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Players' Goal: College Game

By Andrew MacDougall

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Alex Dalton always tries to be one step ahead — whether she is setting up her day, trying to elude a defender on the lacrosse field, or establishing a pecking order for her homework assignments.

A junior at Notre Dame Academy in Hingham, Dalton plans to focus on the medical field in college.

And as long as she can remember, she has wanted to play lacrosse at the collegiate level. So when she made a verbal commitment last fall to attend the University of Notre Dame, a recruitment process that started in the eighth grade was finally over.

“It’s so exciting that a coach believes in me, that she has faith in what I can be,” said Dalton of Notre Dame coach Christine Halfpenny, who just completed her first season at the helm in South Bend.

“It’s exciting to know how much better I can become in the next two years. By committing so early, I have time to get to where I need to be.”

A 5-foot-6 midfielder from Needham, Dalton is at the end of a long, demanding process that can be overwhelming.

As the sport of lacrosse continues to gain popularity, colleges and universities are increasing their investment in lacrosse programs, opening the door for more scholarship opportunities.

As a result, many girls who aspire to play beyond high school are looking at college choices much earlier, some as soon as middle school.

“When I was playing, there weren’t nearly as many opportunities,” said NDA’s coach, Meredith Frank, who played for her mother, Leslie, at Westwood High, graduating in 2006, before winning four national championships at Northwestern University.

“Sure, there were [lacrosse] tournaments, and we did those tournaments, but now, more than ever, there are so many more opportunities that didn’t exist when I was around.”

For a student-athlete like Dalton, who also plays soccer and basketball, the demands are even greater across three seasons: practices and games, in addition to club lacrosse, skills competitions, and tournaments up and down the East Coast.

“Recruiting in lacrosse has become so fast,” said Frank, who also played soccer and basketball at Westwood.

“They’re identifying prospective student-athletes so early, and that didn’t exist when I was in high school. Because of that, you were able to play other sports. You didn’t feel like you had to go to four tournaments in the fall and six tournaments in the summer.”

With the high school and college seasons running concurrently, attending camps from May to October is often the only opportunity to be seen live by college coaches.

“You don’t get many opportunities to be seen by 200 coaches at a time,” said Taylor Graf, a junior at Hanover High, who netted 68 goals and 12 assists this season.

“The coach doesn’t come to you; you have to show yourself to the coach.”

So Graf has participated in a plethora of camps and played in a number of tourneys, hoping to catch a coach’s eye.

She was one of 160 players selected to attend the Brine National Lacrosse Classic in Boyds, Md., this summer. The last two years, she has traveled to camps in Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania, and attended showcases put on by Northwestern and Nike.

“For kids to get recognized now, it seems like they have to do these things, especially for lacrosse,” said her father, Tom Graf.

“Cost-wise, it’s pretty expensive. Club teams are \$1,000 to \$2,000, plus travel expenses on top of it. In a way, it’s unfair to kids who don’t have the money” — or shell out the money, make a determined push, and then not attract any attention.

“It’s so tough trying to be seen by the coaches and schools you want, because one second they could be talking to you, and the next they could be looking somewhere else,” said Amelia Brown, a junior at Notre Dame Academy, who also plays soccer and is one of the top alpine skiers in the state.

“I’ve been through experiences where you’re talking to a school that you may really want to go to, and things quickly change.”

NDA freshman Keeley MacAfee, who will attend the Northstar Invitational in Lake Placid this summer, said, “It’s very important to get your name and face out as early as possible.

“I guess in a way there’s pressure to do all the camps. It’s more important to be seen early than seen late, because kids keep committing earlier and earlier.” She will also be at the Maximum Exposure camp in Maryland, where a number of college coaches will be on hand.

If a player has the talent to compete in college, whether it is Division 1, 2, or 3, her ability will surface. MacAfee believes that the stress, demanding schedule, and money are worth the investment.

“It’s stressful, but there’s nothing else that I’d rather do than play lacrosse in college,” she said.

“I love lacrosse, and I can’t imagine not playing after high school.”

But that is the offseason. In season, players focus on their high school programs.

“When I’m in lacrosse season, I’m focusing on lacrosse,” said Brown.

And on Tuesday afternoon, that translated into a Division 1 South semifinal for the 21-1 Cougars against Leslie Frank and her 20-2 Wolverines.

“In soccer season, I’m focusing on soccer. It’s kind of hard for me to try to get in the other sports while I’m in a different season.”

“I feel like it’s more important to be dedicated to the high school sport because you’re there to be a part of a team,” added Graf.

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