

Let's face it; very few running careers pay the mortgage. Unlike our other sporting counterparts whose biggest concern is finding a tax haven to hide the excess cash, many of us will be heading to Centrelink applying for the appropriately named "Johnny Howard Track Sponsorship Program." The alternative option is to look abroad in search of an American college athletic scholarship to advance your career prospects as both an individual and as an athlete. JULIAN DWYER provides some tips for applying and some insight into what it is like being on scholarship at an American college.

US COLLEGE ATHLETICS SCHOLARSHIPS

THE perfect fit for young athletes is to study and train at the same time. This provides ample time for training and recovery without the rigors and demands of full time employment. With tertiary education spots becoming harder to get and the cost of Australian education becoming more and more expensive, American track and field scholarships are more popular than ever before.

For the average distance runner, there is a big gap or jump between the junior ranks and being competitive at a senior level. It has been called the "five-year apprenticeship", as the strength required to be a distance runner takes years to develop. The disillusionment of not being competitive immediately at senior ranks together with the common teenage enlightenments, such as being able to drink and drive (not to be done following each other of course), leads to the high drop out rates of potential stars in Australia and other countries around the world.

American college athletic scholarships provide a way of giving high school graduates the opportunity to continue to race against individuals of a similar age in an environment where running is the primary focus, but development and education are also key essentials.

Where to Start

The best place to start searching for an American College Athletic Scholarship is the Internet. The governing body of college athletics in the United States is the National Collegiate Athletic Association, better known as the NCAA. The NCAA has a web site that is set up to answer the many questions about the structure of the collegiate system. In particular, it tells you all about the colleges, universities,

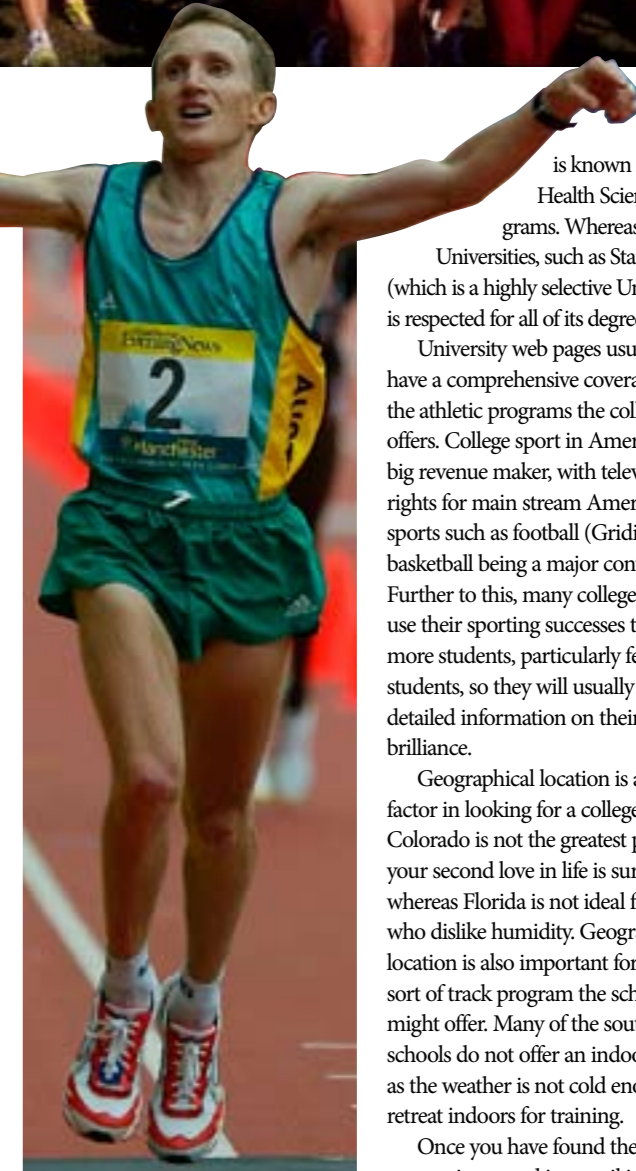


Far Left: The competition at the NCAA championships is world class. This page: Team competition is emphasised within the American college system. Getty Images

conferences and divisions that make up the NCAA.

Perhaps the biggest thing to understand about the American college system is that not all schools compete on the same playing field. Due to the large number of schools, and to make sports fairer, the NCAA introduced the 3-tier division system. There is a huge variation in the number of students in attendance and the amount of money received by individual colleges, which has a huge impact on the sports listed on their program and how competitive they are. In its basic form, Division 1 is the most competitive and preferred of the divisions, followed by Division 2 and Division 3. The NCAA provides recent results so you can attain some idea of the strength of each school straight from the organising body. You will not get a coach on the phone say to you, 'yes ,come and join us, we're crap.'

Your next move should be to look directly at the University's web site itself. Most University websites are loaded with information, and you should be able to find whether or not the University offers the course that you are interested in. Many of the American Universities are known for different areas of study. For example, Georgia State University has a world respected business school, whilst Emory University, just down the road,



Andrew Letherby, Commonwealth Games Bronze medallist, credits a lot of his success to his time at college in America. Getty Images

is known for its Health Science programs. Whereas other Universities, such as Stanford (which is a highly selective University), is respected for all of its degrees.

University web pages usually have a comprehensive coverage of the athletic programs the college offers. College sport in America is a big revenue maker, with television rights for main stream American sports such as football (Gridiron) and basketball being a major contributor. Further to this, many colleges will use their sporting successes to attract more students, particularly fee paying students, so they will usually provide detailed information on their sporting brilliance.

Geographical location is a major factor in looking for a college. Colorado is not the greatest place if your second love in life is surfing, whereas Florida is not ideal for those who dislike humidity. Geographical location is also important for what sort of track program the school might offer. Many of the southern schools do not offer an indoor season, as the weather is not cold enough to retreat indoors for training.

Once you have found the college you are interested in, email is usually the most common form of contact. The coach usually emails back and a potential phone call will ensue.

>> The common way that most Australians have been recruited to a US college is through other Australians currently on scholarship at that university. Butler University in Indianapolis and Georgia State University in Atlanta are active in having Australians on their scholarship programs, and these athletes will often pass on fellow Australians to the coach for consideration. Although recently, Layne Anderson from Iowa University was looking for prospective students at the Commonwealth Games trials in Sydney, so scouting is also not that uncommon.

Erica Sigmont has stepped up to another level since attending college in the USA. Getty Images



The standard of performance required for a scholarship changes from college to college. The weaker the college generally, the easier it is to get a scholarship. However, some of the academically acclaimed Universities require a higher academic standard, and their track and field program can sometimes suffer. The NCAA website is again the best place to begin, as it often shows previous results giving some idea of the standard expected.

More important than current performance is your own comfort with the coach. No matter how successful a university may be, it will not work for you if you and the coach do not get along. A disagreement with the coach is one of the main reasons that athletes either transfer while at college or return early to Australia. Once you have emailed your phone details to the coach, be clear on what you want to ask. The recruiting coach is very good at recruiting. Think the whole situation through and ask specific questions. Some good questions to get you started are;

- What part time work is available through the college?
- How much mileage is completed during season and out of season?
- Can you get emailed a copy of last year's schedule and the training program that accompanied it so that you can show your coach in Australia?

The Nuts & Bolts

If you have not already been enrolled in tertiary education, most colleges require prospective athletes to sit the S.A.T. examination. It is a general examination which gives you a score measurable with other examinees. The score required for

entry varies from school to school. This is the only formal external step in the recruiting process. Prospective athletes should not be put off by the examination, as remember you are applying for a running scholarship, not an academic one. However, those academically challenged should master the spelling of their names before attempting the exam!

The US college year starts in mid August. The cross-country season runs from August to November, the indoor season from January to March and the track and field season from April to June. Each season involves around 6 to 8 meets followed by the conference, district and national titles.

An athlete has 5 years of eligibility the moment they enrol in tertiary education. They can compete for four. Eligibility starts ticking no matter where the tertiary education institution is located. If you enrol in tertiary education in Australia and decide to defer straight away to work for a year, then the next year you apply for a scholarship, you will only

have three years of eligibility left. Most American degrees take four years to complete. The first year of study is a general year in which certain core subjects have to be completed. You then choose an area to major in. Since an athlete only has 5 years of eligibility, but 4 for competition, an athlete will generally miss one year throughout a degree. An athlete can choose when to put their eligibility on hold, whilst continuing to study. Missing a year, more often than not usually due to injury, is called "red shirting".

If injured, red-shirting works well as you don't waste any eligibility when you are unable to compete. Secondly, it takes the pressure off you having to compete, giving you the time to make a full recovery.

If you do not qualify for a Division 1 school, a junior college is a useful stepping-stone. Their rules are less stringent than Division 1 schools. The relationship between junior and NCAA Division 1 schools is similar to that of Universities and Technical College in Australia.

What to Expect

Many athletes go to a College in which another Australian has been, as they are able to gain a clear understanding of exactly what to expect. A full scholarship usually includes housing, tuition, books and food allowance. A small allowance for day-to-day activities is also usually included. However, most athletes also work part time for the University to enable them to get by comfortably. This is never too taxing and is usually a job in the University gymnasium.

One of the biggest attractions to a US scholarship is that cross country and track and field are essentially team sports. All decisions are made for the betterment of the team and not the individual. Rarely in an individual sport such as running does one get to enjoy the benefits of being part of a team. The team element is reflected in the NCAA rules. There are very few spots for individual qualifiers at the NCAA cross-country national championships. Over ninety percent of starters have qualified as a team.

At most colleges, athletes live on or nearby the University campus. You get roomed with another athlete. The team trains as much as possible as a team, usually meeting at the college track or at busses that take the team out to the training venue.

Most Universities have a room in which athletes can see the physical trainer (physiotherapist). This is a free service and includes such things as cold baths, which are popular for recovery. The University staff deal with injury problems, and most have great medical insurance that covers all surgical procedures, given that they are not considered to be pre-existing.

On the academic side of things, students are expected to attend classes and pass examinations. American colleges use a G.P.A. which stands for Grade Point Average and represents academic achievement. If an athlete's G.P.A. drops too far, the University can suspend them from training and competing with the team.

Some colleges also require athletes to attend a study hall. This is a hall in which students must complete a certain amount of supervised study a week. Again, failure to turn up to

study hall can lead to the University suspending an athlete from competing with the team.

Potential Pitfalls

Many of the potential pitfalls of attending College in America can be avoided by doing the proper research prior to leaving. The most common concern is that athletes who accept American scholarships become 'burnt out'. Practice shows, however, that the exact opposite is happening. Athletes are kicking on, and many of them going on to represent Australia. Shaun Creighton, former Australian Distance coach at Athletics Australia and Australian 10,000m record holder, believes US scholarships can be very beneficial to the athlete, however it is individualistic.

Over racing is one concern that many believe lead to an athlete burning out. The key is to understand that not every race is of importance. The whole season is geared towards the end of the season in which there is conference, district and national championships in that order. Earlier races are usually used as training sessions and solid hit outs. Coaches know that there are only so many good performances athletes are capable of each season, so therefore do not attach too much importance to earlier meetings.

Another concern is what happens if you dislike the experience. There are no contracts and at no stage are you bound to stay in America. However, one needs to take into consideration culture shock, so 'homesickness' etc is a normal thing that most colleges have the resources to deal with.

In choosing a course you should make sure it is professionally recognised back in Australia. Calling the

respective regulating body prior to accepting your scholarship should do this. For instance, the respective State Law institute, if you plan on studying law, or the Australian Medical Association if wanting to study medicine. In some instances students have been forced to complete further study in Australia in order to be able to practice in their chosen field.

Who said you can't go to college in America and then run for Australia

In years gone by, going to college in America was viewed as an alternative to striving to represent Australia. Maybe this was a reflection on the early retirement age of athletes in the past. Herb Elliot for instance retired from athletics at the age of twenty-two. Going to college in America and then going on to represent Australia is now a common stepping-stone. At this year's Commonwealth Games in Melbourne, Australian athletes who have studied in the US on scholarship included Andrew Letherby, Victoria Mitchell, and Erica Sigmont.

Andrew Letherby, who finished third in the marathon at the Manchester Commonwealth Games and who has also represented Australia at the World Championships and World Cross Country Championships, completed his degree at Georgia State University in sports physiology. Andy said that at the time he accepted this scholarship to Georgia State, he was having a difficult time trying to work, study and run all at the same time. His scholarship allowed

him to focus on his study and running, as the scholarship put him in a position in which he only had to work a couple of hours a week.

Andrew considers that exposure to quality competition in the USA, which did not exist in his native Queensland, has contributed significantly to his athletic achievements. He states that the exposure to this competition greatly improved his times and fostered a new level of dedication to the sport. The fact that his running was paying for his education and housing led to a new level of professionalism, which continues in his attitude to his running today.

Erica Sigmont is another athlete who has capitalized on her US scholarship. Erica has just finished a four year degree at Arkansas University. Arkansas is one of the most competitive cross-country and track and field schools in the US. Erica came back from the US a hardened competitor. This was reflected in the way she ran a personal best in the final of the 800 metre at the 2006 Commonwealth Games trials, qualifying her for the team.

One of the pioneers who helped change the attitude to Australians' accepting US scholarships was the great Peter Brett. Peter attended Fresno State University in California in the mid 1980s. Whilst at college he won such internationally renowned

events as the Stanford Invitation 10km. On returning from the US, Peter went on to win the Zatopek 10km in Melbourne and make numerous Australian track and field teams. Peter ran in seven World Cross Country Championships – a record bettered only by DeCastella and Moneghetti. He was one of the first to prove that you can come back from the US a better athlete than when you left.

Perhaps the biggest benefit of going to study in America is the experience itself. It is one way of using your talent, which is not available to the rest of society. It puts people together working for a common goal. It is the athletic version of Warhol's factory. While most teens and twenty something's experience the world through seedy back packers, athletes have the chance to experience other cultures doing what they love most, running.

Some Recommended Reading

Two books which are recommended for prospective US scholarship holders are *Once a Runner*, a novel, John L. Parker and *Running with the Buffaloes*, Chris Leah. Both books give insight into what it is like being a college athlete and a clearer understanding of what to expect.



Victoria Mitchell (#93) has also been a success beneficiary of the competition level provided by a scholarship at a US college.

Useful Websites & Email Addresses:

- ★ National Collegiate Athletics Association www.ncaa.org
- ★ John Rowland, Head Coach, Georgia State University athjwr@langate.gsu.edu
- ★ Joe Franklin, Head Coach, Butler University jbfrank@butler.edu
- ★ Layne Anderson, Head Coach, Iowa University layne-anderson@iowacrosscountry.com
- ★ Tony Houchin, Head Women's Cross Country Coach, University of Nevada anthony.houchin@unlv.edu