

College Soccer Recruiting: What Parents Need to Know

Recruiting

Coach Nick & the YSC Coaching Team

A mom stopped one of our coaches in the parking lot after a U15 club match last month. Her daughter had just played a great game at center back — won everything in the air, switched the field twice with her left foot — and the mom said, "Everyone keeps telling me she could play in college, but nobody tells me what we're actually supposed to *do*." Her daughter, like every kid glued to the World Cup this summer, has the dream. The family just didn't have a map.

Here's the short version. College soccer recruiting is a multi-year process where most real opportunities live at Division III, Division II, NAIA, and junior college — not Division I — and full scholarships are rare because soccer is an equivalency sport. NCAA D1 and D2 coaches may begin contacting recruits on June 15 after sophomore year, so the freshman and sophomore years are for development and film, junior year is for active outreach and ID camps, and senior year is for committing and confirming the financial fit. Your job as the parent is logistics and support — the athlete drives the process.

Everything below unpacks that map.

The Realistic Landscape: Where College Soccer Opportunities Actually Are

Most families start the process picturing one thing: a Division I scholarship. So let's level-set, because the families who understand the landscape early make better decisions for four straight years.

College soccer is played at five levels — NCAA Division I, Division II, Division III, NAIA, and junior college (NJCAA). Every one of them is real, competitive college soccer. And the honest truth our coaching team repeats constantly: **D3 and NAIA are where the majority of opportunities live.** There are far more roster spots there than at the D1 level, and the soccer at strong D3 and NAIA programs is faster than most parents expect.

Now the scholarship reality. Soccer is an **equivalency sport**: coaches divide a limited scholarship budget across an entire roster rather than handing out full rides one at a time. Partial scholarships are the norm at D1, D2, NAIA, and JUCO; full athletic rides are rare, reserved for difference-makers a program builds around. D3 programs don't offer athletic scholarships at all, but they compete hard with academic and merit money, and a D3 total package can absolutely beat a small athletic offer elsewhere.

So reframe the goal. You're not chasing "a scholarship." You're chasing a **roster spot at a school where your kid will play, develop, and graduate** — with the best total financial package you can assemble. That mindset alone puts you ahead of most of the sideline.

The Timeline by Grade Year

Freshman and Sophomore Years — Development and Film

These two years are about becoming a better soccer player, full stop. No coach is signing a 14-year-old. What these years are for:

- **Train and compete at the highest level your athlete can actually play at.** Minutes matter more than the league logo (more on that below).
- **Start capturing game footage.** You don't need a finished highlight video yet — you need a library of clips to pull from later. Film matches from an elevated angle whenever possible.
- **Protect the grades.** A strong GPA opens doors at every level and is the single biggest lever for D3 merit money.

June 15 After Sophomore Year — The Door Opens

This is the date to circle: **NCAA Division I and Division II coaches may begin contacting recruits on June 15 after the athlete's sophomore year.** Before that date, college coaches can't call, text, or email your athlete directly, no matter how interested they are. (Athletes can still attend camps and send coaches their information beforehand — coaches just can't respond with recruiting communication until the window opens.)

If your phone is silent on June 16, do not panic. Most recruits — including most who go on to great college careers — are not getting day-one calls. The date marks the start of the active phase; it is not a verdict.

If you also have a ballplayer in the house, the rhythm will feel familiar but the rules differ by sport — we laid out the baseball version in our college baseball recruiting timeline for parents.

Junior Year — Active Outreach and ID Camps

Junior year is the engine room of soccer recruiting. This is when your athlete — not you — should be emailing coaches directly: a short note with position, grad year, club and league, GPA, a highlight link, and one genuine sentence about why that program interests them. Target a realistic list of 20–40 schools across multiple levels, not a mass blast to every D1 in the country.

This is also the year for ID camps at schools on the list (more on picking them below), campus visits, and updated video after each season. Coaches who are interested will say so. Coaches who answer with generic camp invitations and nothing else are telling you something too.

Senior Year — Commitments and Financial Fit

By senior fall, the work shifts from exposure to decisions. Athletes finalize their shortlist, take visits, and have direct conversations with coaches about roster role and money. Get every financial piece on the table at once — athletic money, academic money, need-based aid — because the real number is the *net cost across four years*, not the headline percentage. A "25% athletic scholarship" at an expensive private school can cost more out of pocket than a strong academic package at a state school. Run the math as a family before anyone signs.

Club Soccer Pathways, in Plain Language

Parents hear an alphabet soup — ECNL, MLS NEXT, Girls Academy, NPL, state leagues — and assume there's one golden ticket. Here's the plain version.

ECNL, MLS NEXT (boys), and Girls Academy sit at the top of the club pyramid and get heavy college-coach traffic at their showcase events. If your athlete is genuinely competing for minutes at that level, those platforms are valuable. But strong regional and state-level leagues produce college players every year, and coaches at D2, D3, NAIA, and JUCO programs recruit from them constantly.

The rule we give every family: **play where you'll actually play.** A kid getting 80 minutes a game in a strong regional league develops faster — and shows coaches more — than a kid getting 15 minutes a match at a label club. College coaches evaluate the player, not the patch on the jersey. Bench-warming at a famous club is a development plan and a recruiting plan failing at the same time.

What College Coaches Actually Evaluate

Our soccer coach who played at the D2 level puts it this way: by the time coaches are watching juniors, almost everyone on the field is technically decent. What separates recruits is a short list:

1. **Speed and athleticism** — both raw pace and quickness over the first five yards.
2. **Soccer IQ** — does the player scan before receiving? Are they in the right spot *before* the ball arrives?
3. **First touch under pressure** — anyone looks clean in warmups; coaches watch what happens with a defender closing.

4. **Character on and off the ball** — work rate when the team loses possession, body language after a mistake, how they treat referees and teammates.
5. **Grades** — a strong transcript makes an athlete recruitable at more schools and cheaper to bring in. Coaches genuinely pass on talented players with weak academics.

One more thing coaches consistently tell us they like: athletes who haven't specialized too early. The movement variety and competitiveness carry over — we break down the evidence in why multi-sport athletes are better players.

Highlight Video Basics

The highlight video is the first cut in most recruiting decisions, and coaches watch it like coaches, not like grandparents. Keep it simple:

- **2–3 minutes total.** Coaches rarely watch longer.
- **The first 30 seconds decide everything.** Lead with your athlete's best, most representative moments — if a coach isn't hooked by then, they're on to the next video.
- **Game footage, not training montages.** Real matches, real opponents, real decisions. Skip the music-video edit, the slow motion, and the juggling-in-the-backyard clips.
- **Make the player easy to find.** A spot shadow or arrow at the start of each clip. Coaches won't hunt.
- **Show the position honestly.** Defenders should show defending, not just the two goals they scored all season.

Update it after every season and put the link in every email.

ID Camps: Real Evaluation vs. Revenue

ID camps are the most misunderstood money pit in soccer recruiting. Some are genuine evaluation events; many are simply fundraisers for the program. How to tell the difference:

Signs it's a real evaluation: a coach from that school has already seen your athlete or responded personally to their email; the school is a realistic athletic and academic fit; the actual college staff is working the camp, not hired counselors; and it's small enough that players get meaningful touches in front of them.

Signs it's a revenue camp: a mass-blast invitation out of nowhere ("our staff has identified you!"), hundreds of campers, vague promises of "exposure," and a school your athlete has no realistic connection to.

A useful filter: email the coach before registering and ask directly, "Is your staff actively recruiting my athlete's position in their grad year?" Honest programs answer honestly. And when your athlete does attend a camp that matters, show up prepared — broken-in cleats, proper shin guards, plenty of water. Sort the gear out before camp season starts instead of panic-buying the week of.

The Parent's Actual Job

Here's the part nobody puts on the club flyer. The parent's job description is exactly three things: **driver, financier, and emotional ballast.** You handle logistics, you manage the budget, and you stay steady when your kid has a rough showcase or a coach goes quiet.

What's not on the list: agent. Coaches recruit athletes, and they pay attention to which families let the athlete lead. The kid writes the emails. The kid talks to the coach at camp. The kid answers the questions on the campus visit. When a parent dominates those conversations, coaches quietly wonder what four years of those phone calls would be like — and we've watched it cost players real opportunities. The same dynamic damages kids at the youth level too, which is why we wrote a guide on how to deal with difficult parents in youth sports — don't become the parent a college coach has to manage around.

Get Organized Before the Window Opens

Our coaching team has guided athletes through this process across multiple sports, and the families who handle it best all get organized early. The Prospect Athlete app was built for exactly this — it gives student athletes a clean, coach-accessible recruiting profile they can build on iOS: measurables, highlight video links, academic info, and a target school list in one place. For soccer parents staring down that June 15 date, having your athlete's information ready to share the moment a coach can respond is one of the most practical moves you can make.

For the rest of the process — outreach scripts, eligibility, visits — start with our college recruiting hub, and if you're earlier in the journey, our soccer coaching section covers the development side that makes all of this possible.

One Last Thing

Recruiting rewards the same things soccer does: consistency, honesty about where you are, and patience. Most college soccer players were not phenoms with day-one phone calls — they were good players from solid clubs whose families understood the landscape, built the film, targeted the right schools, and let the kid lead. That can be your family. Start the film library this season.