



INDIAN WELLS, CA MARCH 9 - 22, 2009



All Things Tennis, All the Time

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Last Modified: 3/1/2008 4:46:07 PM

SMASH magazine: Guide to College Tennis

This story first appeared in the Spring 2006 issue of SMASH magazine.

By Christopher Chung

It's basic math: There are far fewer spots out there on college tennis teams than there are kids who play the game. But if you are a decent player and have some good credentials, you should be able to find a school whose program fits your needs as a tennis player and, of course, as a student.

The process of finding a tennis program is much like a courting ritual—first contact, correspondence, evaluation, on- and off-campus visits—and you have to adhere to the NCAA's timetable for each stage of recruiting.

As early as your sophomore year, and certainly by the end of your junior year, you'll want to research potential tennis programs as well as each college's campus, academics, and student body. This is how you do it.



1. KNOW YOUR GAME

Remember: the first thing is realism

Before you even start looking at schools and contacting coaches, you've got to sit down, ideally with your parents and tennis coach, and ask yourself: "What caliber game do I play?" If you answer, "Somewhere between Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal," you're probably headed in the wrong direction; you really mean to research the top schools for acting.

"The first thing is realism," says Mark Winters, director of communications for the USTA's Southern California section, who gives seminars on college recruiting. "Mothers and fathers and coaches are the evaluators. I think you need to look at where your talent is." There's no objective measure for what will get you into, say, a Top 10 Division II tennis program—the best way to see if a program is a good match is to go to the team's website and read about the playing history of current athletes, or contact coaches and ask about any rankings requirements and other criteria they might have.

One tip: If you play in a particularly competitive section, like Florida and SoCal, explore colleges outside of your area. "Schools on the East Coast and central part of the U.S. are very eager to lay their hands on a Californian because they're so competitive and play in such a competitive environment," Winters says.

In the end, you want to know what your limits are, and then fairly assess which schools, for the next four years, may be

potential homes for your game.

2. FREE YOUR MIND CHECK YOUR EGO AT THE DOOR!

In the big picture, coaches will look beyond academic and athletic achievements and try to see how you'd fit in with the culture of the team. Translation: Check your ego at the door. You're more likely to make a coach's short-list if you're motivated, flexible, and team-oriented.

Through your interaction with coaches (which by your senior year should include phone calls as well as in-person visits to colleges), you should emphasize your accomplishments but also show that you're the type of person who'll get something out of being on the team. "It's important that someone is still relatively fresh," says Simon Earnshaw, the men's and women's coach at Armstrong Atlantic State University. "The type of player who works best in the program here is motivated and enjoys tennis." Coaches also appreciate players who are open-minded enough to adapt and develop their games.

"Be able to talk about what you're willing to improve, change, and work on," Winters says. Are you shoring up your volley or improving your kick serve? Make it known. It all amounts to looking forward and not getting stuck on your past achievements, like Uncle Rico in Napoleon Dynamite. What you've accomplished will get you in the running, but how you present yourself as a future asset is often what's going to get you on the team.

"Kids have to be technically sound in their games and they have to be ready to improve when they get to college," says Peter Smith, the longtime men's head coach at the University of Southern California. "I've never looked at a 14-and-under ranking."

3. DON'T JUST SIT THERE TAKE INITIATIVE

You've probably heard it a million times: Take the initiative. Want to hook up with that hot girl? Ask her out. Want that loser to bug off? Tell him. Likewise, you have to be proactive in the recruiting process. It really will help to reach out to coaches, some of whom can get several inquiries a week about their tennis programs.

"That to me, as a coach, is very attractive," says USC's Smith. "If a kid is very motivated, and he's very interested in you and your school, you're going to return the favor."

Not that just anyone can play for USC, which won the men's Division I crown in 2002. But, Smith says, when you show your interest in words and actions, he's more likely to go out of his way to talk with you and watch you play.

"Personally, I prefer it when a student has taken the initiative in the process," says Nicole Kenneally, the women's head coach at the University of Colorado. "If you have everyone going for you except yourself, as a coach I wonder how much you're invested in this decision." Some coaches also appreciate it if you make like Quentin Tarantino and send them a videotape of your game (the Reservoir Dogs soundtrack is optional). "The first thing I want to see is a video," says Mark Rosewell, the men's and women's coach at Northwest Missouri State, a D-II program. "That can help me a lot. It can show me if that person's what we're looking for or not."

And if you happen to be traveling, you can call up a coach and mention that you'll be dropping by for a visit. "The way you've got open national tournaments all over the place, if you're going to South Carolina to play a tournament, take some time out and see whatever may be in the area," Winters says. "It's a good way to make an early contact. Go there, see what the facility's like, what the coach is like, what the team is like." The NCAA places no limits on trips to campuses ("unofficial visits," in recruiting jargon), so it's an effective way to get your name out to coaches and schools early while going on a fact-finding mission to answer other burning questions: What are the dorms like? What are the students like? What do the students look like? And where do they party? You can also promote your cause through letters of recommendation. But this old-school strategy is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, coaches won't put too much

weight on recommendations. "You know most kids will have one or two people write letters," Smith says. "They're usually pretty skewed in favor of the kid."

On the other hand, you're better off keeping the letters coming—even if they are from your kid brother. Recommendations won't get you in, says Dave Porter, the men's and women's coach at Brigham Young University in Hawaii. But not having any can look bad.

The goal in doing all this—writing coaches, sending videos, traveling, and having people write letters on your behalf—is to get to know coaches, and to get them to know you, during your last year or two of high school. Give this extra effort, early and consistently, and your prospects will be looking good.

4. SELL YOURSELF FIRST AND FOREMOST . . . WATCH OUT FOR YOUR ACADEMICS

In addition to showing that you're a team player, there are plenty of other things you can tell a coach that he or she will find interesting. For example, if you're an accomplished doubles player, that can only work in your favor; lefties are always coveted by coaches; and lefty doubles specialists are considered mana. If you play multiple sports and have decided to commit yourself fully to tennis, that will send a positive message about your dedication.

At some point, you should also let your potential coaches know what other schools are interested in you. Telling your girlfriend or boyfriend about "other interested parties" almost always backfires, but in recruiting it helps coaches stay aware of their prospects. Bottom line: You can increase your chances of getting in if your stock is high. If a coach knows that you're seriously entertaining several possibilities, you may have some wiggle room in terms of scholarship money, especially if rival schools are competing for you. "It's always good to find out who they're looking at," says Porter, of Brigham Young.

But in all this tennis talk, you can't lose sight of a virtually universal factor for college players: "Tennis will be important, but really watch out for your academics," Winters says. No matter how well you fit in with a tennis program, you've still got to be comfortable with the school as an educational institution. Will you be able to study what you want? Are the class sizes right for you? Does the social atmosphere seem to fit your personality?

The point is, don't let all the standard questions about college get lost in the search for a team—that's a one-way ticket to indefinite employment at the Gap. Plus, it's important to coaches because they want you to be good for the team. "Is this the right fit?" Porter says. "It has to work for both coach and player. I may get a terrific player one way or another. But it's got to be right for them academically and socially."

There's no question: You'll have a ton of things to juggle in this process. So go buy some folders and highlighters, dig up those phone numbers and e-mails, and do some legwork. You'll be glad you did when you finally find your school, and your team.

THE DEAL WITH DIVISION II

Division II is like a stripped-down version of Division I, less massive in every way—fewer programs, a lower overall level of competition, and less scholarship money. Plus, Division II typically involves modest regional colleges rather than large national universities. But there's overlap between the divisions: Many D-II players would be right at home going head-to-head with a D-I opponent.

Scholarship Statistics

The whole scholarship thing can be pretty confusing. This chart, which shows estimated numbers, tells you the maximum scholarships allowed per program, not how many scholarships each program actually has. But the "Total Scholarships"

column gives you a good idea of how much money is actually out there. Girls, hit the practice courts: There are 2,000 D-I scholarships waiting for you.

IS DIVISION III THE WAY TO GO?

It's a common misconception that Division III necessarily means low-quality tennis. That's understandable, but let us explain.

As any coach will say, Division III is an approach to athletics—not a synonym for “third-rate.” Like Ivy League colleges, D-III schools don't offer scholarships. They intend athletics to be supplemental to the academic experience.

“I love the balance of Division III,” says Bob Hansen, the longtime men's head coach at the University of California at Santa Cruz. He feels that D-III tennis helps reinforce the philosophy that playing and improving your game is a reward in itself, rather than a means to scholarship money and a career.

“I think the value of excelling at sport is much more inherent with our athletes, as they are treated in most cases just like other students,” says Hansen, whose team won the 2005 D-III national championship. “This breeds a healthy perspective about their place in the university.”

Matt Seeberger is Hansen's top player at Santa Cruz, and he turned down scholarships at Division I programs to play for the Banana Slugs (despite their name, the Slugs are a kick-ass team). He recalls the first time he visited his college and how he noticed the way a D-III team's culture differed from that of D-I programs that he had been recruited for. “The bottom line was, they loved to play,” he says. “At every other school I looked at, it almost felt as though tennis was a job for the players. They had to perform everyday to keep their scholarship, and that scholarship was always on the line.”

At the same time, D-III features some accomplished tennis players. “There are definitely many D-III tennis players who would have no problem getting a tennis scholarship for a D-I school,” says Carol Matsuzaki, the women's head coach at M.I.T. In other sports, going through a top D-I program can lead to a lucrative, even if unspectacular, career in the professional ranks. Not so with tennis. Playing college ball might even hurt your chances of eventually playing on the tour. In turn, many high-schoolers choose their schools based less on scholarship money and the tennis program and more on his or her larger goals.

In addition, the spillover of good players from D-I to D-III is more pronounced on the men's side than on the women's because there are far fewer D-I scholarships available for the men. So a guy who is denied a scholarship may open himself up to college options that he wouldn't have even considered previously, such as D-III schools.

What you end up with is potent competition at the better D-III colleges. “The top D-III programs, talentwise, are better than two-thirds of [all] D-I programs,” Hansen says. “Every year I see more top U.S. players choosing Division III teams.”

Now, don't get us wrong. The women at Emory won't be taking on Georgia Tech with much success anytime soon, but the best players in D-III could hold their own at any of the big schools. “Sure, the [overall] level isn't as high,” Seeberger says. “But you still look at the top players in D-III, and they can compete with anybody in the country.”

Dave Hagymas, the men's head coach at M.I.T., agrees. Before joining M.I.T. last summer, he was an assistant at Duke, a perennial member of the Division I Top 10. And he doesn't go any easier on D-III players. “I run practice exactly the same as it was run at Duke,” Hagymas says.

Playing D-III tennis is an especially shrewd move if you're destined for a non-contending D-I school. “What's cooler,” says Dave Schwarz, the men's head coach at Middlebury College, “playing at a mid-level D-I program, or maybe competing for a national championship at a D-III school that's a good school that'll probably lead to a good job or a good med school or law school?”

Then there's the whole warming the bench thing. "Sometimes the best juniors sit a year or two before they can play and some never because of the depth of D-I tennis," Hagymas says. "But the same juniors could play all four years at a D-III school."

DIVISION III FEATURES SOME FIRST-RATE TENNIS PLAYERS

Other Options

What about those of you who won't make a team? Life sucks, we know. But almost all universities have club or intramural tennis, and there are always good recreational players at any college. So you'll never be at a loss for potential hitting partners. After a year of practice, you can try again, or talk to another school and, if they like you, transfer.

BEST COLLEGE PROS IN THE LAST 10 YEARS

MEN

Sargsis Sargsian (Arizona State)

Paul Haarhuis (Florida State)

James Blake (Harvard)

Malivai Washington (Michigan)

Todd Martin (Northwestern)

Byron Black (Southern California)

Wayne Black (Southern California)

Rick Leach (Southern California)

Richey Reneberg (SMU)

Bob Bryan (Stanford)

Mike Bryan (Stanford)

Patrick McEnroe (Stanford)

Jeff Tarango (Stanford)

Doug Flach (Tennessee)

Chris Woodruff (Tennessee)

Brian Vahaly (Virginia)

WOMEN

Jill Craybas (Florida)

Lisa Raymond (Florida)

Lori McNeil (Oklahoma State)

Laura Granville (Stanford)

Tulane's Lost Season

It was the first day of classes at Tulane University, and no one was there. Two days earlier, on Monday, August 29, Hurricane Katrina had plowed through New Orleans, forcing thousands of Tulane students out of their college, and out of the city. Orientation had become an exodus.

By week's end, the news had come in: Tulane's president had declared that while most students had relocated to host colleges around the U.S. for the fall semester, athletic teams would stay together and "carry the torch" for Tulane.

After weeks of impermanence gymnasium at Jackson State University with other Tulane athletes relocated to Texas A&M University. "We were able to compete in a couple of tournaments," Robert Klein, the longtime men's head coach, says. But serious competition wasn't a priority, or even a possibility. The tennis teams' budgets had virtually been eliminated, and players were using equipment donated by sporting-good companies and other colleges.

"Our guys looked at it as a chance to do a lot of off-court training," Klein says. "They hit the weights and conditioned harder than they ever had. The tennis was going to take care of itself when we got back in January." But the big blow came in early December, when Tulane's administration announced its "renewal plan." Academic programs would be streamlined and the five-year suspension of eight sports teams, including men's and women's tennis, would begin this

coming fall "until fall of 2011," says Klein, incredulously.

High-schoolers looking to play for Tulane, which has had great success in recent years, are out of luck. "There's no option now to be recruited," says David Schumacher, the women's head coach, "because we don't have a team."

The men's and women's teams have both accepted an offer to cancel their spring seasons in exchange for a year of NCAA eligibility, and younger players have started looking for a new school to play tennis for. Schumacher now finds himself shopping his own players to other schools, including rivals. "Now I'm Oderecruiting," he says. "It's an unpleasant duty. I had a bunch of girls that I was really looking forward to working with."

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