



SOFTBALL ACADEMY

with Mitch Alexander

Don't Forget About Division III

When many student athletes begin their journey of college selection, they automatically think about Division I as these are the schools they see playing in the Women's College World Series and featured on TV broadcasts. The Division I schools seem glamorous. We also hear about the Division I players being drafted into the National Pro Fastpitch league and playing for Team USA. As student athletes start their selection process in earnest, some come to the conclusion that Division II is a better fit. However, Division III schools are often incorrectly thought of as safety schools or schools of last resort. For a small group of informed players and their families, attending a Division III school is their primary goal. The recruiting process for Division III schools is not as well known to many potential student athletes and therefore may seem confusing.

The decision of which school to attend is a difficult, complex one. One of the major components of this decision is which division to play in. A lot has been written about Division I schools and the player experience in these schools. Student athletes need to be extremely dedicated to their sport to be successful at a Division I school. Expectations from the coaching staff are very high.



The process of securing a Division I (and II) athletic scholarship is not unlike looking for a job. Players are potential employees going on job interviews. The Coaches interview many candidates and finally select the right one for the job they need help with. They know that older employees will be retiring and they need to find fresh, hungry candidates to get the work done. However, these employees are essentially consultants or contractors with a one-year contract. The employer has the option of renewing the contract if they are happy with the employee's performance and attitude. Athletic scholarships are one-year contracts. They are an agreement between the player and the school. The player agrees to play softball (and train) in exchange for a type of monetary compensation.

Division I athletes normally spend about 40 hours a week practicing, training, or otherwise involved in their sport. It really is like having a full-time job. Student athletes, also need to fit their school work in. If you consider full-time enrollment requiring another 40 hours a week, and athletes will require at least 8 hours of sleep a night to be effective, little time is left each day. Perhaps enough time to eat, wash clothes, and for grooming – that's it. Want to watch TV? You will need to get that time from somewhere, like giving up bathing or studying! Division II is similar, but student athletes have a little more free time available for entertainment or studying.

Another thing to consider is the career path you are considering. It is important to note that unless you are planning on a career in some avenue of sports (therapy, management, training, etc.) there may be little benefit to playing for a Division I school. If your career choice is one that requires a lot of lab time, or is a very difficult curriculum like engineering, coaches at Division I schools may insist you choose another, easier program as it will be difficult to suc-



cessfully complete these programs while committing to play softball.

What about Division III? Division III doesn't offer ANY athletic scholarships. Are their teams walk-ons then? No. Division III coaches recruit for players like the other divisions do. The exception is they aren't offering any money to play for them. So why play for a Division III team? As detailed above, Division I and II offer athletic scholarships that are one-year long. If a student athlete is injured, gets bad grades, or doesn't thrive in the softball program, their athletic scholarship won't be renewed. This leaves the student to pay the full cost of their education (less any other discounts or academic scholarships the school offered them). Think this doesn't happen? It happens all the time!

Division III recruiting is a little different. There are no rules about when a coach can contact potential student athletes by phone or by mail, so you can start contacting these schools when you're a freshman! You can unofficially visit Division III schools at any time. You can officially visit Division III schools starting January 1st of your junior year, and the number of visits in total are not limited. In person off-campus visits are allowed by coaches after completion of the junior year. Division III coaches cannot contact you at a tournament or game until you are officially dismissed by your current coach. There are no limits to the number of contacts or evaluations a Division III coach can have with you. Also keep in mind that recruiting budgets for travel at the Division III level are very limited. This means that you will most likely need to travel to showcase your skills to the school in question. Division III schools often hold camps and clinics, and their coaches travel to a few of the larger showcases and camps to recruit.



So what does playing for a Division III school do for me? For one thing it may get you considered for a school you normally wouldn't get into. Also consider that Division III softball programs can be found at some of the top universities in the United States. This includes: Tufts, MIT, Amherst, Wellesley, Brandeis, Emory, Smith College, Drew, Farleigh Dickinson, Rutgers, NYU, RPI, and Swarthmore. Division III schools have academic scholarships, leadership scholarships, and grant money, and many schools are very generous in handing them out. Division III schools are often expensive. To offset this, many Division III schools offer need-based money to assist families with affording tuition. 75% of Division III students receive some level of academic grant or need-based money averaging \$13,500/year. Student athletes with good grades may be awarded an academic scholarship that can be worth 25% or more of tuition! Compare this to the average Division I athletic scholarship of just under \$15,000 – is it truly worth it?

Division III athletics provides a good balance between sports, academics, and having a social life. These student athletes can also enjoy all that their college has to offer. They can attend other sporting events, social events, and they can also enjoy an off-season that other divisions do not. Division I student athletes typically only have time to socialize with their teammates and it can be problematic when players don't all get along as they spend most of their time together. Division III athletes typically play a season of about 40 games, where most of the games are played in close proximity to the school. Compare this to Division I that typically plays at least 50% more games and has considerably more travel to these games.



Most student athletes will not be seeking a career in sports. Instead, they want to play softball at the college level to get into a good school or earn a scholarship to reduce the financial burden of today's tuition levels. Division III players enjoy the highest rates of graduation at 87%. Division I players graduate at a rate of 81% and Division II has the lowest graduation rate at 71%. Also consider the logistics of attending every practice - many Division III coaches allow players to miss practices that conflict with labs or to study for major tests. Division I and II typically do not allow this. If there's a scheduled practice, student athletes are expected (by contract) to attend. Division III students can study music and art, or have a second major. These are very difficult if not impossible to do at Division I schools.

Student athletes and their families really should consider Division III schools, as playing college softball only lasts four years. The forty or so years following college softball while the student athlete transitions into a member of the work force is incredibly more important. Some student athletes desire the highest level of competitiveness and training, and thrive at the Division I level. However, don't shortchange your education, college social life and career goals just to play Division I softball. In the end you may find that the decision was not worth it.

Mitch Alexander is the creator of www.varsityfastpitch.com, a new web site to help students play softball in college. His area of focus is on youth sports and college recruiting. His wife Marie was one of the first female student athletes in the country to play Little League softball after Title IX was passed and played in the first Little League World Series. Over the years, both have managed and coached Little League and select/travel teams at all levels and helped spark a love for softball in their student athletes. Mitch can be reached at mitch.varsityfastpitch@gmail.com.

