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In Recruiting, a Big Push From Small Colleges, Too

By BILL PENNINGTON

The players, a jumpy group of 16- and 17-year-old boys from around the country, arrived at the **Headfirst Baseball Honor Roll Camp** last month in Richmond, Va., with statistics that stood out. It was not just their batting averages. These were players who scored, on average, 1,300 out of a possible 1,600 on the two-part College Board exam.

Most of the 165 players were A-minus students, and all wore identical white T-shirts, with only numbers stenciled on their backs to tell them apart.

The campers tolerated the cattle-call atmosphere at the Virginia Sports Complex just north of Richmond because of the potential payoff: 30 college coaches, many representing elite liberal arts colleges and Ivy League universities, were scouting players. Among them was Dave Beccaria of Haverford College, a small liberal arts college outside Philadelphia that is one of the most selective in the country and which has agreed to give The New York Times access to its recruiting process through the academic year. Beccaria has been in touch with more than 1,000 high school players since the beginning of the year, most of them juniors when the process started. He initiated contact with many, but others sent e-mail messages to him, some sent professionally made videos showing them in action and a few hired recruiting services to promote them. Almost all joined the summer-long tour of showcase camps like the one in Virginia.

By the time the recruiting cycle is complete, Beccaria figures six to eight of those players will join his team at Haverford, a college that competes in Division III, requires Ivy League-caliber academic scores and does not offer athletic scholarships.

As the competition for admission to highly rated colleges like Haverford continues to escalate, the playing fields of America are becoming an even bigger part of that process. High school students and their parents are looking for any edge, and an athletic résumé is seen as the extra ingredient that can get a student's name on the precious list that the athletic department gives to its admissions office each year.

That list can include as few as a dozen names in one sport, with perhaps half expected to be admitted, although there are no guarantees. Still, with select institutions routinely rejecting 7 of 10 applicants over all, parents and their children relish the odds given "listed" athletes.

For coaches, the key is deciding whose names to write on the list. Haverford is typical of the top-tier liberal arts colleges, academically and athletically. The college ranked eighth in the liberal arts category of the most recent U.S. News and World Report rankings; nearly 40 percent of students play a varsity sport; and its athletic director, Greg Kannerstein, said that athletics played some role in the admission of about 15 percent of each recent incoming class.

"Years ago, I would go to lunch with someone from admissions with a bunch of names on the back of an envelope," said Kannerstein, who has been at Haverford for 30 years and served as acting dean of admissions last year. "We would look at a few applicants' folders and pretty soon we'd have a team. It's a different world now."

Prospecting Via E-Mail

Flipping through a binder prepared for coaches at the **Headfirst Honor Roll Camp** - the 18th recruiting event Beccaria visited this summer - he examined the grades and test scores of each player. He immediately crossed off about 120 players, or 70 percent, saying that their test scores or grades were too low. For the next two days, with a

roster that matched names to T-shirt numbers, Beccaria followed the progress of the other 45 players, paying careful attention to the 8 to 10 he had seen at previous showcases.

Some of these players Beccaria had known of for more than a year because they had sent e-mail messages to him as juniors in high school. It is a common practice that many coaches appreciate.

"You want someone to show the initiative," Beccaria said. Or, as Georgetown University's baseball coach, Pete Wilk, said in an address to parents and campers at the close of the **Headfirst** camp: "Parents, I'm pretty sure your college eligibility is over. So let me hear from your son; he's the one who might play for me."

Beccaria's e-mail messages from potential applicants often included a schedule of the showcases the player planned to attend. This is important information because Beccaria and his coaching colleagues rarely scout individual high school games. The image of a weary, grizzled coach driving from one dusty high school ballpark to another is a nostalgic artifact.

At the dozens of highly orchestrated showcases around the country, coaches can see 150 to 200 players in a day and analyze them in an environment that resembles a professional audition. The players perform hours of skill drills: fielding dozens of ground balls, throwing to every base, catching, hitting, running and playing simulated games.

Another relic of college recruiting's past is the significance of a high school player's senior season. Beccaria and the other Haverford teams' coaches complete their serious evaluations by the summer after a player's junior season. This year, most of the Haverford coaches had identified their top 20 players by Aug. 15. With the push to get applications in for early decision on Nov. 15, or by the regular decision deadline of Jan. 15, an athlete's senior season can be almost irrelevant.

When Beccaria, who led Haverford to 25 victories last season and to its first victory in the postseason, watched prospects this summer, he was continually winnowing his list. But he knew he did not need to make it too short. Coaches from other colleges would do that for him. Even at the small-college level, it is hard to hide a prospect, and the most promising are often looking at Ivy League universities and other elite colleges that offer grants as enticements.

At the Headfirst camp, there was a moment in a simulated game when one of the players Beccaria was interested in, the sidearm pitcher Clay Bartlett of Washington, was facing another Beccaria prospect, outfielder Ben Sestanovich, also of Washington. It figured to be a good match up because Sestanovich laced a crisp single in an earlier at-bat against another pitcher.

Beccaria leaned forward in his chair as the at-bat began, aiming a radar gun in his left hand. Aligned in rows of chairs alongside Beccaria, seated like jurors, were 11 other coaches.

When Bartlett struck out Sestanovich with a hard, tailing slider on the outside corner to finish two scoreless innings of relief pitching, Beccaria was impressed, though he made sure he did nothing to show it. Without looking, he also knew that the coaches to his left and right, including those from Columbia and Cornell of the Division I Ivy League, were busy taking notes on Bartlett's unusual delivery and commanding presence.

Beccaria stood and, with a wry smile, walked to another field to watch another player. He would keep Bartlett and Sestanovich on his list.

"There's a long way to go," he said.