

20 Secrets
to
Success
for NCAA Student-Athletes
Who Won't Go Pro

Rick Burton

Jake Hirshman

Norm O'Reilly, PhD

Andy Dolich

Heather Lawrence, PhD

Foreword by Oliver Luck

Afterword by Pat O'Conner

Part **I**

Succeeding as a
Student-Athlete

Secret **I** Create and Follow Your Student-Athlete Plan

THE SECRET IN A FEW WORDS

There is an old saying that failing to plan is planning to fail. Sure, it's a simple twist on a few words, but the second part of the saying is where the big outcome rests. No plan means you fail. For many that word "plan" is probably mysterious or simply a hassle. Most of us remember in elementary school having to produce an outline that used roman numerals, capital letters, and arabic numerals. Many of us thought it was stupid to be forced to outline a report on birds or the state of Tennessee. Why couldn't we just start writing the report? The reason was that "the plan" (i.e., the outline) would make writing the story so much easier. For student-athletes, the creation of a plan, simple or otherwise, is a massive determinant in achieving post-athletic career success.

CREATE AND FOLLOW YOUR STUDENT-ATHLETE PLAN

When we asked Oliver Luck, Executive Vice President of the NCAA, about career planning for a student-athlete, he succinctly said, "The backup plan is going pro in your sport." Yes, a leader of the NCAA who played in the NFL is suggesting that a career in pro sports is Plan B. Plan A is your life path based on your academic choices.

Steve Cobb, Director of the Arizona Fall League, said, "It is important to have a plan as an athlete, a roadmap. If you don't have a plan, you aren't going to get to where you want to be. And you can have the best game plan of anyone, but if you don't have the right people supporting you or around you, your plan won't be as effective."

Wise words from these two executives are ones to take to heart, and an indication that you should probably start your plan now.

Most young adults arriving on a college campus as recruited student-athletes (or walk-ons) have both specific and vague goals. And the source of these goals has likely come from life experiences, role models, parents, or peers. Commonly held objectives for freshmen student-athletes entering college include the following:

List No. 1

1. Impress the coaching staff and earn “playing time.”
2. Beat out others on the team and emerge as a “starter.”
3. Take advantage of the university’s training facilities to help achieve Goals 1 and 2.
4. Make new friends and settle into college life.
5. Figure out how to balance athletics with academics and a social life and eventually graduate.
6. Make sure to take care of mental health and consistently make good decisions on sleep, food, socializing, and interpersonal relationships.

Unfortunately, for most student-athletes, there are several other desirable goals that never get stated or are formulated so vaguely that they don’t register until late in an athlete’s senior year. Those goals look a lot more like this:

List No. 2

1. Identify a professional work career that seems exciting and will sustain the lifestyle I want for the many years after I finish playing my sport.
2. Graduate in four or five years with a degree in a major that will enhance the procurement and enjoyment of my future professional career.
3. Graduate with honors or a GPA that will impress future employers or make admission to graduate, medical, or law school possible.
4. Take advantage of every single Athletic Department and University/College offering that makes me more accomplished and more functional for life after college.
5. Build an individual brand that resonates with teachers, administrators, the media, and future employers.

6. Join professional groups on campus or attend professional presentations that facilitate the development of a well-rounded individual and not “just” a “jock” or athlete.
7. Take advantage of the travel opportunities related to my sport and get to know the different cities and countries I might visit. Get out and explore.

ROB SMITH

(former student-athlete, Head Baseball Coach at Ohio University)

I didn't have a plan, and I was very misguided early on in the process. I had some struggles, and I didn't really get things going until after my first year in school. I learned how to start prioritizing things like my academics, because the baseball wasn't hard to prioritize.

I was also the first person in my family to graduate from college, so academics wasn't a highly emphasized thing in our house, and I got buried early on because of that.

The plan component is probably more important than the goal-setting component because you can't reach your goals without a plan. It's important to understand what your tasks are and what needs to be done to execute them. As Herm Edwards, former NFL star, would say, “a goal without a plan is just a wish.” The plan is far more important than the goal.

If all you are concerned with is the endgame with no real process, then more often than not, you will fail. If you're like the 99 percent of us who walk on the planet who can't just show up and play, or have great skills without training as much, you must think about the process.

You already know which of the two lists above you naturally gravitated toward. And, granted, as a seventeen- or eighteen-year-old landing on a college campus for the first time (carrying the weight of an athletic scholarship and the pride of parents, guardians, or an entire “village”), the reason you were recruited as a student-athlete was because of your athletic skill. So, logically, it makes sense to “stick to what got you here.”

But here's what makes that natural inclination to simplify tricky. Media coverage of student-athletes around you will reveal many starters or prized recruits who believe they will go pro in their sport. Since they believe they will go to the NFL, NBA, WNBA, NHL, MLB, MLS, LPGA, PGA, WTA, or the Olympics, their goals rarely go beyond numbers 1–3 in list 1. So their goal-setting is simple. Get noticed, get media coverage, get drafted/selected. And the faster the better.

But here's the biggest secret of all that we'll keep repeating in this book: 99 percent of all collegiate student-athletes will never play professionally or represent their country in the Olympic Games.¹ Yes, some will . . . and there is nothing wrong with keeping that particular dream alive . . . but if 100 percent believe they will play professionally and 99 percent will fail at that ambition,

then a key secret for the 99 percent is to hedge your bet (even just a little) so you have a safety net for the day your ACL tears or the coaching staff starts taking playing time away from you. If trends hold, on average you have a good sixty-ish years to live after you stop playing a high-performance sport.

The idea of a safety net for college athletes is a well-supported idea based on previous research in the area.²

Said another way, college (in general) covers four years. That's approximately 1,400 days, between the first day and graduation, and 200 weeks. If you are an elite athlete, you may train, practice, or compete in your sport during each of those 45 months. But how much will you put into preparation for week 201? That's the week after you graduate and realize you aren't going back to College Station (Texas), Collegeville (Minnesota), or State College (Pennsylvania) that next August.

This is where planning comes in. The building of the safety net. It is the effort you put into everything other than your sport. Sure, there are a lot of hours that will disappear. If you average eight hours of sleep for 1,400 days, you will lose 467 days (almost 16 months) sleeping. That's right . . . 33 percent of your college career will be spent sleeping. Eating won't take up another year but it will take up entire days and months when all the hours are added up.

And how about your sport? If you average three hours a day (every day) in pursuit of your goal of more playing time, you will lose another 175 days. The bottom line? There is less time than you imagine available for establishing and actually accomplishing that "other" priority, professional career success.

So how do you create a plan that lets you master this initial secret?

The very first thing to do is to really understand your schedule. Many around you will assume you are not disciplined enough to set a schedule that fits your long-term goals . . . or even the goals of your head coach. That's why forces beyond your control will set practice times, conditioning times, eating times (Training Table), class times, study times (mandatory Study Hall), injury rehabilitation times, and sometimes even bedtimes.

All of a sudden, one thing missing in your calendar is free time. This is a hard realization for many and it often comes as a surprise to learn that one day you wake up and realize there is no time to hear a guest speaker on campus or to join a campus organization featuring a topic or profession that interests you. The choice has been made for you. Classes, practice, eat, study, sleep. Repeat for seasons on end.

This is not to say that you won't have any free time at all . . . but free time is often not "free" and it is sometimes the hardest time to spend wisely. So, a part of this first secret is learning how to schedule your free time to plan and accomplish the bigger-picture goals you want to achieve.

One trick is developing lists of things you want to do or see. Lists are also fun because you can throw them away as soon as you make them or you can carry them around for years. Lists can be created in spare time, boring time,

while eating or, as some people do, as your day starts. They can be “Must Do” lists or “Dreaming to Do” notations. Here are a few to consider:

- Places I Would Like to Visit on Vacation
- Places Where I Would Like to Live
- Dream Jobs
- Books I Would Like to Read
- People I Would Like to Meet
- Potential Mentors I Should Connect With
- Musical Acts I Want to See before I Am 30
- 10 Celebrities I Would Invite to Dinner
- Cars I Would Like to Fix Up and Own
- Hobbies I Would Like to Have
- Grad Schools I Would Consider Attending
- Meals I Would Eat if the Zombie Apocalypse Was Starting in One Week
- Locations Where I Could Outlast the *Walking Dead* Zombies

Your “Dream Jobs” consideration may be the last thing most readers would construct, but in reality, should probably be among the first. Instead, responses such as the ones below are something you may catch yourself saying . . .

- I don’t have a dream job. I’ve never thought about that.
- I want to own the Dallas Cowboys or get hired as the general manager of the New York Rangers.
- My dream job is to work for _____ but I know I could never get them to hire me.
- None of my dream job companies recruit at my university.
- What do you mean by dream job? Do you mean like working for someone cool or just doing a task that’s easy?
- What’s the difference between a dream job and a dream company?
- Dream jobs don’t exist. That’s fantasy for people who believe that stuff that if you follow your dreams, you can be happy. Where I come from, there are no dream jobs. Just stupid jobs.

For some, the “Dream Jobs” list would include the following companies:

- Apple or Samsung
- Google or Mozilla Firefox
- Facebook or Twitter
- EA Sports or Activision

- The NFL, WNBA, MMA, WTA, NASCAR, or USOC
- Under Armour or Adidas
- Microsoft or Dell
- Nike or Abercrombie & Fitch
- New York Liberty or the LA Clippers
- ESPN, NBC Sports, or Fox Sports
- Disney or 20th Century Fox

As you can see, the list can feature many potential careers, but the power of the list is that it functions as a vehicle for imagination, creativity, and accomplishment. The old adage that “it won’t happen unless you write it down” is true for many and is a strong rationale for lists and plans in general.

One list that is not shown in the many already suggested above is this:

What I Want Out of My Four Years at _____ University.

As an exercise, try making such a list in which you limit yourself to only ten achievements. Then let’s see if the hypothetical list we created here (during our imaginary freshman year) would have any similarity to something you might create:

1. Graduate in four years with a 3.5 GPA.
2. Get hired by Nike to work in an area connected to my sport.
3. Make friends with at least four professors who are intellectually stimulating and committed to my success through introductions and networking.
4. Become a member of at least one campus organization that has nothing to do with sports.
5. Participate in an overseas course that is either a semester abroad or a shorter study tour in another country (less than twenty-one days).
6. Give back to my sport or college community by coaching or using my team’s access to less-privileged individuals.
7. Make three lifelong friends who will be there for me when times are tough (and for whom I will be there when they need me).
8. Get real about how much I will owe in college loans or in appreciation for those who helped me get through college for free.
9. Read four books that were not assigned but that will stretch my imagination or stimulate my intellectual curiosity.

10. Dominate my friends in video games such as *EA SPORTS FIFA*, *Madden NFL*, or *Call of Duty: Black Ops*.

Bonus Extra: Cure cancer, walk on the moon, get my screenplay purchased, record with Beyoncé.

Bonus Plus: Actually take the time to do another Top 10 list.

Again, you should see that the creation of the list is not hard, but committing to the plan that will deliver the itemized outcomes requires long-term awareness. The other piece in the puzzle is figuring out how to evaluate progress toward your various goals. When a student starts his or her freshman year, graduation seems light years away. Four years. At least 120 credits. So many term papers and final exams.

Sheesh. It's hard, then, to write "Graduate in four years with a 3.5 GPA." But if that is the goal, the 3.5 GPA allows for semester-by-semester evaluation. Like an athlete, you will have either exceeded your goal or missed it. If you are ahead, you make plans for leveraging that success. If you are behind, you need to make adjustments. GPA is a great example of the kind of thing to evaluate since it is measurable semester by semester, course by course.

Football movies are famous for their stirring halftime speeches in which the coach convinces the players to put their first half mistakes behind them, to overcome their distrust of each other, to block out the distractions of the crowd and "win one for the Gipper" or some other clichéd personage (how about the speech in *Rudy* or inspirational words said to Michael Oher in *The Blind Side*). Sometimes players get chewed out at halftime. Sometimes players get the silent treatment. But invariably, the announcers covering the game, witnessing a great comeback, suggest that adjustments "must've gotten made at halftime and would you look at how this team is responding!"

You should feel the same about your ability to adjust. Traditionally, school years are usually broken into semesters (two) or quarters (three) and after final exams there is a point when you know your GPA for the grading period and therefore for your academic career so far. You know whether you are meeting NCAA academic progress requirements, are eligible, are likely to get announced as having made the Dean's List, or maybe have a shot at making an All-Conference Academic list.

If your grades aren't what you want, then adjustments must be made. Perhaps your adjustments include one or more of the following:

- Paying more attention to course details
- Skipping fewer classes
- Changing studying habits

- Working with different tutors
- Studying with different friends
- Allowing more time for homework and test prep
- Making more time to meet professors and getting to know them
- Asking for help earlier in the semester
- Making a commitment to do better by working harder
- Allocating more time to studying

Perhaps, as you read this, you have never had, nor expect to have, grades that fall below your expectations. If that's the case, you can move on to any of the other items listed above in "What I Want Out of My Four Years at _____ University."

The second bullet point is getting a job at Nike, and while we randomly selected that particular company, the goal can be evaluated just like grades. If you want to work in athletic apparel and equipment when you graduate (or technology, media, medicine, or music), the same approach to accomplishment can be evaluated regularly (and often with the help of a list that is focused on the goal):

- Whom did I meet from my desired industry this term?
- What did I read about my desired company this month?
- Who at my school knows someone working in the field I want to enter?
- How can I get networked to an employee at my dream company?
- What more did I learn about the field I want to work in?
- Will I be ready for a job interview (or internship opportunity) if one suddenly materializes?

Interim measurable goals could be a class project opportunity, a consulting project, a practicum, or an internship with that company or one in its field.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

One of the most important secrets to learn during your time in college is how to create a plan for success that leads to a desirable outcome. It is not as simple as creating random lists (although that can certainly help) or banking on the hope that things will fall into place for you. An essential element is establishing concrete goals and having a true desire to accomplish those goals and "check them off." This is what will lay the foundation for you to position yourself for career success.

ERIK PRICE

(Associate Commissioner at the Pac-12 Conference)

I think it's very important to have an academic plan, do internships, and travel during the summer. Traveling exposes you to new perspectives and provides you with new experiences. You don't necessarily have to have a plan that is divorced from being an athlete, such as coaching, training, or strength and conditioning. I have seen a lot of student-athletes be successful and go into ancillary careers such as those. Every student-athlete should have two paths that they want to follow that are not "playing sports" related, so that the last time you suit up, you are not in a crisis afterwards. For example, one of the most important parts of your plan is graduating, and having a graduate school plan because advanced degrees are what help you get the jobs that you can sit in for life, generally speaking.

Goals may change and dreams may get upended . . . but failing to plan is planning to fail. Why let that happen when a little effort can set anyone on a path to a much more fulfilling future?