



October 2005

## Playing the Field: An explosion in the number of potential athletic recruits has coaches searching for ability--and intangibles

Gerry Boyle  
*Colby College*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine>



Part of the [Sports Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Boyle, Gerry (2005) "Playing the Field: An explosion in the number of potential athletic recruits has coaches searching for ability--and intangibles," *Colby Magazine*: Vol. 94 : Iss. 3 , Article 9.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine/vol94/iss3/9>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the Colby College Archives at Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Magazine by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.

# PLAYING THE FIELD

**An explosion in the number of potential athletic recruits has coaches searching for ability—and intangibles**

**O**n a warm afternoon in July, football players packed the playing fields at Minuteman Regional High School in Lexington, Mass. Bulky linemen smashed together, legs churning. Receivers and defenders sprinted pass patterns. Cool-headed quarterbacks fired passes in a dozen simultaneous scrimmages.

Colby Head Football Coach Ed Mestieri watched intently, one eye on the play and the other on a printout providing information—height, weight, GPA—about the 100 or so elite high school juniors on hand for what is sometimes billed as a “skills” camp. But don’t let the name fool you. “They’re not coming here to improve,” Mestieri explained. These players, he said, are coming to be seen.

Dozens of coaches, many from NESCAC (New England Small College Athletic Conference) schools, ranged the sidelines at the Lexington camp, one of 22 camps attended by Colby football staffers last summer. The skills camps are part of a recruiting effort that, especially for NCAA Division III colleges, has increased exponentially in volume of players and dramatically in sophistication in recent years. “The numbers are through the roof,” said Colby Athletic Director Marcella Zalot, “because kids will recruit *us* now.”

**By Gerry Boyle '78   Photos by Fred Field**



Head Football Coach Ed Mestieri eyes potential recruits during a skills camp last summer.

How far through the roof are the numbers? Mestieri began the recruiting season with about 2,500 names from recruiting services, networking, contacts by athletes, coaches, and alumni. Academic criteria culled more than two thirds of the list. So, as he headed off to Lexington that day, Mestieri knew that “as of 12:52, there were eight-hundred and five kids in our system.”

That’s up 200 over last year, and football isn’t the only sport in which the numbers are increasing.

The men’s basketball program will start with as many as 700 potential recruits to yield two or three players. Women’s Soccer Coach Jen Holsten ’90, blessed with a sport that has exploded in popularity in the United States in recent years, has to contend with so many potential recruits from across the country that she tracks them on a color-coded computer spread sheet, noting each exchange of e-mail, each phone conversation with coach or player, each campus visit. “They’re strong academically and they’re committed to soccer,” Holsten said. “The pool is large.”

And the stakes are high, as students—and parents in many cases—have worked for years toward college athletics. Unlike Division I colleges and universities, NESCAC schools do not award athletic scholarships. NESCAC appeals to skilled athletes with strong academic records because they know the conference is among the most competitive in Division III, both athletically and academically. In

fact, in a recent ranking of Division III colleges by the National Collegiate Scouting Association, using a rubric of academic and athletic strength and student-athlete graduation rates, Colby placed 11th nationally. Ten of the 11 NESCAC schools were in the top 17.

“We offer these kids a world-class education with a great football program in a dynamite setting,” Mestieri said.

Parents know that. Students know that. But they also are aware that, in many cases, these athletes have what colleges like Colby want.

It’s an odd dance, a sort of mutual wooing. Parents and athletes attend camps, contact coaches, bring professionally prepared videotapes and DVDs of the athlete on the field. High school coaches, often former Colby athletes, recommend players, sending e-mails like this one, from a soccer coach at a New Jersey prep school: “She’s a good player and could have an impact at Colby her first year.” Or another, from a Colby alumna now coaching the next generation of players: “She’s a great soccer player and a great kid.”

Colby coaches carefully “watch tape” to discern strengths and weaknesses and to determine whether a player would be an asset to a Colby team. Parents often act as agents, a role that Holsten says can be unhealthy if an athlete is performing only for mom or dad. “Are you playing because your father is a fanatic with eighteen tapes on his lap?” she needs to know, or do you have your own passion for your sport?



Even when drawing from a pool of talent that includes all-conference and all-state teams, Olympic Development and premier leagues, and touring all-stars, it can be a mistake to recruit based solely on skill and academic qualifications. Mestieri, watching a lineman at the Massachusetts camp, said, "He's a tough kid. He's our kind of guy." Or, as Holsten put it, "Heart is a huge factor. ... Is this a player who's going to go through a brick wall for you? Is she going to do four years for you? Is that more important [than skill alone]? I think yes."

She and other coaches say they want to cull their recruiting pool down to not only athletes whom coaches would like to bring to Mayflower Hill but to athletes who don't want to go anywhere else.

Getting to that point requires coaches to sell not just their programs and the College, but to be able to distinguish Colby from its NESCAC peers. Mestieri, for one, says his program has its own defining characteristics just as the College does. He sells the quality of the faculty, the supportive community, and the beautiful campus. He looks for a commitment to football (Blue Team Pride, the team's motto, reflects hard work and an unselfish team approach) but counsels potential recruits that academics is absolutely the first priority at Colby. "We tell a kid, 'Pick a school where you would be happy if you weren't playing football—if you got hurt,'" Mestieri said.

And pick they do—earlier than ever.

"They know that for student-athletes, early decision is the way to go," Holsten said. This year she had a player write in June to say she would be applying early decision to Colby, the earliest that's happened, Holsten said. Even those players who by summer have not yet made a decision about where they'll apply make sure the coaches know Colby is on the list. "I have narrowed down my list to four schools," one prep-school player wrote in an e-mail to Holsten this summer, with the early-decision deadline still months away, "and I'm very serious about Colby." How serious is serious enough? For Mestieri, it's more than just an athlete's desire to go to Colby, Mid-

dlebury, or Williams. "So many kids are hung up on going to the NESCAC schools no matter which one it is," he said. "We want kids who want to go *here*."

Holsten looks for the same desire to go to Colby when she sits in her office with a potential recruit—an interview that, by design, leaves parents waiting in the hall. It's not hard to pick out the player who can't wait to put on a Colby jersey, she said. "You can see it the moment they come in the door."

But before bringing them in the door, a considerable amount of work takes place. From April to February (yes, that's 11 months of the year), football coaches are doing what Mestieri calls "banging the phones." Meanwhile, Holsten is talking to coaches, fielding tips, sifting through the vast amount of information on hundreds of players.

Who is strongest academically? Will a player require support from athletics through the admissions process? If so, how much support will be necessary? What else will he or she contribute to the College?

And there are other questions. Does the player have that distinguishing spark that coaches look for? Will the player fit in well with the older players? Could the player become a team leader?

Back in Lexington, Mestieri still was in the early stages of this long but crucial process. He sought out players who already had contacted him at Colby. He threaded his way through the crowds, chatted with high school coaches, was buttonholed by others. "He's had high honors, took a couple of AP courses," said a prep school coach from Massachusetts, plugging one of his players. From another coach it was, "He's not the most skilled kid I've ever had but he's a hard worker. A great kid."

And then sometimes it is a serendipitous moment, the play that catches a coach's eye, that starts the long process that can determine where a player spends his college years. "That guy throws the ball nice," Mestieri said, eyeing a quarterback, running a finger down his list. "Twenty-two in purple. I've got to find out who that guy is." 🐼





**“The overnight visits gave me such a good look at the kind of people who are there. Are these people you want to spend four years with? That’s really what set Colby apart.”**

*Kevin Bird '08, a defensive end on the football team, who enrolled at Colby after being recruited by several NESCAC schools.*



Clockwise from top left, Katherine Koleski '08, Amanda Comeau '09, and Meghan Herlihy '08 take to the field in an early scrimmage; Football Coach Ed Mestieri leans over the line of scrimmage during a preseason practice; Women's Soccer Coach Jen Holsten '90 gives Comeau some tips; Mestieri and Assistant Coach Tom Dexter compare notes on high school players at the Colby-Bates-Bowdoin skills camp; tailback Chris Bashaw '08 of Rutland, Mass.

