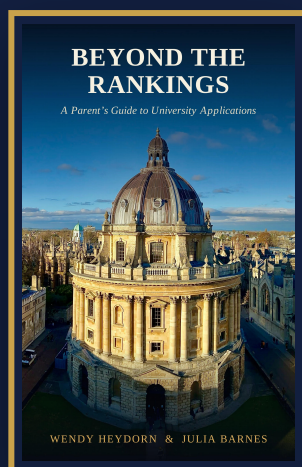




SPORTS SCHOLARSHIPS — FREE EXTRACT

Supporting Athletes and Applying for Sports Scholarships

*A Q&A with Cath Nicholson,
Commonwealth Games Medallist & US Recruitment Adviser*

AN EXTRACT FROM
Beyond the Rankings
Wendy Heydorn & Julia Barnes

FREE EXTRACT — ONE OF EIGHT EXPERT Q&AS IN THE FULL BOOK
A guide for parents of students in Years 11 to 13

Supporting Athletes and Applying for Sports Scholarships

A conversation with Cath Nicholson

We asked Cath for her perspective on the questions that matter most to parents supporting a son or daughter through US athletic recruitment and sports scholarships.

ABOUT CATH NICHOLSON

Cath Nicholson is a former international hockey player who balanced a high-performance sporting career with academic study at Loughborough University, where she read Industrial Design and Technology. She represented England and Great Britain, winning a bronze medal at the 2006 Commonwealth Games in Melbourne and narrowly missing selection for the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games. She now advises student-athletes on US university recruitment and sports scholarships, drawing on first-hand experience of elite sport and extensive knowledge of the American college system.

DEGREE

BA Industrial Design and Technology, Loughborough University

GRADUATED

2003

A LEVELS

Mathematics, Design Technology, Government & Politics

FAVOURITE PART OF UNIVERSITY

Becoming an international athlete

KEY MESSAGE FOR PARENTS

If your son or daughter is good at and passionate about a sport, do your own homework early and explore what international opportunities might be out there for them to access an incredible university experience.

For families new to the US system, can you explain how sports scholarships work?

Around \$4 billion is awarded annually to over 196,000 student-athletes in NCAA Divisions I and II. Full scholarships — also known as 'full-ride' scholarships — are extremely competitive and typically cover tuition and fees, room and board, books and supplies, and travel costs for competitions. Partial scholarships are more common and cover a portion, typically 50–70%, of costs. Many student-athletes receive a partial scholarship and combine it with academic aid, financial aid, or personal funding.

What is the Ivy League, and what does it actually mean?

The Ivy League is a sporting conference made up of eight private universities in the north-eastern United States: Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Columbia, Cornell, Dartmouth, Brown, and the University of Pennsylvania. The conference was formally established in 1954 to organise intercollegiate athletics. Over time, however, these universities became associated with exceptional academic standards, influential alumni, and highly selective admissions. As a result, "Ivy League" has evolved into a shorthand for academic prestige as much as athletics.

Do Ivy League universities offer sports scholarships?

No. Ivy League institutions are unique among NCAA Division I conferences because they do not award athletic scholarships. This often surprises families, particularly those familiar with NCAA recruiting, because many non-Ivy Division I universities use athletic scholarships as a primary recruitment tool. Ivy League coaches instead support athletes through the admissions process, while maintaining high academic expectations.

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Being recruited to an Ivy League school is not about receiving a sports scholarship; it is about gaining access to a world-class academic institution while competing at a high athletic level.

Can you explain the difference between NCAA, NAIA and NJCAA and what that means in practice for a student-athlete?

The NCAA is the primary governing body for college athletics in the US, serving more than 500,000 student-athletes across three divisions. Division I universities offer the highest level of competition and the most substantial scholarships. Division II universities also provide athletic scholarships, though typically less generous. Division III universities do not offer athletic scholarships but can provide other forms of financial aid such as academic scholarships.

The NAIA is a separate governing body for 250+ smaller schools and offers competitive sports, athletic scholarships and national championships comparable to those in NCAA Division II. The NJCAA is the governing body for two-year colleges and junior colleges — suitable for students looking to develop athletic skills and improve academic credentials before moving to a four-year university.

One important distinction: Ivy League universities compete in NCAA Division I but do not award athletic scholarships. Instead, they provide need-based financial aid based on a family's financial circumstances. A recruited athlete may receive a generous aid package, but it is awarded because of financial need rather than sporting ability. Being recruited to an Ivy League school is not about receiving a sports scholarship; it is about gaining access to a world-class academic institution while competing at a high athletic level.

What do coaches actually look for when recruiting international student-athletes?

Coaches will always want to find the right 'fit' for a student-athlete when recruiting for their programme. Whilst sporting ability is often what attracts a coach's attention, attitude and application will play a significant role in their decision to sign a student-athlete. Academics and strong grades are an important indicator of a student's ability to manage their workload and remain disciplined when faced with competing priorities. A strong academic profile can also open doors to more universities and increase eligibility for academic scholarships.

Beyond raw physical talent and athletic metrics, coaches prioritise high emotional intelligence, coachability and robust character. They seek diligent, proactive individuals with a serious work ethic, often observing how an athlete behaves on the sidelines or treats teammates during a loss. Coaches want to see an athlete demonstrating grit and determination and their consistent desire to put the team first.

For measurable sports, coaches can filter applicants instantly by times or distances. For subjective sports, highlight reels allow for a coach's intuition regarding how a player's style fits their tactical system alongside the performance level of the athlete.

How early should students start preparing, and what should that preparation look like?

If a student is thinking about applying to the US, it is advisable for them to think about preparing for the process by the end of Year 9 and the start of Year 10. The biggest task is designating quality time to ensuring their academics are up to standard and collating footage to create a high-quality showcase reel.

Being organised, proactive and diligent in filming performances and creating a high-quality highlight reel that showcases strengths can make a significant difference. A well-constructed reel allows a Head Coach to quickly identify an athlete's strengths and understand the impact they could have within a programme. Aim for two to four minutes and place your best clips first. Clearly identify themselves in each clip and prioritise competitive match footage rather than training sessions.

College coaches receive hundreds of emails from prospective athletes each year, so first impressions matter. Rather than sending the same generic message to dozens of universities, students should take time to personalise their communication. Coaches are much more likely to respond when they can see that a student has researched their programme and understand how they might contribute to it.

Students should also consider taking the SAT. The tests have been a widely debated topic over recent years and both the NCAA and NAIA waived the SAT/ACT requirements in 2021/22, but not all colleges dropped the requirement, so students are strongly recommended to take the test to keep more options open. A strong score also demonstrates how a student will cope academically and will make a student stand out to a coach when comparing similar athletes. If a student qualifies for an academic scholarship, that money will come from the university, not the coach's athletic recruitment budget, which allows them to use it to improve their programme in other ways.

How should families evaluate scholarship offers and compare options?

It is important to look beyond the headline scholarship figure. Two offers that appear similar on paper can have very different financial implications. Families should consider what the scholarship actually covers, including tuition, accommodation, meals, books, health insurance and travel costs. Additional expenses such as flights home, personal spending, summer accommodation and visa fees can also add up.

A balanced approach requires evaluating a US university under the "injured player" rule: if sports were taken away tomorrow due to injury, the student should still be entirely happy with the American location, the campus culture and the specific degree programme. True success means finding an institution that excites them both academically and athletically. The goal should be to find the best long-term opportunity rather than simply the highest financial award.

How can students tell whether a university's sports programme and the academic environment will genuinely be a good fit?

One of the biggest mistakes students make is focusing solely on scholarship value, university reputation or athletic division. The most successful student-athletes carefully consider:

- **Academic fit:** Does the university offer strong programmes in subjects that genuinely interest you?
- **Athletic fit:** Are you capable of competing at that level and earning meaningful playing time?
- **Campus environment:** Would you prefer a large university or a smaller college community?
- **Location:** Consider climate, distance from home and overall lifestyle.
- **Athletic culture:** How demanding is the training schedule? What support is available for athletes?
- **Career outcomes:** What internships, alumni networks and graduate opportunities are available?

Ask coaches about team culture, academic support, injury support services and what a typical week looks like for student-athletes. Speaking to current team members often provides the most honest insight into life at the university. Remember that choosing the "best" university is rarely the goal; finding the university that is best for them is what matters.

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What are the most common mistakes students and families make — and how can they be avoided?

Perhaps the most common mistake is leaving things too late. Recruitment can begin much earlier than many families realise, so students who wait until their final school years may miss valuable opportunities to build relationships with coaches and showcase their abilities.

Another pitfall is focusing solely on sporting reputation rather than university fit. Students can become excited by a particular team or programme without properly considering academic courses, location, campus culture or the overall university experience. The best outcomes happen when students find a university that is a strong fit academically, socially and athletically.

A third mistake is underestimating the importance of academic performance. Strong grades significantly widen the range of universities available and demonstrate the work ethic that coaches value highly. Many of the most successful student-athletes are excellent students first and athletes second.

Finally, some students are hesitant to promote themselves. American recruitment requires athletes to be proactive, communicate with coaches, build a sporting CV and create quality highlight videos. Students who take ownership of the process tend to achieve far better outcomes than those who simply wait to be discovered.

What do you wish more parents understood about the realities of being a student-athlete in the US?

The rewards are extraordinary. Students become part of a highly supportive environment with access to coaches, tutors, academic advisers, strength and conditioning specialists, physiotherapists and wellbeing support. The level of investment in student development is often unlike anything available elsewhere.

Student-athletes are expected to perform in the classroom as well as on the field. They balance training sessions, strength and conditioning, travel, competition and academic deadlines. It can be demanding, particularly during the first year when students are adjusting to a new country and culture.

Perhaps most importantly, students grow up quickly. They develop independence, confidence and adaptability while building friendships with people from all over the world. Years later, graduates often tell me that the combination of education and sport gave them a unique set of leadership, teamwork and communication skills that continue to benefit them in their careers and personal lives. The reality is that student-athletes work incredibly hard, but the rewards — in education, personal growth and future opportunities — can be truly life-changing.

What message of encouragement would you offer to students and families feeling uncertain about the process?

Applying to American universities as a student-athlete can feel overwhelming at times. There are forms to complete, videos to produce, coaches to contact and important decisions to make. It is completely normal to feel uncertain along the way.

The most important thing is to start early, stay organised and remain open-minded. There are hundreds of universities across the United States, each offering a different combination of academic, athletic and personal opportunities. Their journey does not depend on one coach, one programme or one outcome. Students can focus on becoming the strongest student and athlete they can be. They should be proactive, resilient and authentic. Most importantly, remember that recruitment is not about finding a perfect university — it is about finding the place where they can grow, contribute and enjoy an unforgettable chapter of their life.

My advice to families is simple: don't view the US and UK pathways as competitors. They are simply different routes to achieving similar goals. The best choice depends on the student's sporting ambitions, academic interests, independence, personality and long-term aspirations. The right fit is always more important than the perceived prestige of the destination.

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For student-athletes who want to stay in the UK, what does the university sports scholarship landscape actually look like?

While the UK system differs from the American collegiate model, there are several universities that offer excellent performance sport programmes, scholarship support and athlete-development pathways.

Which UK universities are particularly strong for student-athletes?

Some examples include:

- **Loughborough University** — widely regarded as one of the UK's leading sporting universities, with world-class facilities, elite coaching and extensive scholarship support.
- **University of Nottingham** — offers structured performance sport programmes and scholarship packages with financial support, performance services, academic mentoring and access to elite facilities.
- **University of Bath** — a recognised high-performance sport centre supporting many Olympic and Paralympic athletes.
- **University of Birmingham** — strong performance sport programme and excellent hockey, athletics and swimming pathways.
- **University of Exeter** — one of the strongest BUCS (British Universities and Colleges Sport) programmes in the country with extensive athlete support.
- **University of Stirling** — particularly strong in swimming, triathlon, golf and other high-performance sports, with dedicated scholarship opportunities.
- **Hartpury University** — renowned for rugby, football and equestrian sport.
- **Durham University** — combines strong academic standards with a competitive sporting environment.

Is there any additional support available for student-athletes at UK universities beyond the scholarships themselves?

Many UK universities also participate in the Talented Athlete Scholarship Scheme (TASS), which provides support services such as physiotherapy, strength and conditioning, lifestyle support and flexible academic arrangements for talented athletes.

How do UK sports scholarships compare with US athletic scholarships, and is the UK route still worth considering?

The key difference is that UK sports scholarships are generally smaller financially than US athletic scholarships, but they can still provide valuable support, performance services and opportunities to compete at a very high level while studying for a degree.

Useful resources

NCAA eligibility and transfer rules: [ncaa.org](https://www.ncaa.org)

SAT guidance for international student-athletes: firstpointusa.com

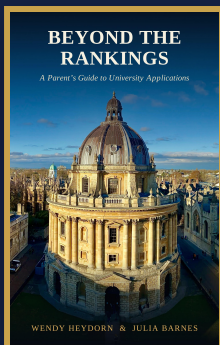
Sporting Elite USA: sportingeliteusa.com

Keystone Sports: keystonesports.com

UK sports scholarships: ucas.com

University of Stirling sports scholarships: stir.ac.uk

**Cath Nicholson — Former International Hockey Player, Commonwealth Games Medallist,
and Adviser on US University Recruitment and Sports Scholarships**



THIS Q AND A IS AN EXTRACT FROM

Beyond the Rankings

A Parent's Guide to University Applications

Wendy Heydorn & Julia Barnes

With the number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) reaching one million in the UK, helping your child find a positive path beyond school has never mattered more. University rankings tell you almost nothing about whether a course or campus is right for your child.

Beyond the Rankings is written by two Higher Education specialists with over 25 years of combined experience guiding students through UK, US and international university applications. This isn't an encyclopedia — it's a practical companion for the decisions that matter most, written in plain English, without the jargon or the assumption that you already know how any of this works.

Whether your child is in Year 11 wondering what comes next, or in Year 13 with a UCAS deadline looming, this book walks you through every stage with clarity, warmth and genuinely practical advice — exploring university options not only in the UK but internationally too, and giving you the questions that open conversations rather than close them.

INSIDE, YOU'LL FIND

- How to help your child choose the right course and university, based on fit, not just prestige
- Building a strong application profile through activities, work experience and academic interests
- Navigating Personal Statements and US College Essays, and preparing for admissions tests and interviews
- A clear, honest breakdown of what university really costs, and how to plan for it
- Degree Apprenticeships: how your child could earn a salary, gain a qualification and graduate debt-free
- Supporting your child through the transition to university life — academically, practically and emotionally

Each chapter includes a summary, key questions for your son or daughter to reflect on, popular myths addressed with facts and practical tips, timelines and checklists, useful links, and Key Advice for Parents. It includes various Q&A's with contributors in university admissions.

Beyond the Rankings — order on Amazon Kindle now!

Available on Amazon Kindle from 29 July 2026

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