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Admissions and the Cold Slap of Rejection

By BILL PENNINGTON

Kevin Friedenberg was certain he had played by all the rules of the college recruiting game.

A top high school lacrosse goalie from Needham, Mass., he had e-mailed coaches to promote himself and had attended showcase camps and tournaments. An A student who said he had College Board scores equivalent to 1,380 on the two-part SAT, Friedenberg narrowed his choices to three Division III institutions, including Haverford, a small, selective liberal arts college.

Friedenberg twice visited the Haverford campus outside Philadelphia, with astute questions for the lacrosse coach, Mike Murphy: Could he study a year abroad? How many advanced placement high school courses did he need to take? Did Haverford need a goalie? Would the coach support him in admissions?

Assured he was in the top half of the list of athletes Murphy would forward to admissions, Friedenberg completed Haverford's binding early-decision application in November. He spurned overtures from Swarthmore College and Connecticut College.

"I thought I had all my bases covered," Friedenberg said. "But what I got in the mail was a thin letter."

A thin letter, as opposed to an envelope thick with acceptance forms, is code for a rejection.

"I was completely shocked," said Friedenberg, whose application was not among the few deferred to Haverford's regular decision process in the spring. "I didn't know what to do. I have to get back in touch with all those coaches again, but they've probably already recruited their goalies and moved on without me.

"It's going to be difficult to get into these great schools now without the support of a coach. My fear is I'll be left with no place to go, and maybe, not play lacrosse in college at all."

A month ago, Friedenberg talked about how the recruiting process had been good to him.

"This definitely puts a different spin on it," he said last week. "It seemed like a good idea at the time. I have seen the other side of it."

Haverford accepted 101 of 237 early-decision applicants this month, and 37 of those were athletes who had been endorsed by a coach at the college. Haverford officials granted The New York Times access to most of the decision-making involving the recruited athletes, and to the interaction between the athletic and admissions departments, on the condition that applicants' identities be revealed only with their permission.

In Houston last week, John-Paul Cashiola, another lacrosse goalie, received a thick envelope from the Haverford admissions office. Cashiola had also marketed himself to coaches, spending almost \$5,000 to fly to three recruiting events in the Northeast this year.

Cashiola, who attends a private school, said he had a 3.1 grade-point average and scored 1,200 on the SAT. Neither of his parents attended college, a plus in the admissions process, and his mother is Nicaraguan; Cashiola said that made him a minority candidate.

"I'll be the first to tell you that lacrosse had a huge role in my admission to Haverford," Cashiola said in a telephone interview. "Lacrosse had to be a tool to get into a better school."

Being recruited was a job to Cashiola, who found work cutting lawns and doing housecleaning to raise money for his flights to showcases.

"My mom would say, 'More money for another trip?' " Cashiola, 18, said. "But I would tell her, 'This trip could be the deciding factor.' It paid off. Every penny was worth it."

The decisions on Friedenberg and Cashiola were typical if opposite outcomes to a subjective, unpredictable and imprecise process, one ultimately decided by a committee of seven Haverford admissions officers.

Athletic prowess gave some candidates a clear edge toward admission - in 10 cases in particular. But of the 71 recruited athletes in the early-decision pool, 31 were rejected. Three athletes endorsed by coaches were deferred to the regular admissions pool.

One athlete was rejected for having received two C's in the first semester this year. Another was rejected in part because two of the five required SAT scores were below 600, although the 650 average was in the acceptable range.

Another athlete had a 3.9 G.P.A. But the admissions officers discovered that the applicant's high school grading scale extended to 5, not 4, which meant rejection.

Another athlete had good credentials (A-minus average and 1,310 SAT) but few activities or apparent interests besides sports. That troubled the committee and led to a rejection.

Yet another athlete never went to Haverford for an interview and did not show interest in the college until this past fall, making the committee uneasy. Another rejection.

But there were several cases in which athletics seemed to have tipped the decision in a borderline applicant's favor, other cases in which a recruited athlete might have been accepted without a coach's assist and others in which athletics played a major factor.

Ben Regan-Sachs is a right-handed pitcher from Bethesda, Md., who attended his first recruiting showcase when he was in eighth grade. He was recruited by Division III baseball coaches from Virginia to Massachusetts.

An A student at the respected Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School with a mid-1,300 SAT, Regan-Sachs is also a competitive chess player who had a lengthy list of extracurricular activities.

Regan-Sachs was endorsed by Haverford's baseball coach, Dave Beccaria, and had made a number of visits to the campus. His early-decision application was accepted.

"I think my grades and G.P.A. put me in the ballpark," Regan-Sachs said. "Athletics may have helped me get noticed at Haverford. By the time I applied, it was not the first time they had heard of me."

Monica Stegman of Sparta, N.J., was on the list submitted by Wendy Smith, Haverford's women's soccer coach. Stegman ranked in the top 5 percent of her class and had a 1,380 SAT, including a perfect 800 on the math portion. She was accepted.

"I always thought I was a strong candidate for Haverford," she said. "I knew being recruited wouldn't hurt, but I wasn't going to rely on it."

Another top athlete was first in her class and had taken demanding courses at an urban high school that rarely sends students to Haverford. That intrigued Jess Lord, the dean of admissions, because the college is trying to diversify.

"But her test scores were way off profile for us," Lord said. "They were 100 to 150 points below our median - on each test."

The median SAT for Haverford's current freshman class was 1,380. The median for those accepted, including students who eventually chose to go elsewhere, was 1,420.

Despite the applicant's lower test scores, she was high on a coach's list. Lord left his office to consult with Greg Kannerstein, the athletic director, and the coach. Lord wanted to know whether the athlete could be an impact player. With a strong recommendation from athletics, Lord pushed for the candidate's admission.

"We're looking for multiple ways a student can contribute to the campus," Lord said. "This student is deserving of being here for many reasons. The athletic component just made it certain."

Another athlete was typical for a Haverford applicant: class rank in the top 10 percent with a 1,370 SAT. Recommendations from teachers and the evaluation from the admissions department interview were good but not great.

"That kid, at first glance, probably gets lost in the shuffle," Brian Walter, an associate dean for admissions, said. "There's nothing negative in the file, but we're dealing with pretty rarefied air here, so something has to make that student stand out."

In this case, the applicant was ranked No. 1 on a coach's list. That was enough to grant extra consideration and, eventually, acceptance.

But being No. 1 on a coach's list and lobbying by the athletic department did not guarantee acceptance. Five of 13 athletes at the top of coaches' lists were not accepted, although three of those five were deferred.

The admissions officers, however, kept a tally of how recruited athletes in each sport fared. If a coach had a list of five athletes and the first four had been rejected, when the fifth came up, Walter informed the committee. It did not mean that any of the five candidates would be admitted, but the committee considered whether it had been too harsh in the previous four cases. It was rare for a team to be shut out.

Lord, the dean of admissions, conceded that the process was fickle.

"If the same seven people met in our committee room next week and did the whole thing again, it's likely we would not admit the same 101 applicants," he said. "There is a human element you can never remove from the process."

Not everyone at Haverford found the unpredictable nature of the admissions process easy to accept.

When Mike Murphy, attending a lacrosse coaches convention in Baltimore, heard that Friedenberg and some of his other top prospects had been rejected or deferred, he slammed a telephone on the desk in his hotel so hard that it cracked.

"I feel horrible for kids like Kevin," Murphy said. "I never went too far in what I said to him, but I encouraged him and he trusted me. For me, I can go home, hug my kids and sleep well tonight, but that doesn't help Kevin Friedenberg right now."

Murphy contacted three other college coaches the next day to recommend Friedenberg, and Beccaria, the

baseball coach, referred a rejected prospect to a rival.

"Just because it doesn't work out here," Beccaria said, "you can't take it out on the kid."

Given a few days to digest the results, most of the Haverford coaches were pleased. More recruited athletes than usual were admitted through the early-decision window, part of a nationwide trend. More athletes choose to apply early to maximize their chances of admission.

Of the 20 athletes Murphy had listed, 10 were accepted, as were six from Beccaria's list of nine.

"I've got 10 elated, happy kids I will turn to now," Murphy said.

Jen Ward, the softball coach, had two of five athletes on her list admitted. Although she was disappointed, Ward, a recent Haverford graduate, said, "I know a ton of great kids didn't get in who aren't athletes."

The 19 remaining athletes who were accepted early compete in eight other sports. Some teams had no early-decision applicants.

The coaches of those teams, and others, will try to fill their rosters through regular admissions, when hundreds of athletes will be on coaches' lists. Haverford's teams will probably end up with about 20 to 25 more recruited athletes. Teams that added several athletes during early decision will get less attention.

In the past week, Haverford's coaches were compiling their recruiting wish lists for athletes applying by the Jan. 15 regular admission deadline.

The process was starting anew. Among the first tasks for the coaches: fielding e-mail messages and phone calls from athletes who were denied early-decision admission.

Friedenberg was among those scurrying to get back in the game. He had also begun counseling his younger teammates.

"I've told them to look at me and learn," he said. "Make sure you have your backup choices figured out in advance and know immediately what you'll do if you don't get in. It's a hard process. I'm just trying to pass along that wisdom."