



RUNNING TOWARD THE FUTURE

Rural Athletes Must Overcome Hurdles to Win Scholarships

For much of her life, Olivia Murphy focused on becoming a collegiate swimmer. The biggest obstacle she faced didn't come in the pool—it was catching the eye of college coaches.

Each year thousands of student-athletes pursue college athletic scholarships. Ultimately, only about one out of every 50 succeeds, according to a 2021 study by Next College Student Athlete. That bar can be even tougher to clear for athletes like Olivia, who live in rural areas, where it's often difficult to get the attention of major programs.

For those students, earning a spot on a college roster takes more than just the talent and commitment to be a high-level athlete—it also takes a “second job” as a communicator and organizer, working just to be seen.

“I didn't start the actual recruitment process until summer of my junior year, which is a little late for some people,” says Olivia, a Tennessee resident and 2024 Tullahoma High School graduate.

MAKING A SPLASH

Olivia's path was more straightforward than that of many other athletes: Swim fast, win races. A key member of the Wildcats' school-record-setting relay team, she recorded plenty of fast times while helping the team win its first division title.

She knew she had the speed, she just needed the coaches to know it, too. “When you first reach out to a coach, whether it's through a questionnaire or an email, you put your best events and your best times in there,” Olivia says.

When prospective recruits submit statistics, coaches compare their times to those of their current swimmers, as well as the

ones winning division and national titles. Athletes from almost every sport send out these cold-call emails to coaches across the country. In sports like football and basketball, where skills can't be boiled down to a set of times or statistics, athletes will create their own highlight videos and send those to coaches.

This can be especially valuable for rural athletes. Coaches can't visit every town to scout athletes, but there's no travel time in opening an email. Olivia says coaches especially want to see the swimmers' videos. “They love videos,” she says. “Most coaches like to see video because they want to see your technique or where your weaknesses might be.”

SHOWCASING SKILLS

Sometimes, rather than sending videos, recruits travel to camps and showcases so coaches can watch them in action and compare their skills to athletes at a similar level. These are often sport-specific camps run by college programs where potential recruits get hands-on practice time with

Photo illustration by Mark Gilliland



Photo courtesy of Olivia Murphy

Olivia Murphy's best swimming events are the 100-meter freestyle, butterfly, backstroke and the 50-meter freestyle.

coaches. At regional showcases or tournaments, thousands of athletes can test their skills while scores of coaches look for diamonds in the rough.

Landyn Cox, a 2024 high school graduate from McKee, Kentucky, competes in archery and found success at these large events since most high schools don't have archery teams. He was offered a scholarship to be an archer at the University of the Columbians in Williamsburg, Kentucky. He competed on the USA Archery U18 Compound National Team, the World Archery 3D Championships and other USA Archery Team events. He says the USAT events are a solid way to draw attention. "If you win like one of the USATs or certain big events, that gets your name out there pretty fast," he says.

MAKING A DECISION

Once coaches begin recruiting, the challenge comes in settling on a school. Olivia narrowed down her list to three. "I wanted to limit myself to three visits because I'm really bad at decisions," she says.

Part of the process was deciding what size school she wanted to attend. Many athletes feel the need to compete at a prestigious NCAA Division 1 school, but they



Photo courtesy of USA Archery

Landyn Cox first competed in archery through the National Archery in the Schools program.

SCORING AN OFFER

1. Know your skill level and learn the NCAA or NAIA eligibility requirements.
2. Compile an athletic resume with:
 - Skills video
 - Athletic stats
 - Academic transcripts, ACT/SAT scores
 - Extracurricular activities
3. Email coaches.
 - Include your athletic resume.
 - Subject line: Name, position, current grade level and key stat: "Jane Doe, High School Sophomore, Pitcher, 90 mph fastball"
 - Individually craft each email, clearly stating why you're interested in that program.
4. Make campus visits and meet coaches. Keep sending updated stats.
5. Lock down your offer and negotiate your amount. Don't discount merit-based, academic or other scholarships.



could find a home—and potentially more playing time or better financial aid—at a smaller school. "Division 1 isn't everything," Olivia says. "It's not live or die."

No matter the size or program, a visit is the critical component. After a successful recruiting visit where she got along great with her future teammates, Olivia chose Delta State University, a Division II school in Cleveland, Mississippi.

"They need to go where they feel like they best fit," she says. "I was like,

'There's no way that I'm not going to go Division 1,' and then I found a school that matches up with Division 1 schools and I got better scholarship offers and felt like I fit with the team better. And so, I was like, 'Oh, that's not the end of the world.'"

But it will be a whole new world for Olivia, Landyn and other rural athletes as they aim to parlay their hometown successes and hard work to the next level. 🏹