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ELITE FENCING COACHING

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College Fencing Recruiting

A Parent's Guide



Timelines, NCAA divisions, recruiting rules, building a profile, communicating with coaches, and everything parents need to know to help their fencer pursue collegiate fencing.

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A Note from Coach Derek

College fencing is one of the best-kept secrets in athletics. Fencing offers opportunities at some of the most prestigious universities in the country – Ivy League schools, top-tier Division I programs, and competitive Division III schools where fencing can be the factor that gets your student admitted.

But the recruiting process is confusing, especially for fencing families who didn't grow up in the sport. The rules are different from football or basketball recruiting. The timeline is different. The expectations are different. And the opportunities are different depending on the weapon, the division, and the school.

This guide walks you through the entire process: when to start, what coaches look for, how to communicate, what the NCAA rules allow, and how to build a recruiting profile that gets attention. It's written for parents because parents drive this process – but the fencer should read it too.

I've helped fencers navigate this process for years. The families who start early, stay organized, and approach it strategically consistently get better outcomes. This guide gives you the strategy.

– Coach Derek

The College Fencing Landscape

College fencing in the United States exists across three NCAA divisions and several club-level organizations. Understanding the landscape is the first step to finding the right fit.

NCAA Division I

Division I programs are the highest level of college fencing. These schools offer athletic scholarships (though fencing scholarships are limited compared to revenue sports), have full-time coaching staffs, and compete at the NCAA Championships. There are approximately 30–35 Division I fencing programs, concentrated in the Northeast and Midwest.

Division I programs recruit nationally and internationally. They're looking for fencers who can contribute immediately or develop into competitive collegiate fencers within a year. Many Division I recruits are nationally ranked and have competed at Junior Olympics, Summer Nationals, or international events.

NCAA Division II

Division II fencing programs are rare. Very few schools sponsor fencing at the D-II level. If a D-II school is on your list, research whether they have a varsity fencing program specifically.

NCAA Division III

Division III programs do not offer athletic scholarships, but fencing can still significantly impact the admissions process. Many D-III fencing programs are at highly selective academic institutions where being a recruited athlete provides a meaningful admissions advantage. The coaching staffs are often part-time, but the competitive level can be very high.

D-III is where fencing most commonly serves as an admissions "tip factor." A coach who supports your application can move your fencer from the waitlist to admitted. This is an enormous opportunity for strong students who are also competitive fencers.

Club Programs

Many universities have club fencing teams that compete through organizations like the United States Association of Collegiate Fencing Clubs (USACFC). Club programs don't offer admissions support or scholarships, but they provide competitive fencing at the college level for fencers who want to continue the sport without the varsity commitment.

IMPORTANT: The number of college fencing programs is small compared to sports like swimming or track. This means the recruiting pool is smaller — which is both a challenge (fewer spots) and an opportunity (less competition for those spots, especially in certain weapons).

The Recruiting Timeline

Fencing recruiting follows NCAA rules and timelines, which have changed significantly in recent years. Here's what to expect.

8th–9th Grade: Foundation Building

- Focus on competitive development. Build your national points and results.
- Attend regional and national tournaments to build a competitive resume.
- Begin researching college fencing programs. Make a list of schools that interest you academically AND have fencing programs in your weapon.
- No direct communication with coaches is expected at this stage, but attending camps at colleges with fencing programs is valuable for exposure.

10th Grade: Research and Identification

- Create a target list of 15–20 schools with fencing programs. Include a mix of D-I and D-III, reach and safety schools.
- Research each program: coaching staff, recent results, roster depth in your weapon, team culture.
- Attend summer fencing camps at target schools if available. This is a natural way to meet coaches.
- Begin building your recruiting profile (details below).
- Continue competing and building your national ranking.

11th Grade: Active Outreach

- Send introductory emails to coaches at your target schools (template below).
- Attend tournaments where college coaches will be scouting (Junior Olympics, Summer Nationals, NACs).
- Visit campuses. If possible, schedule unofficial visits that include meeting the fencing coach and watching a practice.
- Take the SAT/ACT. Academic credentials matter enormously in fencing recruiting, especially at D-III and Ivy League schools.
- Continue competing at the highest level available to you.
- Respond promptly to any coach communication. Be professional, enthusiastic, and honest.

12th Grade: Decision and Commitment

- Continue communication with coaches. Narrow your list to 5–8 serious options.
- Complete official visits if invited.
- Apply to schools during Early Decision or Early Action if a coach has indicated support.
- Communicate clearly with coaches about your interest level and timeline.
- Once you commit, notify all other coaches promptly and professionally.

COACH'S TIP: The most common mistake families make is starting too late. By the time most families think about recruiting (beginning of 12th grade), many roster spots are already spoken for. Start the research in 10th grade and the outreach in 11th grade.

What Coaches Look For

College fencing coaches evaluate recruits across several dimensions. Understanding what they're looking for helps you present your fencer effectively.

Competitive Results

Results matter, but context matters more. A coach knows the difference between a national tournament result and a local result. The most meaningful results for recruiting are performances at national-level events: NACs (North American Cups), Junior Olympics, Summer Nationals, and Division I/Division IA qualifying events.

Your fencer doesn't need to be a national champion to be recruited. Many D-I programs recruit fencers ranked in the top 50–100 nationally. D-III programs often recruit fencers who are competitive at the regional level with clear upward trajectory.

Trajectory and Potential

Coaches are recruiting for 4 years, not just freshman year. A fencer who has shown steady improvement over 2–3 years is more attractive than a fencer who peaked in 10th grade and plateaued. Coaches look for the slope of the improvement curve, not just the current level.

Academics

This is non-negotiable, especially at academically selective schools. A fencer with strong results but weak academics will not be recruited at Ivy League or top D-III schools. Conversely, a fencer with moderate results but exceptional academics becomes very attractive because they're an easy admissions case for the coach to support.

The sweet spot: A fencer whose competitive level fits the program AND whose academic profile fits the school. Coaches can provide the most admissions support when the student is close to the school's academic profile already.

Character and Coachability

Coaches recruit people, not just fencers. They want athletes who will be positive teammates, who respond to coaching, who are disciplined in training, and who represent the program well. Every interaction your fencer has with a coach — email, phone call, visit, tournament — is an evaluation of character.

Weapon Need

This is the variable most families overlook. A program might need a left-handed épée fencer desperately and have no room for another foilist. Weapon need varies by year and by program. Coaches recruit to fill specific roster gaps, and being the right weapon at the right time can matter as much as being the best fencer.

COACH'S TIP: Ask coaches directly: "What are your weapon needs for the class of [year]?" This shows you understand how recruiting works and helps you focus your efforts on programs where there's a real opportunity.

Building a Recruiting Profile

Your recruiting profile is the package of information you send to coaches. It should be professional, concise, and easy to scan. Coaches receive dozens or hundreds of recruiting emails — yours needs to stand out.

Essential Components

- Full name, graduation year, weapon, and hand (left or right).
- Club name and coach name.
- Academic information: GPA (weighted and unweighted), SAT/ACT scores, class rank if available.
- Competitive results: list your top 10–15 results at regional and national events with dates. Include your current national ranking and rating.
- A brief personal statement (2–3 sentences): why you're interested in college fencing and what you bring as a student-athlete.
- Video links: 2–3 high-quality bout videos from recent competitions. Full bouts, not highlight reels. Coaches want to see how you fence, not your best touches. Upload to YouTube (unlisted) and include links.
- Contact information for your club coach (as a reference).
- Your email, phone number, and mailing address.

What NOT to Include

- Don't exaggerate results or ratings. Coaches verify everything.
- Don't send a 5-page resume. One page is ideal, two is maximum.
- Don't have parents write the emails. The fencer should write (with parental review). Coaches want to hear from the athlete.
- Don't send highlight reels without full bouts. Highlights are supplementary, not primary.

The Initial Email to Coaches

Your first email to a coach should be brief, professional, and specific to their program. Here's a framework:

Subject Line: [Your Name] — [Weapon] — Class of [Year] — Interested in [School Name] Fencing

Dear Coach [Last Name],

My name is [Name], and I'm a [weapon] fencer graduating in [year] from [high school] in [city, state]. I train at [club name] under [coach name]. I'm writing to express my strong interest in the [school name] fencing program.

[One sentence about your top competitive results.] [One sentence about your academic profile.] [One sentence about why you're specifically interested in this school — be genuine and specific, not generic.]

I've attached my recruiting profile and included links to recent bout footage. I would welcome the opportunity to learn more about your program and discuss how I might contribute.

Thank you for your time. I look forward to hearing from you.

[Your Name] | [Phone] | [Email]

COACH'S TIP: Personalize every email. Coaches can tell when they've received a mass email. Mention something specific about their program: a recent team result, a specific aspect of the school that interests you, or a connection to the program. Generic emails get deleted. Specific emails get responses.

NCAA Rules You Need to Know

The NCAA has specific rules about recruiting communication, visits, and commitments. These rules change periodically, so always verify current regulations on the NCAA website. Here are the fundamentals as of this writing.

Communication Rules

NCAA rules govern when and how coaches can initiate contact with recruits. However, there are generally no restrictions on when a recruit or their family can contact a coach. You can email a coach at any time. The restrictions are on the coach's ability to respond or initiate contact, which varies by division and changes periodically.

Official and Unofficial Visits

Unofficial Visit: A campus visit that you arrange and pay for yourself. You can take unlimited unofficial visits at any time. These are valuable for getting to know the campus, meeting the coaching staff, and seeing the fencing facilities. Schedule these through the admissions office and separately through the fencing coach.

Official Visit: A campus visit arranged and paid for by the school (travel, meals, housing). The number of official visits a recruit can take is limited by NCAA rules. Official visits typically happen in 12th grade and signal serious mutual interest between the recruit and the program.

Ivy League Specifics

Ivy League schools do not offer athletic scholarships. However, they provide need-based financial aid, and fencing coaches have significant influence in the admissions process through a system called the Academic Index and the coaches' "likely letter" or support list. If an Ivy League coach supports your application, your admissions odds improve dramatically — but your academic profile must still meet the school's standards.

The Verbal Commitment

A verbal commitment is a non-binding agreement between a recruit and a program. It means the coach will support your application and hold a roster spot for you, and you agree to attend that school. Verbal commitments are not legally binding — either side can back out — but breaking a verbal commitment damages relationships and reputation in the small fencing community.

IMPORTANT: NCAA rules change frequently. Before acting on any specific rule mentioned here, verify current regulations at ncaa.org or with your high school guidance counselor. This guide provides a framework, not legal advice.

Navigating the Process: Practical Tips

For Parents

- Support, don't drive. The fencer should own this process. Help with logistics, proofreading, and scheduling, but let your fencer write the emails and make the calls.
- Stay organized. Create a spreadsheet tracking every school, coach name, email, communication history, visit dates, and deadlines.
- Manage expectations. Not every fencer will be recruited at a D-I program. A D-III program at an excellent academic school can be an even better opportunity.
- Ask about financial aid early. Understand the difference between athletic scholarships (D-I), need-based aid (Ivy League), and merit aid (many D-III schools).
- Don't badmouth other programs or coaches. The fencing world is small. Everyone talks to everyone.
- Trust the coach's assessment. If a coach says your fencer isn't at the level they need, thank them and move on. Don't argue.

For Fencers

- Be genuine in every interaction. Coaches value authenticity over polish.
- Do your homework on each school. Know the program's recent results, the coaching staff's names, and something specific about why you want to be there.
- Respond to emails within 24 hours. Coaches notice responsiveness.
- Send updates after strong tournament performances. A brief email with results and a thank-you keeps you on the coach's radar.
- Be honest about your interest level. If a school is your top choice, say so. If you're exploring options, say that too. Don't lead coaches on.
- Maintain your grades. A dropped GPA can kill a recruiting opportunity overnight.

Red Flags to Watch For

- A coach who pressures you to commit before you're ready. Good programs don't rush recruits.
- A program with very high turnover (many fencers leaving or transferring). This may indicate coaching or culture issues.
- Promises that seem too good to be true. Verbal promises are not guaranteed. Get everything important in writing from the admissions office, not just the coach.
- A coach who discourages you from visiting other programs. You should always explore your options.



A Note About the Bigger Picture

College fencing is a wonderful opportunity, but it's not the only path. Some of the best fencers I've coached chose schools without fencing programs because the academic fit was better. Some fenced club in college and loved it. Some stopped fencing entirely and came back to the sport later in life.

The goal is not to get recruited at any cost. The goal is to find the right school for your student – academically, socially, and athletically. If fencing can be part of that equation, this guide helps you navigate the process. But never choose a school solely because of fencing. Choose a school where your student will thrive as a person, and let fencing be the bonus.

Start early. Stay organized. Be genuine. And trust the process.

– Coach Derek