

Compete

A Guide for College-Bound Basketball Players

- Earn an Athletic Scholarship
- Be Smart
- Get and Stay Eligible
- Maximize Opportunity
- Avoid Danger

NCAA rules translated into plain English!

Marc Isenberg and Rick Rhoads

An A-Game Guide

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Compete: A Guide for College-Bound Basketball Players

Published by A-Game, LLC

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About the authors

Marc Isenberg and Rick Rhoads have teamed up since 1994 to write about issues confronting athletes. They are co-authors of *The Student-Athlete Survival Guide*. Marc wrote, and Rick edited, *Money Players: A Guide to Success in Sports, Business & Life for Current and Future Pro Athletes*. Marc writes a monthly column for *Basketball Times* and blogs at moneyplayersblog.com. He is a frequent speaker to professional teams and college athletic programs.

Dedication

Dedicated to the late Coach John Wooden, the greatest coach who has ever lived. He taught us a lot about basketball, but even more about life.

“Success is peace of mind...knowing you made the effort to do your best to become the best that you are capable of becoming.”

—Coach John Wooden (1910–2010)

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We don't make the rules

Compete is based on interviews with knowledgeable high school and college experts and others familiar with NCAA rules. We've also carefully studied NCAA rules and regulations. But the NCAA rulebook is 100 times as thick as *Compete* (we measured!), and 1,000 times less readable. And the rules change every year. If you need to clarify a point, please check with the NCAA, the Eligibility Center (formerly the NCAA Clearinghouse), or with one or more of the many knowledgeable experts serving student-athletes.

Message from Len Elmore

It has often been said that, “Information is power.” The iHoops mission, in large part, is to provide high school student-athletes tools of empowerment that enable them to take control and responsibility of their futures.

Compete contains information that is essential in assisting college-bound student-athletes as they make critical decisions that affect their educational and athletic futures. Moreover, *Compete* serves as a useful tool for parents, guardians, coaches and others who provide guidance to student-athletes.

Compete is a straightforward and easily comprehensible resource that will appeal to readers seeking the facts that will enhance the future of student-athletes as they embark upon their college basketball journeys. Marc Isenberg and Rick Rhoads have captured the information necessary for high school athletes to make meaningful and informed choices that may have a lasting impact on their futures.

The iHoops staff applauds the authors for their willingness to provide this assistance. In our efforts to improve the game, enhance the basketball experience on the pre-collegiate level, and convey messages of opportunity and the benefits of a college education to young basketball players, iHoops understands the value that *Compete* represents. As a high school student-athlete, you can benefit enormously from the information on recruiting and eligibility which, in turn, will help you “compete” successfully in the classroom and in basketball.

As CEO of iHoops, a former college basketball student-athlete and as a college basketball TV network analyst, I know what is required for student-athlete success: understand expectations, know the rules and be prepared.

Compete offers an assist in those areas. Read it as if your future depends upon it.

Len Elmore, CEO
iHoops

Message from Marc Isenberg

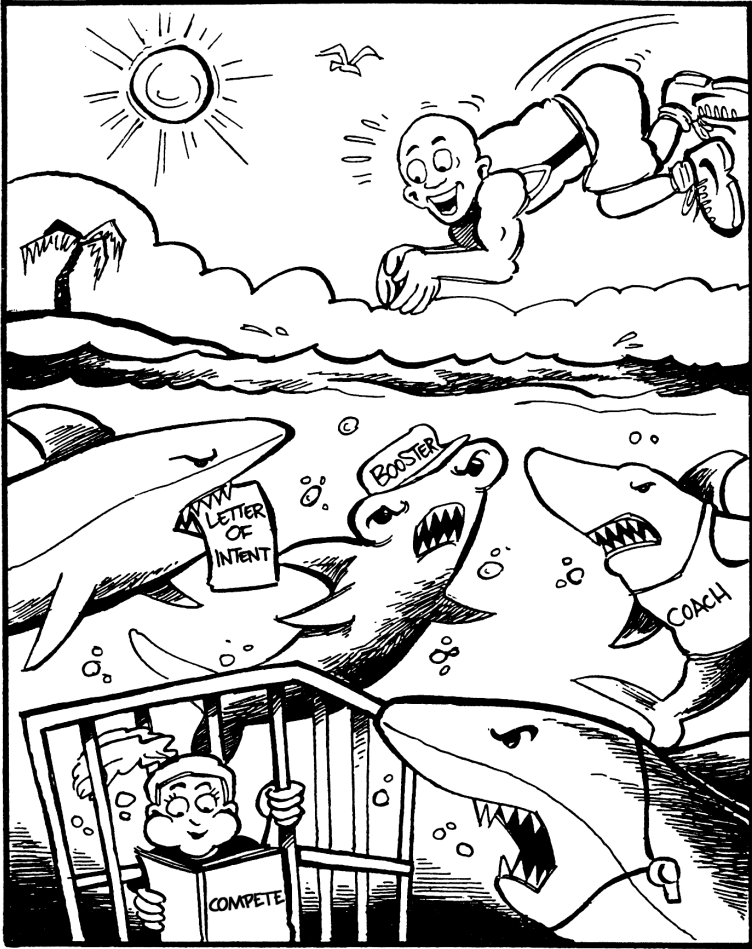
We wrote *Compete* to help athletes improve their lives in all phases, not just basketball.

It's written for male and female high-school-age basketball players who have the ability to play at the collegiate level—and maybe even beyond. We want to help you master the recruiting process, so that you end up with an athletic scholarship at the college that is right for you.

The title of this booklet is *Compete*. Most people are competitive, but only in things they are good at. True competitors compete, when necessary, beyond their areas of natural strength, which is harder. This booklet has a lot of information that may not catch your interest. NCAA rules can be complicated and sometimes hard to even comprehend. Nevertheless, if you want to maximize your chances to have a successful college basketball career and a useful academic career, you need to learn about recruiting, scholarships, eligibility, agents, “extra benefits” and several other subjects.

Our goal in writing *Compete* is to tilt the odds in your favor by giving you information that you need to achieve your goals. There is no guarantee that you will succeed. This booklet won't work unless you do!

LeBron James said: “Use the game of basketball as a vehicle to get to where you want to be in life. Use it, don't let it use you.” Take James' approach to heart, make it your own, act on it—and you will do well.



SHARK PROTECTION FOR ATHLETES

1

THE GAME OF YOUR LIFE

“I am not a businessman. I am business, man.”

—Jay-Z lyric

What is this booklet?

Compete gives you easy-to-understand, basic information about a sometimes complicated process: getting into the right college/basketball program for you and achieving athletic and academic success there.

Beyond explaining NCAA rules for eligibility, we want student-athletes to make the connection between the rules and why they should follow them. We also want student-athletes to become more aware about the dangers and ways to protect themselves from any sharks who may infest their waters.

Athletes have succeeded—and failed—in college without this booklet. But the business (and it *is* a business!) of recruiting gets more complex and competitive by the year. What you don’t know can cost you. Dearly.

Who is *Compete* for?

This booklet is intended for

- Male and female basketball players currently in high school who are interested in playing college basketball, either NCAA Division I, II or III, NAIA or community college.
- Those who are highly-sought after by recruiters, and those who fly below the recruiters' radar.

Who are we?

We are not the NCAA. We greatly respect college athletics, but we do not overlook the fundamental problems created by the big business of college basketball. To the credit of iHoops and its partners, the NCAA, NBA and others are part of a growing movement to address these problems squarely.

We are advocates for athletes. We stand up for what we believe—based on fact and reason—to be fair. Sometimes we agree with the NCAA, sometimes we don't. We are, however, united in the pursuit of improving basketball and making the environment better for those who play the game.

***Compete* vs. NCAA Guide**

Much of the material we cover in this booklet is contained in the 21-page *2009-2010 Guide for the College-Bound Student-Athlete*, published by the NCAA. You can download it free at www.ncaa.org or iHoops.com/classroom/eligibility.

Why should you read *Compete* as well? Because our only concern is what's best for you as a student and an athlete, and we talk about the challenges you face only from that point of view. And because we write in easily understood English, reading this booklet will make it easier for you to understand the NCAA rules.

More important, we show you why it is in your interest to be so far from violating the eligibility requirements and so far above the minimum academic requirements, that you won't have to be anxious about the details of the sometimes complicated rules.

Be smart—and read both booklets.



IT'S A GOOD THING YOU
HAVE AN EDUCATION TO
FALL BACK ON!

X-RAY
CAREER
ENDING
INJURY

COLLEGE PLAYER
OF THE YEAR
--- THE NEXT
MICHAEL

BASKETBALL PRINCIPLES **B**
BASKET WEAVING **C**
ENGLISH 101 **F**
MATH 101 **F**

2

WHY COLLEGE IS CRITICAL TO YOUR LIFE

*“Look, if you had one shot, or one opportunity/To seize everything you ever
wanted/One moment/Would you capture it or just let it slip?”*

—Eminem lyric

No doubt you’ve been inundated with the message that college is critically important to your future success. What is so significant about that piece of paper called a college diploma? It tells the world that you have mastered a body of knowledge and skills that are valued in the marketplace; it gives you the ability to access an alumni network and, hopefully, lifelong friends that you have made during your college years. A meaningful college degree can transform your life.

College graduates earn more

According to the United States Census Bureau, the average lifetime earnings of a high school graduate is \$1.2 million; for a college graduate it’s \$2.1 million. Far more important: It’s not how much money you make, but how much you save and, ultimately, how much happiness and fulfillment your career brings you. These long-term good things come

to people who have learned to delay gratification, and earning a college degree provides invaluable experience in that department. A college degree matters.

The true value of your scholarship

We can talk about the value of an education; we can quote statistics. In the final analysis, all that matters is the quality of *your* education and the value it has in the marketplace. Ask yourself, “Why do I want an athletic scholarship?” Obviously, it sounds like a great deal compared to having to pay tens of thousands of dollars for college or graduating with loans that you’ll have to repay for years. But smart athletes back up and take a longer look. They ask, “Why do I want to go to college in the first place?” The answer for most smart athletes includes graduating with a meaningful degree, marketable skills and a network of friends and associates.

That’s not as obvious as it may sound. When former NBA player Elden Campbell was asked if he had earned a college degree, he replied, “No, but they gave me one anyway.” For elite athletes, there is a long history of “majoring in eligibility.” And now that the NCAA has made low graduation rates punishable by cutting athletic scholarships, there is additional pressure on athletic departments and coaches to make sure players get a degree—meaningful, marketable or otherwise.

Success leads to more success

Why worry about any of this now, while you are still in high school? Because academic success in high school is the best predictor of academic success in college. This makes sense to anyone who plays basketball: to do well you have to master the fundamentals. In this case the fundamentals are reading, writing, math, study skills and time management. Another underrated but important skill: learning to defer gratification.

Unfortunately, athletes can be offered easy ways to get by academically so that they remain eligible to play. Even when this is done by well-intentioned people who want to help the athlete and the team, it starts the athlete on the path to being unprepared for success in college. As a teenager it’s tough to turn down such “help” when it’s offered. We suggest you be smart and do just that.

Hoop madness

Basketball is an awesome game, but an often dysfunctional business. Sometimes it's difficult to reconcile. As a teenager it would be much easier if you could just focus on hoops and books, rather than on complex rules about recruitment, eligibility and behavior off the court. Nevertheless, this booklet goes into detail about why it's smart to protect your eligibility by following the NCAA rules, regardless of what motivates them or whether you agree with them.

OK, so your goal is to earn a college scholarship, maximize your college experience in the areas of basketball, academics and social life, leave with a meaningful degree, and go on to success after college...whether it's playing professional basketball or getting a job in another profession.

You need an education. Period

Perhaps you're thinking that your main reason for going to college is to get to the NBA or WNBA, and you're going to leave early anyway, so the question of a degree is irrelevant. You often hear this question answered, "You can't be sure you'll become a pro, so you better have a college degree to fall back on." True, but if you **do** become a professional athlete, you need an education to deal effectively with the business aspects of life and to protect yourself from the questionable characters that flock to money. Even more than the subject matter of college courses, you need the skills of study and analysis developed by doing college-level work.

3

PREPARING FOR COLLEGE SUCCESS —ON AND OFF THE COURT

*“Don’t go around saying the world owes you a living.
The world owes you nothing. It was here first.”*
—Mark Twain

The information in this chapter can help you compete on a more equal footing with recruiters, and will undoubtedly move you ahead of students with similar basketball ability but who are not taking a businesslike approach to recruitment.

Bookstores and libraries are filled with self-help books about how to be motivated, work harder and smarter, and how to succeed in college. They are many useful books on these topics.

Here’s our short guide to college success, delivered Twitter-style:

- Don’t look for the minimum, in the classroom or on the court
- Develop a strong work ethic and a positive attitude (yes, people will notice)
- Work to improve your writing and communication skills...everyday

- Spend at least one hour per day reading for enjoyment, even if it cuts into time allotted to video games
- Set goals, develop plans to reach them, then go to work pursuing them
- Work on fundamentals without coaches' orders and study even when no assignment is due the next day
- Compete at everything you do, not just things you are good at
- Play to win, but not at all costs
- Don't cheat even if you know you won't get caught
- Know right from wrong—and consistently do right

Earning an athletic scholarship is competitive, like basketball

A lot of high school basketball players want to go to college on an athletic scholarship (and even more parents of high school students want their son or daughter to get one). A smaller number of players have a realistic chance of getting one. An even smaller number actually get one.

The numbers game in NCAA basketball

This table shows the number of athletic scholarships available to basketball players.

Men's basketball

Division I: 335 teams x 13 scholarships per team = 4,355 full scholarships

Division II: 291 teams x 10 scholarships per team = 2,910 full scholarships

Division III: 415 teams, no scholarships, need-based financial aid

Total available men's scholarships: 7,265

Assuming players average four years in college, there are approximately 1,800 scholarships available per year for male basketball players.

Women's basketball

Division I: 334 teams x 15 scholarships = 5,010

Division II: 291 teams x 10 scholarships = 2,910

Division III: 438 teams, no scholarships, need-based financial aid

Total available women's scholarships: 7,920

Again, assuming players average four years in college, there are approximately 1,980 scholarships available per year for female basketball players.

According to the NCAA, there are 553,000 male high school basketball players and 450,000 female basketball players. Assuming that one quarter of them graduate each year, 1.3% of male players and 1.8% of female players will get an athletic scholarship. (Of course, if you are a starting player on a strong high school team, especially if you are ranked by a reputable scouting service, you are part of a pool of players with a significantly better shot at an athletic scholarship.)

Earning an athletic scholarship is highly competitive, like basketball. How do you win the game?

The first step toward success is to know what game you're in. Recruiting players is a business. Many coaches are fine people and great educators. Nevertheless, the harsh rule of college basketball—especially in big-time Division I programs— is win or get fired. “You can’t win without the horses” is a common saying in basketball. In thoroughbred racing, no matter how great a trainer or jockey may be, he or she can’t win without a horse with innate speed, power, stamina and heart. The same is true in basketball.

A coach’s job is to recruit the athletes who will most help his/her program. A coach may not be thinking about what college/program will be best for you, the athlete. Therefore it is your job, with the help of your parents and trusted advisors, to become an educated consumer and make the most informed decision.

Big plus: strong academics and character

The first thing coaches look for in a prospect is the ability to play basketball (talent, skill, size, strength, speed, conditioning, basketball IQ and so on). So what’s the second thing? Any problem that might prevent a recruit from using his or her athletic ability for the good of the coach’s team. Those problems come in two flavors: academic and character.

Tie goes to the stronger student

Athletes who get good grades in high school will probably do reasonably well on college entrance exams, and are likely to continue to get good grades in college. (In fact, good high school grades are, according to the NCAA, the “single best predictor” of academic success in college.) This means that if you get good grades, you are more likely to be admitted to the college you want to attend and to stay academically eligible to play your sport. Coaches like that. To put it another way, they

don't like worrying about wasting a scholarship on an athlete who will be unable to play because of low grades. Given a choice between two athletes of roughly equal ability, they will award an athletic scholarship to the better student.

Character does count

Read the sports section for a week or two and you will probably find at least one article about a pro, college, or even high school athlete who has behaved in a way that has ended or hurt his or her career. If a coach believes a prospect is involved in cheating, excessive partying, getting drunk, using drugs, engaging in criminal activity or sexual abuse, he's going to think, this guy could end up off the team because he has been suspended by the school or by the NCAA, or he's in jail. There are plenty of other fine athletes with better character and grades." On the other end of the spectrum, if the coach hears that an athlete tutors other students, volunteers to feed the homeless, or helped raise money for victims of an earthquake, he may think, this guy is so far away from self-destructive behavior that he's a good candidate for a scholarship.

So, to be awarded an athletic scholarship—and to have the best chance to attend (and flourish at) the college of your choice—here's what to work on in high school (and before):

1. Be the best athlete you can be.
2. Be the best student you can be.
3. Be the best person you can be.
4. Know and follow NCAA rules.

The next two chapters are mainly about NCAA rules. Ah, NCAA rules. Definitely not the most scintillating topic, but this stuff is critically important to your future. What you don't know can hurt you.

4

UNDERSTANDING THE NCAA AND ITS RULES

“Be more concerned with your character than your reputation, because your character is what you really are, while your reputation is what others think you are.

—John Wooden

It’s critical to know and follow NCAA rules. Why? Because not following them can result in loss of eligibility. Without eligibility, you cannot play at, or get an athletic scholarship from an NCAA institution.

We hope, so far, you have found this booklet at least mildly entertaining as well as informative. Now comes the more complicated stuff: the business of recruiting, the NCAA, scholarships and financial aid.

What is the NCAA?

The NCAA is the National Collegiate Athletic Association, the governing body of college sports. NCAA rules govern 23 sports, with over 400,000 student-athletes, at the Association’s more than 1,200 “member institutions” (colleges and universities).

The NCAA coined the term “student-athlete” to convey the idea that athletes are in college to get an education. You are a student first, athlete

second. At least theoretically. In practice, you are whoever you want to be. You want shortcuts, they are easy to find. You want to do things the right way, the paths exist.

According to the *NCAA Division I Manual*: “Eligibility requirements shall be designed to assure proper emphasis on educational objectives, to promote competitive equity among institutions and to prevent exploitation of student-athletes.” Student-athletes are, therefore, amateurs who play “for the love of the game,” as opposed to professional athletes, who play for money and no doubt love the game at least as much. Many of the NCAA’s rules are designed to somehow differentiate between amateurs (eligible to play NCAA sports) and professionals (not eligible).

The *NCAA Manual* is 419 pages full of rules stipulating what members (including coaches, athletic administrators, representatives and tutors) and student-athletes can and cannot do. Unfortunately, some NCAA rules, even after deciphering their complex phraseology, are unclear and subject to wide interpretation. This puts the onus on student-athletes and families to have a working knowledge of the rules even before they enter college.

Even if a particular rule appears to be clear, it may be open to interpretation. For example, for the Extra Benefit Rule, the NCAA provides four general guidelines on extra benefits without precisely defining them. The solution is simple: If you don’t want to jeopardize your NCAA eligibility, don’t put yourself in a position where your actions might be open to interpretation.

Protect your eligibility

NCAA rules are critically important to high school athletes. If it comes out that you violated the NCAA’s rules on amateurism at any age, you can lose your college eligibility. If you want to play basketball at an NCAA institution, you and your family are affected by NCAA rules long before you arrive on campus. Your goal is to be eligible to compete in college. The last thing you ever want to face are questions about your possible associations with boosters, agents and even financial advisors.

Here is a short, plain-English summary of the NCAA rules regarding agents, amateurism and eligibility. “Don’t’s” 2 through 4 involve interactions with sports agents. The first “don’t” is about “extra benefits,” which are benefits provided to student-athletes that are not available to general

students, but might be offered to athletes based on his or her athletic ability or notoriety. Among other things, money, shoes, cars or dinners provided by individuals (college coaches and boosters, for example) tend to be considered extra benefits; athletic scholarships, uniforms, training meals and, when provided by the school, game tickets for family members are benefits that are not considered “extra.”

Five Don'ts and One Do

1. **Don't** take money or other benefits (including free transportation) from an agent (or anyone else who is giving them to you because you are an athlete), and tell everyone else in your family not to take them either.
2. **Don't** agree to be represented by an agent, either orally or in writing.
3. Don't allow an agent to act as a representative on your behalf, either formally or informally.
4. **Don't** sign with a professional sports team or play on a team that compensates players, even if you play for free.
5. **Don't** accept any payment based on your—or your team's—performance (Individual sport athletes are allowed to accept prize money to cover necessary expenses. Make sure you clear this with your compliance department and/or the NCAA before you cash any checks!)
6. **Do** get advice about your professional prospects from a reputable agent, lawyer or anyone else who is qualified. Beware, however, of anything that even *looks* like representation by an agent.

According to the NCAA, “If you receive assistance from an advisor, you must compensate the advisor in an amount equal to the value of the services he or she provides you...without jeopardizing your eligibility, regardless of whether the advisor does not typically charge clients for such services.”

What is an athletic scholarship?

Unlike many other forms of financial aid, athletic scholarships are equally available regardless of your family's income level or wealth. In NCAA men's and women's basketball, all athletic scholarships are full scholarships. However, even a full athletic scholarship, known as a “full ride,” does not cover every expense of a college student.

NCAA schools are divided into three divisions. Divisions I and II award athletic scholarships. Division III does not.

The NCAA permits an athletic scholarship to cover:

- Tuition
- Fees
- Room and board
- Required textbooks

No athletic scholarship covers other expenses, such as

- Computer and computer supplies
- Pens, pencils, organizers, datebooks
- Transportation to and from school
- “Incidentals” such as laundry, snacks, clothes, entertainment, phone, room decoration
- Car and gas, insurance, parking, maintenance

For Division I athletes who can demonstrate need, some of those expenses can be met from the NCAA Special Assistance Fund.

Athletic scholarships are awarded one year at a time, and, according to the *NCAA Manual*, “may be renewed each year for a maximum of five years within a six-year period.” If you become ineligible to compete, for whatever reason, your scholarship likely will not be renewed. It may also not be renewed if you don’t perform well on the court, although that is almost never stated as the reason for nonrenewal.

The best way to increase the likelihood that your scholarship is renewed is fairly simple: Get good grades, be a model citizen and contribute to your team’s success. You cannot always control how you perform in the classroom and on the basketball court but you absolutely can control your effort, behavior and attitude. Don’t give coaches and athletic directors a good excuse to not renew your scholarship.

Pell Grants

In the academic year 2010–2011, the Federal Pell Grant Program will pay college students as much as \$5,500, depending on financial need. If you receive an athletic scholarship, a Pell Grant is a great financial supplement. Unlike most other forms of financial aid, they are not “offset” against athletic scholarships. That means the college does not

subtract the Pell Grant from your grant-in-aid. A Pell Grant can go a long way toward paying for the costs not covered by even a full athletic scholarship.

Take the right courses

To be eligible to compete in Division I athletics, you must successfully complete at least 16 “core courses” in high school. For Division II, you must complete 14 core courses.

Core courses must be academic, college-preparatory courses, such as English and math, but not every academic course is automatically a core course. Detailed information about core courses, including how many courses you must complete in particular subjects, is in the *NCAA Guide for the College-Bound Student-Athlete*. Your high school guidance counselor can also help you plan how to meet the requirements.

Most high schools with athletic programs list their core courses on a Form 48H filed with the NCAA Eligibility Center. To find your school’s list, go to iHoops.com/classroom/eligibility, then click on “NCAA Eligibility Center web site.”

To be eligible to participate in Division I, you must earn a “minimum required grade point average” in the 16 core courses. To be eligible to participate in Division II, you must earn 2.0 in the 14 core courses. As your grade-point average moves up, your minimum required college-entrance exam score (SAT or ACT) for Division I eligibility goes down. The *NCAA Guide* has a chart with the details. Of course, you also increase your chances of being admitted to the college of your choice by having an average in the 3.0–4.0 range (“B” to “A”).

The road to competition goes through the NCAA Eligibility Center

If you want to compete at an NCAA Division I or II institution, you must be “certified” by the NCAA Eligibility Center (www.eligibility-center.org) as an academically qualified amateur athlete. Register with the NCAA Eligibility Center immediately after your junior year to make sure you are on track to complete the necessary 16 core classes. Potential problem: According to a recruiting coordinator at an NCAA institution, many high schools have not updated their list of core courses, which can cause problems if not identified early.

“I swear I have never sinned”

When you file with the Eligibility Center you must sign something called a “10.1 statement.” This document essentially states that you have never done anything that violates an NCAA rule.

Of course, everyone signs this statement and has it notarized, even though nobody has read through all the NCAA rules and few can know for sure that they’ve never violated an NCAA rule.

So what’s the problem? For most athletes, there won’t be one. But there is a potential time bomb. The Uniform Athlete Agent Act (UAAA), which has been passed by 39 states (and the District of Columbia and the U.S. Virgin Islands), is designed to protect both the university and student-athletes from unscrupulous agents. The following states have no agent or UAAA laws: Alaska, Colorado, Maine, Massachusetts, Montana, New Jersey, New Mexico, Vermont and Virginia.

It’s important that you understand the potential consequences of violating these laws. 35 states and DC allow educational institutions to seek financial damages from former student athlete who violated the UAAA. The UAAA usually says something like: “An educational institution may bring a cause of action against an athlete agent or a former student athlete for damages caused by a violation of this article.”

What college should you attend?

Figuring out what college will be best for you *is* complicated. Of course you want a basketball program that’s a good fit for your skills and goals, and of course the coach is a key part of that. Nevertheless, do you know what most athletes and coaches told us when we asked them, “What advice about selecting a college would you give to your athlete son or daughter?” They said, “Pick a school you would like even if there were no sports!”

Things can change quickly. The head coach or key recruiter could leave. You could be injured. Another player could take your spot. You might find yourself out of college athletics, look around and discover you hate the place. Even if things go well for you in the athletic program, why not get the most out of your years at college? Therefore, look for colleges that are a good fit for you athletically, academically and socially.

THE MAGIC CARPET RIDE OF RECRUITING





HOW TO PLAY THE RECRUITING GAME

*“Good, better, best. Never let it rest.
Until your good is better and your better is best.
—Tim Duncan*

For most high school basketball players and their parents, recruiting is all about dreams and emotions. For everyone else involved, it's *just* a business. Coaches and assistant coaches are paid to attract talented athletes to their programs. Some high school coaches, club coaches and others find ways to benefit from steering players to one college or another. Recruiting services claim to help athletes get athletic scholarships. Sometimes shoe companies with contracts with college teams play a subtle but important role in the recruiting process.

How can athletes and their parents compete on an uneven playing field against seasoned, experienced recruiters?

Step one is to take a businesslike approach:

1. Get your parents, guardians and trusted mentors involved. Talk over who will be responsible for what parts of the recruiting process, and how best to efficiently work together.

2. Make a careful analysis of your goals and the type of college and basketball program that will satisfy you: academically, athletically and socially.
3. Measure your athletic ability as objectively as possible, so that you work on being recruited by programs that fit your skills/talent/size/strength.
4. Try not to be swayed by trivial things. Tricked-out practice facilities, promises of first-rate accommodations and travel, television appearances, tons of great shoes and apparel all sound awesome, but, in truth, are far less important than quality coaching, team chemistry and academic opportunities.
5. Realize that although you do not have experience, you do have power. While there is no need to be arrogant, if a coach expresses an interest in you, you can be firm about requiring straightforward answers to your questions.

Hot prospect or barely noticed

Almost every high school basketball player who seeks an athletic scholarship has a problem with college recruiters. There are two basic types of problems:

1. Too much attention
2. Little or no attention

If you are a strong player on a strong high school team, recruiters will find you. Sometimes dozens of recruiters will find you. You could end up spending all your time fielding phone calls from recruiters, media and Internet and “fan” recruiting sites, reading emails and letters from recruiters, and so on. Your challenge will be to manage the recruitment process so that you:

1. Stay focused on improving as a student and basketball player
2. See through the hype and select the right college for you
3. Enjoy your senior year of high school

Manage your recruitment

There are many NCAA rules intended to curb recruiting abuses and to protect high school athletes. It's easy to get caught up in all the recruiting madness. But there's a proper balance between useful interaction and wasting your time. With the help of your parents or guardians, consider setting reasonable limits on when you'll talk to recruiters and media.

For example, only Tuesday and Thursday, 7–9 p.m. You can also limit whom you want to talk to, what you want to talk about, and for how long. Time is a valuable commodity. Repeat: *Time is a valuable commodity*. There's nothing wrong with politely telling a coach or assistant coach that you are considering their school, but you do not want calls from anyone who just wants to chat about how well you did in your last game.

Don't be afraid to ask tough questions—and demand answers. Your future is at stake, so it's worth the effort. No matter how legendary the coach, he or she can't win without athletes, and this coach is trying to recruit you.

How to play the recruiting game (for athletes who need to attract attention from recruiters)

The “market” that matches basketball programs and basketball players is somewhat efficient, but far from perfect. Programs spend a lot of money to see players perform at camps and in high school games and tournaments, and in communicating with potential recruits through email, mail, phone and home visits, and in financing campus visits.

Most of this money, however, is spent by the strongest, best-known programs. There are dozens of other programs, including NCAA Divisions II and III and non-NCAA colleges, that are not as well-financed. You might be a perfect fit for one of these programs, but the program might not know you exist.

If coaches are not approaching you (or at least not coaches from colleges you want to attend), how do you get on their radar screens?

Step 1 is to identify college programs that might be a good fit for your skills, strength, height, weight and so on. You may already be aware of some. To enlarge the number of possibilities, you should:

1. Ask your high school coach for suggestions
2. Ask other coaches and other athletes
3. Read the sports sections of newspapers, which are often available free on the Internet, and those fan Web sites dedicated to covering specific college programs.



"LEAVE ME ALONE!"

Once you have identified a number of college basketball programs that are good fits for you, step 2 is to narrow down the list by eliminating colleges that don't fit you academically, socially or geographically.

Get the names and addresses of the coaches and send them a cover letter with your resume, a schedule of your upcoming competitions and/or sports camps that you plan to attend, and, if applicable, a video of your performance (or tell them a video is available).

The summer before your junior year is an excellent time to start the search process, as it gives the coach plenty of time to schedule seeing you perform. The NCAA limits when and how frequently coaches can contact you, but there are no restrictions on you initiating contact with a coach. Just be appropriate—and don't pester them.

Recruiting services?

There are commercial services that will do everything listed above for you: identify programs, create your package (cover letter, resume, schedules, video), and send them out. Depending on exactly what they do, they typically charge from \$500 to \$2,000 or more. Many of these services say or imply that, because they have special contact with college coaches, you are more likely to get an athletic scholarship through their efforts than on your own.

Should you hire a recruiting service? Our “default position” is no, for several reasons:

1. Once a coach knows you exist, he or she will evaluate you based on your athletic ability, academic record, character and personality, not on any influence a recruiting firm claims to have
2. You can do everything, except perhaps the video, by yourself, with help from family and friends, and it will be good experience
3. If you have to pay for a video, you can probably hire a videographer to do it for a lot less than you would pay a recruiting service

Exception: If you feel that, for whatever reason, you just can't or won't put your package together on your own, and/or money is no object, a recruiting service might be helpful.

Campus visits

If you're considering attending a college, you'd like to see it up close. Watch a practice. Talk to the players. Maybe check out an academic department you are interested in, or get a feel for the town or city. You can do this in two ways: on your own or through what the NCAA refers to as an "official recruiting visit," paid for by the school. On an "unofficial visit," you are responsible for whatever travel costs, if any.

If you travel on your own dime, you can visit as many colleges as you want, as often as you want, whenever you want.

In an official visit, your transportation to and from the college is paid for by the college athletic department. NCAA rules governing official visits to Division I schools include the following:

1. A prospective student-athlete cannot be provided an expense paid visit until the start of their senior year in high school.
2. No more than one visit to any college
3. No more than five total visits
4. Before an official recruiting visit, you must provide the college with your high school transcript and with a score (although it does not have to be a qualifying score) from a college entrance exam (PSAT, SAT, PACT Plus or ACT) taken on a national test day under national testing conditions.

Maximizing campus visits

To get the most out of a campus visit, official or not, preparation is key. There is a ton of information about a college on its Web site and in its catalogue. Number of students enrolled? Where are they from? Courses offered? Physical layout? Team record? Graduation rates? Coach's background? All available. No need to waste your limited time on campus getting this info if you already know it.

In addition to talking to the stars or players you are steered toward, talk to the athletes who don't get as much playing time and to whomever you feel will be straight with you—maybe somebody you played with or against in high school.

While you are scheduling a visit, ask to arrange to spend time with regular student. Also, sit in on a class or two and talk to professors in a department you are interested in. Find out what is expected academically of all students. It's your responsibility to show up to college

prepared academically. Otherwise, it is possible that you will be nudged into an easier major. As we said before, your goal should be to graduate with not just *any* college degree, but a *meaningful* college degree. Big difference.

For highly recruited athletes, a campus visit can be a 48-hour magic-carpet ride, filled with experiences that will never be part of your normal routine at the university. Don't believe the hype!

National Letter of Intent

If a coach is serious about recruiting you, he or she will ask you to sign a National Letter of Intent (NLI). The NLI binds a college to give the athlete an athletic scholarship and designates the amount, and it binds the athlete to that college's program. Problem is, the college can get out of its commitment easily (for example, by not admitting the athlete), but an athlete who decides not to attend the college faces severe sanctions.

An athlete who signs the NLI does not fulfill his or her one-year obligation, but instead attends another NCAA institution, must sit out one full season and they are charged with the loss of one year of eligibility. The penalty is harsh, so think carefully before making this commitment. An athlete who signs the NLI, but later changes their mind, can ask to be released. Schools are more likely to grant this release when there is an unforeseen circumstance (for example, a coaching change). Just remember: Schools are under no obligation to do so.

Technically, the NLI is a voluntary program, but unless an athlete is a superstar, he or she does not have the market power to dictate terms of enrollment. It's sign on the dotted line or risk losing the scholarship offer.

Article 19 of the NLI has a special border around it, so that it jumps off the page at you. Here is what it says:

19. If Coach Leaves. I understand that I have signed this NLI with the institution and not for a particular sport or individual. For example, if the coach leaves the institution or the sports program, I remain bound by the provisions of the NLI.

If you have signed the NLI and the coach leaves and you decide to attend a different NCAA institution, you can be hit with the basic penalty. The same is true if, after you have signed, the college is found

guilty of violating an NCAA rule and is banned from postseason play. Or if the coach promised not to recruit another player at your position, but did so anyway. Or if there are cuts in an academic department that attracted you.

Because the consequences of opting out can be so severe, think carefully before signing an NLI. You should certainly not sign one under pressure, when the coach puts it in front of you, either during a campus visit or in your home. The coach may say or imply that if you don't sign right away, your scholarship will go to another athlete. It's a tough situation to be put in, but that's the reality of the recruiting business.

A recruiter may tell you that you will definitely be admitted to the college. At least technically, however, the athletic department cannot determine the actions of the admissions office. So unless you are reasonably certain that you meet the admissions requirements of the college in question, postpone signing.

Also, once you have been offered an athletic scholarship through an NLI (but have not signed it), you can use it to increase your leverage with other colleges. If there is a college/program you would prefer but have not received an offer from, contact the coach and explain that you have been asked to sign an NLI by the college in question...but you think you would rather play at his/her college, and ask if they intend to offer you an athletic scholarship.

DON'T WORRY! EVERYBODY'S
DOING IT!

SPORTS AGENT
INDICTED TODAY ON
CHARGES OF BILKING
MILLIONS FROM
ATHLETES...



6

NAVIGATING THE “EXTRA BENEFITS” MINEFIELD

“As soon as you have given a player money you have corrupted the relationship... it’s [now] a creditor-debtor relationship.”

— Richard Woods, sports agent

“There’s a 100% chance you’ll be offered money.”

—Tim McGee, former NFL player

The above quotes are especially true in basketball. If you are an elite player, you will almost certainly have to decide what to do when you are offered “extra benefits.” This chapter is primarily for the most highly sought-after players—those who the college coaches, boosters and agents covet, and who the media covers. One problem is, many players are recognized so early in their careers—sometimes as early as middle school—that they don’t have the experience or knowledge of the issues to make sound decisions. Unless a player’s family has firsthand knowledge and experience, it’s easy to get swept up in the hoopla.

Many relationships in the basketball business start out with seemingly pure intentions, but later morph into something more sinister. Better to be safe and question someone’s motives, rather than leave your future to unnecessary chance...especially if there’s any chance something sinister is taking place without your knowledge.

Extra benefits for richer and for poorer

If the player comes from a well-to-do family, he may not feel economic pressure to accept gifts. The player's parents also may not feel tempted, and may realize that such gifts always come with strings attached. They may counsel their child not to take them.

So, who are the most vulnerable targets to those offering extra benefits for athletes? Top athletes whose families are at the bottom end of the economic scale. Having started to accept gifts at a young age, the path of no resistance is for the player to continue accepting them as he gets older. If his athletic ability improves, fulfilling his early promise, the gifts get bigger. Pizza and shoes become cars, apartments, airline tickets, even cash.

To add to the temptation, there is a perception—true or not—that “everyone is doing it” (taking extra benefits), and that the chances of getting caught are low.

OK, you follow NCAA rules, so you're safe, right? Well, not exactly. Typically, high school students have little knowledge about their parents' finances. Nevertheless, according to NCAA rules, a prospective or current student-athlete can be held accountable for extra benefits received by family members and friends.

Navigating the realities of basketball

We advocate following all NCAA rules, including abstaining from all extra benefits (or ceasing to accept them if you have already started down that path). An athlete who can “just say no” is in the best possible situation for the future, beholden to no one.

There are two basic sources of extra benefits to big-time athletes in revenue-producing sports:

1. Agents, financial advisors and others who hope to benefit from a cut of the athlete's future pro earnings.
2. Boosters (“friends of the program”), generally wealthy people who want to attract top athletes to the college teams they support.

A basketball player who starred in college and then had a long, outstanding career in the NBA told us, “For every college athlete who gets caught taking money from an agent, there are hundreds who have

received cash and other gifts from boosters—and they hardly ever get caught.” That may be true, but those caught taking benefits from boosters pay a steep price.

Agents of corruption

Athletes who desire to stay within NCAA guidelines never accept anything from agents, financial advisors or their representatives for three major reasons:

1. Loss of the opportunity to work with an ethical agent. An agent or financial advisor who puts potential clients’ eligibility at risk by placing them in violation of NCAA rules has proven that he is unethical and that he is not spending his time working for the best interests of his current clients (if any). Why would an athlete want to do business with such a person?
2. Poor cost/benefit analysis. Whatever benefit offered will not likely compensate for the risks to eligibility.
3. Gifts from agents put an athlete in danger of criminal or civil liability under state Uniform Amateur Agent Acts (UAAA) or the federal Sports Agent and Responsibility Trust Act (SPARTA). (These laws do not prohibit gifts from boosters.)

The NCAA has strict rules, with severe penalties, against athletes having any financial relationship with agents. The NCAA vigorously investigates rumors of athlete-agent contact. Taking gifts (or advances) from an agent is playing with fire; you have a good chance of being burnt once an NCAA investigation is launched.

An athlete who has accepted illegal gifts from an agent, he is beholden to selecting an agent based on these benefits, rather than on merit. If the athlete chooses to be represented instead by a competent, ethical agent, the agent he has been dealing with can blackmail him by threatening to expose him to the NCAA. This is serious stuff.

Boosters can drag a program down

Boosters are important to athletic programs because they provide much-needed financial support. Who else is going to donate large sums to build athletic complexes, pay millions to hire (and fire) coaches and do whatever else they can to help the schools they love? And best of all,

boosters tend to encourage athletes to stay in school. In that sense, their goals are the same as the NCAA and athletic departments. Many boosters provide support simply to be connected with their favorite athletic programs and also the players.

Boosters sometimes provide athletes with meals, free or below-market rent for housing, cars, easy or no-work jobs and other benefits. When it comes to under-the-table booster-athlete relationships, there is less *quid pro quo* than exists with agent-athlete relationships. Consequently, it is more unlikely that a relationship between an athlete and booster will sour. But, “unlikely” does not equal “never.” There have been several well-publicized instances in which college basketball and football players were banned from playing after being caught accepting gifts from boosters.

In the last 10 years, there have been two high-profile college football players who received essentially free cars; in one case the player also received a substantial salary from the car dealership—without showing up to work. A female employee of the dealership told her boyfriend what was going on. The boyfriend happened to be a fan of an archrival, saw a great opportunity to sabotage the rival team, and called the media. Amazingly enough, exposure in the other case came about exactly the same way. One of these players was forced to sit out a season and then transferred to a Football Championship Subdivision school. The other, a senior, was ineligible to play in the final games of the season. Each was drafted by the NFL.

The glare of the public eye

These days, there is no such thing as a private life for elite athletes. The media, which once seemingly collaborated with college athletic departments to protect the image of athletes and the sanctity of sports, is now more interested to expose character flaws and illegal conduct. Nor does the media have to rely on a handful of reporters to dig for dirt. Fans equipped with cellphones, digital cameras and blogs are poised to snap photos of athletes in embarrassing situations and/or write about them. Next thing you know, these photos are on Facebook, Twitter and other social media.

Style of living and cost of talking

Athletes openly living in a style well beyond what they could reasonably be expected to afford invite scrutiny, especially if they boast about the generosity of their benefactors. If an athlete, unless he or she is known to be wealthy, is suddenly driving around in a new BMW, some people may wonder, Who paid for that car? Others (perhaps a fan at a rival school) may even go a step farther and contact the NCAA. Keep in mind: There is a direct path from Internet rumors to Yahoo! Sports or ESPN investigative reports to a full-fledged NCAA investigation.

Target: basketball

The NCAA has recently added to its enforcement staff for basketball—and basketball is the only sport to which the NCAA has assigned a group of investigators who focus exclusively on one sport.

The NCAA monitors the media for information that could lead to investigations, and they have frequently let the public know that they are open to receiving tips about possible violations by athletes and coaches. The NCAA does not have subpoena power. But it does have the power to penalize athletes who do not provide data requested in an investigation.

We repeat, the best option is “Just say no” to gifts from agents, “runners” (who work for agents and recruit college athletes as future clients) and even boosters. That is the only way to be certain of maintaining your eligibility. If you consider a different path, be prepared to accept whatever consequences result from your decision.

Swear you didn’t cheat or don’t play

Once you are in college, the NCAA requires student-athletes participating in NCAA Championships to sign an affidavit that they have not violated NCAA rules. An affidavit is a legal document. If an athlete offers a false statement in the affidavit—a likely scenario for someone who already violated an NCAA rule, but does not want to forfeit eligibility—this document provides schools with legal remedies. In concert with UAAA laws, schools can use this document to strengthen a civil case against an athlete accused of violating any NCAA rules, such as those regarding agents, amateurism or gambling.

The NCAA suggests to compliance officers that when administering the Affidavit, they remind student-athletes that it contains the following wording: “Swearing under oath to a false statement is a fraudulent act, which may subject the student-athlete to an NCAA Bylaw 10.1 unethical conduct violation. Also, the agent may also be subject to criminal prosecution by federal or state authorities.” This is serious stuff.

Reason #968 to follow NCAA extra benefits rules

Extra-benefits cases involving NCAA athletes often come to light when individuals (typically wannabe agents) claim that current or former college athletes owe them money. When NBA player Marcus Camby was at the University of Massachusetts, he took money, clothes, cars, and stereos from two unscrupulous agents. So did his family and friends. When Camby didn’t sign with either agent, they threatened to expose him and break his bones. Camby escaped physical damage, but ended up reimbursing the agents. The NCAA stripped UMass from the 1996 Final Four record book and required the school to return \$151,000 it had received from the tournament. Camby repaid that sum as well.

“Figure it out”

There can be good reasons for turning down help even if it is not a forbidden extra benefit. Calvin Hill, the former college and Dallas Cowboys running back, sports business executive and consultant and father of NBA star Grant Hill tells this story:

“When my son Grant was a freshmen at Duke he locked his keys in the car...with the engine running. Grant called me to ask what should he do. I told him I would call Duke’s director of basketball operations. I told him about Grant’s predicament and asked what we could do to help. His response: “Nothing. He’s a smart kid. He’ll figure it out.” As a father, my natural inclination is to always help my son. When Grant called back a few minutes later, hoping that I had solved his problem, I just said, “Sorry. You’re on your own. Figure it out.” And he did. College students all make mistakes—and sometimes do stupid things. It’s not just about getting a college education; it’s the opportunity to become a responsible adult.

“During freshman orientation, Coach Krzyzewski told the parents he didn’t get too bothered when players got a bad grade—or even failed a course. He wouldn’t accept consistent poor performance, but he wanted his players to be tested in the classroom—and see how they responded. His view was that Duke students fail courses, not just athletes. Struggling to get decent grades is important—and far more gratifying than some easy way out.

“When I went to school they did not have tutors and academic support services just for athletes. These are good people dedicated to making sure the athletes all register for the right classes, go to class and study—and get tutoring. Most students have to do this themselves. If you need extra help, you take the initiative. Today athletic departments are proactive, which is not necessarily a good thing. There’s great pressure for athletes to succeed in the classroom, which for athletic departments means staying eligible and graduating. From the student-athletes’ perspective, they would be far better off in the long run if they succeeded in school with the help of others, not because of them.”



THE PRO MENTALITY

“You can practice shooting eight hours a day, but if your technique is wrong, then all you get is very good at shooting the wrong way. Get the fundamentals down and the level of everything you do will rise.”

—Michael Jordan, Basketball Hall of Famer

“I play basketball for the love of the game; I am paid to work out.”

—Jameer Nelson, Orlando Magic

You can learn a lot about what it takes to succeed—in basketball and in life—by observing NBA and WNBA players during the off-season. Although they are not under a training regimen imposed by their teams, they work out, they practice and they play in summer leagues (NBA players) and European professional leagues (many WNBA players). They take care of their bodies by getting good nutrition, rest and treatment for any injuries.

There are 143 WNBA players and close to 400 NBA players. There are many more opportunities to play professional basketball, both in the United States (the NBA Developmental League, for example) and abroad. No one makes it to the professional level by faking or hustling someone. Obviously, these are players born with genes that gave them the potential to develop great athletic ability. But so were thousands of

others. Those who reach the pro ranks, or even the collegiate level, show a strong work ethic as well. Sure, there are supremely gifted players who make it without working as hard as they could (although they don't reach their fullest potential), but the great majority of NBA and WNBA players beat the long odds through consistent dedication of time and effort. They have tremendous raw ability, but today that is not nearly enough to turn hoop dreams into reality.

What exactly do the pro players do? Instead of putting in extra hours Facebooking or tweeting or just hanging with friends, they show up at the gym. You may be familiar with Woody Allen's line: "90% of success is just showing up." In truth, 90% is nowhere near enough to reach the pro level. The other 10% is what you do after you show up. Do you maximize your time in the gym or the weight room? Or do you maximize your fun?

"Perfect practice makes perfect"

Twenty years ago there were hardly any European players in the NBA. Now there's an average of about two per NBA team. How did European basketball improve so fast? In June 2009, I watched and talked with the best young players from all over Europe at the Reebok Eurocamp in Treviso, Italy. The answer was obvious. These players flat-out love to practice. Practice is everything to European players. Fewer games, more practice. Sounds boring, but that is precisely why European basketball improved at an amazing pace. You may possess incredible athleticism, but if you don't have the fundamentals down, your basketball career will stall.

A lot can be learned from watching women's college basketball and the WNBA. A few women can dunk, and at the college and pro level they are all superb athletes, but women's basketball is not mainly about blowing by defenders and throwing down. It's based on the fundamentals: defense, dribbling, passing, shooting, teamwork. Supreme professionals such as Candace Parker and Diana Taurasi have practiced hard to master the fundamentals. In high school, top male players may be more tempted to rely on athleticism. They may dominate players who are not as tall or athletic. But that's fool's gold—shiny but not worth much—when everyone else is tall and athletic. Those who succeed in college and in the pros are never satisfied, always hungry to improve their skills and their knowledge and understanding of the game.

Only one Babe Ruth

Today in professional sports, there are virtually no slackers. It didn't used to be that way.

An overweight Babe Ruth often stayed up until all hours drinking and still hit 60 home runs in one season and a then-record 714 in his career. But there was only one Babe Ruth. Today, players work out year-round and endure hours and hours of daily practice, exercise and physical therapy. Many pro athletes even hire personal trainers and chefs, all to get the slightest edge.

As a high school athlete, you most likely don't have access to the latest, greatest equipment and facilities. Doesn't matter. You just need a ball, a basket and a burning desire to improve. Success in basketball—and in life—is about preparation. What can you do every day to become a little better, even if you don't see tangible results for days, even months? Noticeable improvement takes time—sometimes years. It's easy to say, "Be patient." You want success...now! Everybody does. But good things come to people who take a longer view and don't get frustrated by excruciatingly slow progress and setbacks.

A Ray of Hope

Ray Allen of the Boston Celtics is a great example of a basketball player who has maximized his abilities. He has superb athleticism that is common in the NBA, but what makes him so special is his total commitment to the game. He is famous for taking care of his body. He gets regular massages and pedicures (yes, pedicures).

Like many who observe basketball, I appreciate the way Allen approaches the game. And you have to love how he talks about basketball.

"My confidence in my game," says Allen, "comes in my preparation... Every day you have to practice whether you have a bump, bruise, scrape, tendinitis, anything.

"There are so many good players in the NBA, and I just want to be at the top of the talent pool. I want opposing coaches and players to fear me. I can't compete at that level and not be competitive off the court. It's all connected. Where I am right now, you can never accept defeat.

"If you come out one night and you're cheating the game, cheating yourself, cheating your teammates, you know it inside. And that voice

inside me is what's always going to push me and make me stand up and be accounted for and be reputable in this league, in this city and for this team." As Allen approaches his mid-30s, old by NBA standards, he is hardly showing signs of slowing down.

"Pure" shooters are not born. They are made—through hard work. Ray Allen is a testimony to this ethic. He is one of the all-time great NBA players, and he's one of the most universally respected players to ever play the game.

"Ray does things the right way, and expects others to do them, too. People are sloppy—in their preparation, in the way they present themselves. Not Ray. Never."

—Jim Calhoun, Allen's college coach at Univ. of Connecticut

"I've watched Ray, I've watched Paul [Pierce], and I've watched Pose [James Posey], and we all have our own way of preparing. All of us are excessive in how we go about it. It makes sense to me. Everybody is a little over the top in what they do, because it means so much."

—Kevin Garnett, Boston Celtics

Think like Mike

One of Michael Jordan's great strengths was his ability to work on his weaknesses. In college, his athleticism made him a threat to blow by defenders, so they played off him, which they could get away with because of his mediocre jump shot. Michael responded by spending hours working to improve his jumper. When Michael came into the NBA, he was 6 feet 6 inches and 195 pounds. Defenders countered his moves and his jump shot by pushing him around. Michael responded by putting in hours in the weight room, a tough regimen that he continued throughout his career. The additional 20 pounds of muscle made him impossible to defend without double-teaming. To contend with that, Michael did daily dribble and quickness drills, something many NBA players haven't bothered with since high school (if then).

Michael's work ethic

I was fortunate to frequently observe Bulls practices. They were mesmerizing, mostly because of Michael Jordan's legendary practice habits. It was one thing to see his magic in front of sellout crowds of 17,317 at the old Chicago Stadium. But it was more impressive to witness Michael practice just as hard against second- and third-string

teammates as he played against the NBA's best. Michael set an example by working on every part of his game, from dribbling and passing to foul shots and defense. He was in the gym early and left late. He played with the same intensity level at practice as he did in a game with the championship on the line and millions of people watching. He demanded that others do the same, leading his team to higher levels of play. Michael intimidated opponents. They knew that whether they had to play offense against him or defend against him, they had better be ready for a war, because Michael always brought his "A" game. As Michael's legend continues to build, we're beginning to realize he was a once-in-a-millennium athlete.

Control what you can control

Michael Jordan understood that his offensive performance would vary. Sometimes his shot wasn't falling. Sometimes defenders played him tight. And sometimes the ball just didn't bounce his way. He viewed his defense, however, as a constant: Because he controlled his effort, Michael believed he should never have a bad night defensively. Ever.

You and Michael

Michael Jordan is an unrealistic standard to measure your athletic ability. It is unlikely that anyone will ever again win like Mike. But you absolutely can compete like Mike. Michael said, "You have to expect things of yourself before you can do them." Figure out every step necessary to reach your goals. Make a plan to take those steps. Pay attention to the details. Work hard, even when progress is not visible. Think—and act—like Mike and there is no question that you will make the most of your potential.

The final shot

Competition breeds success. If you want to be the best, you have to beat the best. It's never fun to lose, even in pick-up games. But if you really want to improve your game, you need to challenge yourself against better competition. It's the best way to get better faster. Don't worry about getting beat today, even tomorrow. Don't be afraid to try different things, even if you experience some short-term failures. It's a long race. It takes years to develop and hone your game. Don't get discouraged. Work hard to get better. And enjoy the journey.

Good luck as you pursue your hoop and life dreams.

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