



The Athlete Auction

Even when a coach succeeds in interesting an athlete in Harvard, and the student gains admission, the battle is not over: the economics of higher education put Ivy League schools, with their high costs and need-based financial aid, in a squeeze. According to Jeff Orleans, the executive director of the Council of Ivy Group Presidents, "a much larger number of college teams are now playing major athletics--and therefore looking for athletes and competing for them." In that context, he says, "The fact that Ivy League schools don't give athletic scholarships means that there is an increasing cost differential between a school that does--and so costs nothing--and our schools, even with need-based aid.

"Thirty years ago, imagine a kid choosing between going to Harvard on need-based aid or attending Boston College with a full athletic scholarship," Orleans continues. "He might look at earning money at a summer job, plus term-time employment, and say, 'This is Harvard, I'm doing it.' Today, even if the student got a \$15,000 grant, and could add \$5,000 per year through work and loans, there is still a significant out-of-pocket expense compared to a 'free ride.' It's harder for middle-class families, especially if there are siblings. Some people who recruit women athletes say that families who are willing to sacrifice for their sons are often less willing to sacrifice for daughters.

"We may have been more price-competitive in the '60s than we are in the '90s--whether it's against Northwestern or the University of Massachusetts," Orleans concludes. "The gap between a UMass education and a Harvard education is certainly not as big as it was 30 years ago, but the price gap is bigger."

In basketball, 305 colleges now compete at the Division I level; in swimming, there are about 250 programs. Competition among them sometimes results in bidding wars for recruits, just the way professional sports teams scramble for free agents. Last year, the Harvard women's swimming team lost a recruit when Notre Dame upped its scholarship offer by \$10,000. "They outbid us," says then-coach Maura Costin Scalise. "The student may feel, 'My parents have done so much for me--how can I say no?'" A hydropower like Stanford, the national women's swimming champions from 1992 through 1996, is an especially formidable opponent. "It's a case of 'Come to Harvard and spend the money' versus, 'Go to Stanford and get a free ride,'" Costin Scalise explains. Stanford also offers pass-fail academic credit for "activity courses" (such as varsity sports or music)--a maximum of eight to 12 credits of the 180 credits needed to graduate. Nearly all of Stanford's athletes opt for such "physical education" studies, and some also take five scholarship-funded years to graduate, lightening their academic loads during their four years of eligibility to focus more on their sports.

Scholarship schools may push students to commit early. "They make an offer early on and then pressure the student to decide by September 30," says soccer coach Jay Saunders. But students are becoming equally savvy. Dana Tenser '97, a star soccer player from Hershey, Pennsylvania, who learned the game at age 5, received an athletic scholarship offer with a deadline from the College of William and Mary. This allowed Tenser to execute what is called a "squeeze play": she informed Harvard of William and Mary's offer and so was able to get a letter from Harvard's admissions office in the winter of her senior year, saying that she was likely to be admitted.

