

THE ATHLETE'S EDGE

College Hopefuls Reach Out to Recruiting Services

By Bill Pennington



Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

Sara Ellison of MSL Sports, a recruiting service, envisions the day when coaches will watch prospects' games via cellphone or iPod.

Dave Beccaria, the baseball coach at Haverford College outside Philadelphia, is looking for a catcher. He has been to dozens of high school recruiting events, mailed hundreds of letters to prospects and scouted countless player videos.

But seated at his office computer, Beccaria can redouble his catcher search in minutes. On the Web site for the Baseball Factory, a recruiting service in Columbia, Md., Beccaria uses a private password given to college coaches

to request files on all high school catchers registered with the service. He receives a list of 284 names, and with each name are the prospect's grade point average, SAT scores and a series of ratings, based on reports by Baseball Factory scouts, for the player's skills in throwing, hitting, fielding and running.

Beccaria can then click on a player's name and be taken to a Web page that includes detailed information: the player's phone number, e-mail address, height, weight and, in some cases, shoe size. Supplementing that are a more comprehensive written evaluation by a Baseball Factory coach and a video of the player in action. Beccaria can narrow his search to find catchers who have certain minimum academic qualifications or times in the 60-yard dash, or who bat left-handed or live in a certain region. Or he can search for players within all four variables.

The information is free to college coaches. For a high school player to register for Baseball Factory services, it can cost \$500 to \$5,000. Last year, about 1,200 players signed contracts to have the Baseball Factory promote them to colleges.

These players are just some of the thousands of high school athletes who, with their parents' blessing, and checkbooks, have employed professional recruiting services to devise sophisticated marketing campaigns to attract the interest of college coaches. The goal is an athletic scholarship, or the edge that being a recruited athlete brings in the admissions process at elite colleges. Haverford, one such college, plays in Division III, which prohibits athletic scholarships.

There are at least 75 recruiting services nationwide, and they do more than build interactive Internet sites. They conduct elaborate e-mail campaigns, lobby college coaches, produce and edit polished videos and counsel their clients on everything from curriculum to essays for college applications.

These are not services for the blue-chip prospects in the most high-profile sports; college coaches know about those players. Instead, recruiting services are particularly popular among athletes a notch below in accomplishment or exposure and among players from the less-celebrated sports like volleyball and softball. Female athletes are flocking to recruiting services. Last year, one of the biggest and oldest services, National Scouting Report, had more girls as clients than boys for the first time.

"The recruiting process has become so complex, and parents have so little free time to learn it," said Dave Possinger, director of national territory sales for National Scouting Report, which has 200 employees and recently opened operations in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. "We relieve the burden for them. We have a host of former college coaches on staff who know the drill. We will put a student-athlete's athletic and academic information into the hands of every coach whose college plays that athlete's chosen sport."

National Scouting Report, which opened in 1980, recently sent information on 107 men's soccer prospects to the sport's 729 coaches in Divisions I, II and III. The company, based in Alabaster, Ala., also provides Web, video and counseling services.

John Darsee of West Nyack, N.Y., paid the Baseball Factory \$5,000 two years ago to help his son, Sean, then a high school freshman. Sean, a right-handed pitcher, has since attended about 15 Baseball Factory training sessions, clinics and camps around the country. (Travel expenses are not included in the fee.) He has a personal Baseball Factory counselor, who is a former Major League Baseball scout, helping him pick colleges and the right recruiting events, or showcases, to display his pitching.



Baseball Factory

Baseball Factory's lineup includes working out for scouts while being filmed.

I've learned how to organize the college process," Sean Darsee said. "You develop as a player, and at the same time they teach you how to look better on the field, better in video and how to talk to the coaches. They're making it a lot easier."

John Darsee said: "The kids who throw 95 miles an hour don't need these services, but the above-average players who may never be seen do benefit. They have taught Sean what he needs to do to better himself in baseball, and that's where my \$5,000 is worth it."

Recruiting service Web sites are replete with testimonials from college coaches about the services' value in recruiting. Other college coaches concede that recruiting services are a useful if elementary tool, providing names to add to a database of players to check out. Beccaria, of Haverford, said that he used a recruiting service as a high school player, although he was not sure if it helped him get into Johns Hopkins.

Many coaches, including Beccaria's colleagues at Haverford, say that recruiting services are a waste of money. These coaches said they had never had an athlete from a recruiting service end up on their teams. They discard the e-mail messages as soon as they receive them.

"I realize some kid's parents might have paid \$1,000 to have that e-mail sent," Tom Donnelly, the track coach at Haverford, said recently as he deleted a recruiting service e-mail message on his computer screen. "The sad thing is, I would have read it if the kid had sent it himself."

Donnelly noted that a similar e-mail message from the same service had referred to an athlete who enjoyed playing track. "Playing track?" Donnelly said. "No real runner talks like that."

Mike Murphy, the men's lacrosse coach at Haverford, said that when he speaks at high schools, he often tells the athletes to avoid recruiting services.

"As a coach, I know that the recruiting service guy's job is to get that kid into college," Murphy said. "He couldn't care less about the welfare of my program. So what do I care what he thinks? These families pay all this money, and the services don't do anything that the families can't do for themselves."

"Send me an e-mail and I'll read it and follow up. Pay somebody a few hundred dollars to video three or four of your kid's games and make a tape."

The Haverford men's tennis and squash coach, Sean Sloane, said he thought potential applicants who would qualify academically were "bright enough to understand that a recruiting service is not going to help them with schools like us."

Steve Sclafani, who founded the Baseball Factory 11 years ago and is its chief executive, said he believed some unscrupulous enterprises were damaging the image of the recruiting service industry.

"The people who say they're experts in 25 sports and don't do any developmental training, they're probably just sending out bios and mass e-mails, and I don't see the value in that," Sclafani said. "So I understand why coaches delete e-mails. If you don't know the people behind the organization, then it's fluff. It is a waste of time." Possinger, at National Scouting Report, agreed that some parents and athletes might be able to navigate the recruiting process themselves.

"But others don't want to risk it," he said. "They've spent maybe \$20,000 since their child was a high school freshman on travel teams, special tournaments and private tutors. A \$2,500 fee to a recruiting service is a good investment."



Baseball Factory

Baseball Factory instructor Mike Zoleki tutors pitchers.

There are other recruiting services that specialize in helping students get into specific groups of colleges, like the Ivy League. Other services concentrate on one sport. Margery Slonaker of Summit, N.J., started Best Foot Forward six years ago to help girls.

"Boys had been recruited for years, but when it came to girls, the colleges would low-ball them," Slonaker said. "That annoyed me."

Slonaker, who also has boys as clients, likened herself to an independent guidance counselor, although she will not contact college coaches.

"I want the kids to stand up for themselves," said Slonaker, whose fees range from \$200 to \$1,200 annually. "I help prepare them: what courses to take, what tutors to see, what camps to attend. But it's their process; it's about the education they want and the sport they want to play. I just take some of the stress out."

Not all recruiting services ask athletes for a substantial amount of money. Some fetch up to \$10,000 from individual colleges.

MSL Sports, based in Manhattan, receives that much from some of its major college football clients, and that allows the coaches access to all the information, evaluations and video MSL compiles from multiple scouting combines it conducts across the country. For \$500, Division III coaches can receive a book on players from high-profile all-star games the company sponsors.

Because football programs need so many players, volume matters. MSL evaluated 2,300 players last season. To be included on the Web site costs \$125.

Sara Ellison, vice president for operations at MSL Sports, envisions a day when recruiting will allow a college football coach in Ohio to watch a prospect's Friday night game in Georgia via cellphone or iPod.

"Technology is changing everything," Ellison said. "That coach could watch eight prospects play live in one night. And he would never leave his office."

About the Series

Articles in the series are examining how coaches, prospective athletes and admissions offices interact.



Baseball Factory

Baseball Factory's lineup: Sean Dearsee meeting Rockies Manager Clint Hurdle.
