, NAIA and junior colleges, possibly as soon as your junior year, but you're generally limited to one official visit per school. We couldn't determine if D2 visits will count towards your D1 limit, but the NCAA website infers it's a possibility. A college can provide official visits to an unlimited number of athletes, but it's usually restricted by their modest recruiting budgets. Set low expectations; unless you're an elite runner, a college may not pay for any or all

of these costs, particularly if the college is located outside the Midwest.

11. Evaluate on paper. Jake Ralston strongly recommended ranking schools on paper when you are down to your final choices. He thought he knew which school he was going to pick, but when he listed his top priorities and where each college ranked, he realized that Kansas was his clear choice. Gabby McGinn had multiple options including an Ivy League school but, based on her specific goals, she decided Washington University offered her the best mix of academics, competition and coaching.

### **Other factors to consider**

- Cross country courses vary but track times translate across state lines. If you are vying for one of the few walk-on or recruited spots on a competitive team, out-of-state coaches will often focus on your junior year track times or regional cross country results. In-state coaches may give more weight to cross country results because they know the courses.
- National letters of intent (NLI) at the Division 1, Division 2 and junior college (NJCAA) levels include an obligation to attend that college. If the athlete changes their mind, they often lose a year of eligibility. If the school isn't offering you athletic financial aid, there may be no point in signing a NLI. D3 and NAIA schools do not have a binding NLI, but the NCAA offers a 'Celebratory Signing' form to announce your decision and NAIA schools are free to create their own Letter of Intent form. My son signed a blank piece of paper at his signing ceremony. Some D3 and NAIA conferences may limit athletes from competing at one school if they have already made a signed commitment to attend another school in that conference. However, there is no nationwide NLI program at the NAIA level. Thus, if you sign a letter of intent at one NAIA school but then decide to enroll at a NAIA school in a different

conference, you should be able to participate immediately.

- Every contact you make with coaches and programs are chances to impress them. A well-written introductory e-mail can show that you're intelligent and interesting. A neat, hand-written thank you note after a visit or phone call shows that you're thoughtful. Returning phone and e-mail messages promptly reflects that you're interested in your college. Good or bad encounters with current athletes will likely be reported to the coach. Character counts.
- Recruiting is cyclical. If a school signed a huge distance class last year, they may not need many runners this year or they may simply increase their recruiting standards. Don't take it personally.
- Boyfriends and girlfriends cloud your judgment. While we all know married couples who were high school sweethearts, it's far more common to meet couples who met in college, at work or in church. I've heard many stories of students who followed a romantic interest to a college or city, only to break up months later. I've never heard someone say they regretted moving away from their high school love interest. If you are truly meant to be together, you can move to the same town after college. Until then, give yourself the best opportunities to grow emotionally, academically, professionally, spiritually and athletically. Allow yourself the space to be the best version of yourself.
- Don't ignore red flags. With all of your options, you shouldn't keep a school on your list if you don't connect with the coach, if the school is too expensive or its academic program is weak in your intended major, or if you simply don't mesh with your future teammates. If you love the school but aren't sure about the distance program, just be sure you'll be happy there even if you stop competing.

## **A world of opportunities**

Your college experience can be amazing. However, the college selection process can be confusing and stressful. Remember that you are blessed not only to pick a college, but also to have the means and the ability to attend one.

Do not take the selection process lightly. There's a high likelihood that the college you attend will play a role in the career you choose, where you live after graduation, whom you marry and even how religious you are in the future. However, there are many colleges that could be the right choice for you, and you will be equally happy at nearly all of them. If you invest the time to research your options, you will most likely pick a college that will be a great fit for you.

Several athletes told me that they had a 'lightning bolt' moment, often while visiting a campus, when they realized they had found the perfect college. Other athletes came to their reasoned decision after analyzing the data they had collected. Either way, if you take the necessary steps to be fully informed, you can be confident in your decision.

After working on this project for more than a month, this is the advice I'll give my youngest son. Apply to a six or a dozen schools to see who accept you. After the colleges have responded, shorten your list to the best schools you can afford. Visit each school two or three times until you know where you'll be challenged and happy.

If you truly love to run, competing in college may be one of the best decisions you ever make. Start the evaluation process early, find your academic and financial fit, and then pick the school that is right for you.

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