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Don't set hopes on a grand-slam scholarship

By Jason Katz

Q) I am a First-Team All-League local high school baseball player. I just received a scholarship offer from my top choice university and it was only a partial scholarship. My parents have invested a lot of money in my baseball career and were hoping it would translate into a "full ride" scholarship to college. Were they misguided in thinking such a thing?

A) Unless you are the next Roger Clemens or Barry Bonds, your parents probably were a bit misguided. According to a recent South Florida Sun-Sentinel article entitled "The great myth of athletic scholarships," "Division I baseball teams have a maximum of 11.7 scholarships to be divided among a roster that can reach 30 players." So, for the sake of argument, let's say the scholarships were divided up evenly among the 30 players. That would mean that each player would receive a 39% scholarship. However, in reality, there are going to be some players that the coach believes are the next Roger Clemens, and those players will receive the full rides. Because the world of Division I baseball scholarships is a zero-sum game, when a few players receive full rides, the amount of scholarship money available for the other players goes down.

So much media emphasis is placed on the full rides that football players receive, for example, that your parents may have thought that most players in all Division I sports receive full rides. The truth is that, when it comes to Division I athletics, "the NCAA defines each sport as 'head count' or 'equivalency,'" according to the Sun-Sentinel article. "Head-count sports are those in which every student-athlete gets a full scholarship. That is football and basketball for men, and basketball, volleyball, tennis and gymnastics for women. All the other sports are equivalency, meaning coaches can divide up the scholarships any way they want, just so they do not exceed the maximum allowed."

One factor you did not mention in your question is your eligibility. According to a recent article from the Palm Beach Post entitled "Academics play a greater role in recruiting decisions," "The NCAA clearinghouse makes sure students who are planning to play a sport at the Division I or II levels have completed required core courses in high school and earned passing scores on the SAT or ACT. The required score an athlete needs on those standardized tests is based on his or her GPA in core classes. For example, a student with the minimum GPA of 2.0 needs to score a 1010 on the SAT or an 86 on the ACT to qualify, while a student with a 3.0 needs a 620 on the SAT or a 52 on the ACT."

I mention your eligibility because many universities and coaches are placing more emphasis on academics when they decide what students will receive scholarship offers. So, for the sake of argument, let's say that you are on the borderline of eligibility. Many universities may not want to risk giving you a full ride if they're not even sure you are going to be able to play for them.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, let's say you have a 4.0 GPA and perfect SAT scores. Although you only received a partial baseball scholarship, you might be able to enhance your total financial aid package by getting some merit based scholarship help.

You shouldn't be disheartened by the fact that you only received a partial scholarship. There's an anecdote in the Palm Beach Post article about a baseball player from Florida who was heavily recruited by many colleges, but whose best offer was an 80 percent scholarship from Clemson. The good news is that he "ended up being taken in the first round of the 2002 major league draft by the Cleveland Indians and took the \$1.25 million signing bonus and is now playing in the minor leagues." Thus, there are many options for talented baseball players. The fact that you didn't receive a full ride is not the end of the story, but rather just the beginning.