

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE NCAA, NAIA AND NJCAA?

There are around 5000 universities/colleges in the US, in different locations, at different levels of athletics, and different costs. This is a breakdown of all the divisions, what they mean and all the options you should consider when talking to a coach.

The American college system is different to that of the Australia because college sport in the USA is big business, with coaches usually having scholarship budgets in the hundreds of thousands of dollars annually. Scholarships for athletes can range from minimal contributions, to a 'full ride' which includes full tuition cover, housing, meals and even money for books. The majority of student athletes offered a scholarship will be offered one somewhere in the middle.

These colleges are divided into a number of sectors and divisions of college sports, all representing different types of higher education. These are;

NCAA, Div 1 and 2 (large public universities)

NCAA Div 3 (usually small private colleges)

NAIA (usually small private colleges)

NJCAA (community colleges)

The top NCAA [National College Athletic Association] teams play in front of home crowds of at least 1,500 and the all-time attendance record still stands at a staggering 22,000.

Colleges want to have the best possible sports teams because it creates extra revenue for the institute and also acts as a way of marketing the university to potential future students.

Typically the best players go to NCAA Division 1 and the majority of people who go professional come from this level, but this does not mean the standard of football is any lower in other divisions and definitely doesn't mean you can't go pro. If you don't perform you won't be seen, simple.

A lot of foreign players end up at the NCAA Division 2 or NAIA level because they have less rules and regulations (and scholarship money) in regards to foreign players. NJCAA is the association that deals with community colleges. These type of colleges are 2 year schools where people transfer to a 'bigger' 4 year uni after they have finished there to finish their last two years of a degree. These are good for players who aren't academically the best, and more coaches will take a punt on a foreign player at this level. However, they are only allowed 4 international players per squad now.

NCAA DIVISION 1

When people think of playing at a US college, this is the level they think of. However people do not realise how difficult it is to be able to play at this level. Firstly, there are a lot of regulations about the number of foreign students they are allowed to have on their rosters. Secondly, it is very difficult academically to be eligible to play at this level. This therefore means that the type of players who end up playing at this level, coming from outside the US, usually come from very strong sporting backgrounds. For example, a player may be released at 18-19 years old from a Premier League soccer academy and he may have strong GCSE's. They are usually very physically matured due to the training background and therefore they can slot straight into the team. This is the type of player that coaches want.

However, don't feel like you don't have what it takes. A lot of student-athletes start off at NJCAA, NAIA and NCAA Division 2 and if they perform on the field AND in the classroom, they are able to transfer. So you may not go straight to Division 1, but you may end up there after 1 or 2 years. The impetus is on you to perform.

NCAA DIVISION 2

This is probably the most popular option for most student-athletes coming from outside of the US due to fewer regulations on the number of foreign players on a roster and also the lower academic barriers to be eligible.

NCAA Division 2 schools are usually a lot smaller than NCAA Division 1, but don't let that put you off. In bigger schools, your team may not be popular as they will have basketball and American football teams which are shown on TV and people won't really care about yours, but at the Division 2 level, the soccer teams are usually one of the best and most popular teams in the institute. So you'd be a big fish in a smaller pond.

You will find that a lot of NCAA Division 2 schools have teams that are actually better than a lot of NCAA Division 2 teams. You will more than likely get to play against a lot of NCAA Division 1 teams in the Spring season as this is the 'friendly' part of the year.

If going pro is your aim, NCAA Division 2 is still a great platform to be seen. Many players every year go pro from this level and to be honest, if you are performing to that standard, a NCAA Division 1 school would come knocking after 2 years at least (as long as your academics are up to scratch).

A coach normally wouldn't offer a large scholarship to a new student-athlete coming in from outside of the US, because usually they normally wouldn't be up to scratch to start for the team. Over the years you will increase your playing time and the scholarship would normally increase.

NAIA

This level is somewhat similar to NCAA Division 2 in terms of size of the school and also the level of sports. You do often find that an NAIA team has a LOT of foreign players. This is due to the few regulations in comparison to other levels.

It is also similar to the NCAA Division 2 level where a coach normally wouldn't offer a large scholarship to a new student-athlete coming in from outside of the US, because usually they normally wouldn't be up to scratch to start for the team. Over the years you will increase your playing time and the scholarship would normally increase.

If going pro is your aim, then many players from NAIA make it every year. It is a great platform as the scouts realise there are a lot of talented foreign players on show.

NJCAA

The NJCAA is the baby of all the divisions in the US, however it is not something to be rejected in the slightest. NJCAA schools are only 2 years long. You go to these THEN you transfer to a 4 year institute (NCAA, NAIA). The level of soccer is often on par with NAIA and NCAA Division 2.

This is a great route for players looking to get higher scholarship money, but who also have lower standard of academics. It is essentially a great way of getting in the door and being seen. Coaches from NCAA D1, D2 and NAIA levels would rather take a player from NJCAA then from outside of the US (like you are right now). This is because they can see you in the college sports setting, but see how your academics are doing within the US system