

High School to College Athletic Participation: A Comprehensive Analysis

By Coach Shan AI

Executive Summary

The transition from high school to collegiate athletics is characterized by high competition & significant variation across sports & governing bodies. As of the 2024–25 academic year, high school sports participation reached a record high of approximately 8.27 million students. However, only an estimated 6% to 7% of these athletes advance to the NCAA level, with the figure rising modestly to 7% or 8% when including the NAIA, NJCAA, & other associations.

Key findings include:

- **Highly Selective Pipelines:** Sports such as Men's Basketball (3.6%) & Men's Wrestling (3.0%) have some of the lowest transition rates to the NCAA, while Women's Ice Hockey (32.1%) & Men's Lacrosse (14.7%) offer the highest statistical probability of collegiate participation.
- **Structural Diversity:** While the NCAA remains the primary governing body with over 1,100 member institutions & 554,298 student-athletes, organizations like the NAIA (~87,000 athletes) & NJCAA (~60,000 athletes) provide critical alternative pathways.
- **Growth Sectors:** Girls' wrestling & flag football are experiencing rapid expansion at the high school level; women's wrestling became an official NCAA championship sport in the 2025–26 season.
- **Data Limitations:** Transition percentages are estimates based on annual snapshots rather than longitudinal tracking. Rates are often skewed in sports where club or travel team participation is the primary recruiting ground rather than high school programs.

National High School to College Transition Rates

The NCAA provides the most standardized data regarding the probability of high school athletes competing at the collegiate level. These figures compare the number of high school participants to NCAA roster spots within the same academic year.

Men's Sports: NCAA Participation Probabilities Table (2024–25) ↓

Men's Sports: NCAA Participation Probabilities (2024–25)

Sport	HS Participants	Overall % HS to NCAA	% to D1	% to D2	% to D3
Baseball	472,598	8.8%	2.7%	2.6%	3.5%
Basketball	540,704	3.6%	1.1%	1.1%	1.5%
Cross Country	241,565	6.4%	2.2%	1.8%	2.4%
Football	1,029,588	8.1%	3.4%	2.1%	2.6%
Golf	162,357	5.4%	1.8%	1.5%	2.1%
Ice Hockey	32,253	14.1%	5.2%	0.9%	8.0%
Lacrosse	113,696	14.7%	3.4%	3.3%	7.9%
Soccer	484,908	5.9%	1.4%	1.7%	2.8%
Swimming & Diving	119,102	8.5%	3.3%	1.5%	3.7%
Tennis	158,667	4.7%	1.5%	1.0%	2.1%
Track & Field	644,235	5.4%	1.9%	1.5%	2.0%

Sport	HS Participants	Overall % HS to NCAA	% to D1	% to D2	% to D3
Volleyball	95,972	3.6%	0.6%	0.9%	2.2%
Water Polo	21,756	5.7%	3.3%	0.8%	1.6%
Wrestling	300,214	3.0%	0.9%	0.8%	1.3%

Women's Sports: NCAA Participation Probabilities (2024–25)

Sport	HS Participants	Overall % HS to NCAA	% to D1	% to D2	% to D3
Basketball	356,240	4.7%	1.4%	1.4%	1.9%
Cross Country	191,733	8.0%	3.3%	2.0%	2.7%
Field Hockey	50,764	13.0%	3.9%	1.9%	7.2%
Golf	85,385	6.9%	2.7%	1.9%	2.3%
Ice Hockey	9,589	32.1%	9.3%	2.0%	20.7%
Lacrosse	99,292	14.0%	4.4%	3.3%	6.3%

Soccer	393,048	7.9%	2.8%	2.2%	3.0%
Softball	338,315	6.5%	2.1%	1.9%	2.5%
Swimming & Diving	138,303	9.4%	4.2%	1.6%	3.6%
Tennis	204,721	4.0%	1.4%	0.9%	1.7%
Track & Field	513,808	6.5%	2.8%	2.7%	2.0%
Volleyball	492,799	4.0%	1.3%	1.2%	1.6%
Water Polo	18,023	7.4%	4.5%	1.1%	1.7%

**Female Wrestling Sponsorship & Participation (2024–25). A total of 74,064 girls participated in high school wrestling nationwide during the 2024–25 school year. Approximately 93 to 95 NCAA schools reported sponsoring women's wrestling during the 2024–25 academic year. Over 1,700 female student-athletes participated in the sport across the collegiate level.*

High School Participation Landscape (2024–25)

High school athletics reached a historic peak in 2024–25 with **8,266,244** total participants (4,726,648 boys and 3,539,596 girls).

Primary Participation Drivers

- **Boys:** 11-player football remains the dominant sport with over 1 million participants, followed by outdoor track & field, basketball.
- **Girls:** Outdoor track & field leads in participation, followed closely by volleyball, soccer.

Notable Growth Trends Bullets ↓

- **Girls Flag Football:** Participation grew by 60% in a single year, reaching 68,847 athletes.
- **Wrestling:** Girls' wrestling participation increased by 15% (74,064 participants), making it the 12th most popular sport for girls. Boys' wrestling also saw a resurgence, surpassing 300,000 participants for the first time in several years.
- **Club Influence:** For sports such as ice hockey, tennis, & gymnastics, many college-bound athletes compete on club or travel teams rather than high school teams. This can result in inflated "transition percentages" because the high school denominator does not capture the full talent pool.

Collegiate Governing Bodies & Program Counts

The collegiate landscape is divided among several major associations, each with varying scholarship rules & program densities.

Structural Comparison of Associations

Association	Member Schools	Estimated Athletes	Footprint
NCAA D1	361	~190,000+	Highest scholarship limits; major media exposure.
NCAA D2	292	~120,000+	Regional focus; partial athletic scholarships.
NCAA D3	422	~200,000+	Merit, academic, need-based scholarship only; academic-first model.
NAIA	250	87,000	Private/public colleges; offering athletic aid.
NJCAA	500+	60,000+	2-year colleges; critical transfer pathway.

CCCAA	109	25,000	California-only junior college system.
NCWA	150+	N/A	Wrestling-specific; includes club & varsity programs.

NCAA Team Counts (2025–26)

Sport	Men's Teams	Women's Teams
Baseball	942	—
Basketball	1,072	1,081
Football	665	—
Soccer	823	1,029
Softball	—	980
Volleyball	206	1,055
Wrestling	285	111
Lacrosse	393	525

Case Study: The Wrestling Pipeline

Wrestling serves as a unique example of how collegiate associations beyond the NCAA provide essential opportunities.

Participation & Continuation

- **Men's Wrestling:** While the NCAA transition rate is low (3.0%), the inclusion of all collegiate divisions (NAIA, NJCAA, & NCWA) brings the total continuation rate for high school boys to approximately **5.2%**.
- **Women's Wrestling:** This is currently the fastest-growing collegiate sport. The NCAA identified 95 schools with programs in 2024–25 (up from 76 the previous year), and the sport will held its first official NCAA championship in 2026.
- **The NCWA Role:** The National Collegiate Wrestling Association (NCWA) operates outside the standard varsity track, supporting over 150 collegiate programs & providing a platform for 578 male and 195 female athletes at its national championships.

Methodological Considerations

Understanding the data requires acknowledging specific reporting nuances:

1. **Duplicate Counts:** National high school surveys count "participation instances." An athlete who plays 3 sports is counted 3 times in the total 8.26 million figure.
2. **Overlap & Transfers:** NJCAA & CCCAA athletes often transfer to NCAA or NAIA schools. Consequently, adding percentages from different associations together may result in double-counting athletes.
3. **Variable Reporting:** Unlike the NCAA, organizations like the NAIA & NJCAA do not always publish sport-specific high school-to-college conversion rates in a standardized format.
4. **Scholarship Scarcity:** While many athletes compete in college, fewer than 2% of high school athletes receive athletic scholarships at the NCAA Division I or II levels. Division III institutions do not offer athletic scholarships.

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