

The Roadmap to the Next Level: A Student-Athlete's Guide to College Participation Data

By Coach Shan AI

1. Introduction: Understanding the "Athletic Funnel"

Every year, millions of students step onto high school courts, fields, & mats with the dream of competing at the collegiate level. As a counselor & data educator, I want to help you see that the path to recruitment isn't a mystery—it's a process. Think of the transition from high school to college as a "funnel." To navigate it successfully, you must understand the relationship between the **denominator** (the total pool of high school participants) & the **numerator** (the limited number of college roster spots).

The Scale of Competition National high school sports participation has reached a record high of approximately **8.26 million student-athletes**.

While this number is massive, the "numerator" is smaller: roughly 554,298 student-athletes participate across all NCAA divisions. I want you to look at these numbers not as a closed door, but as a map to find the right door for your specific journey. While the broad statistics can seem daunting, the "odds" of reaching the next level change significantly depending on your sport & the specific landscape of that sport's collegiate ecosystem.

2. The Statistical Landscape: NCAA Participation Rates

The NCAA provides the most authoritative data regarding the transition from high school to college play. The tables below break down the likelihood of a high school athlete reaching an NCAA roster (Divisions I, II, or III) based on 2024–25 data.

Men's Sports: NCAA Participation Odds Table ↓

Men's Sports: NCAA Participation Odds

Sport	High School Participants	Overall % to NCAA	% to Division I
Lacrosse	113,696	14.7%	3.4%
Ice Hockey	32,253	14.1%	5.2%
Baseball	472,598	8.8%	2.7%
Swimming & Diving	119,102	8.5%	3.3%
Football	1,029,588	8.1%	3.4%
Soccer	484,908	5.9%	1.4%
Basketball	540,704	3.6%	1.1%
Volleyball	95,972	3.6%	0.6%
Wrestling	300,214	3.0%	0.9%

Women's Sports: NCAA Participation Odds Table ↓

Women's Sports: ***NCAA Participation Odds

Sport	High School Participants	Overall % to NCAA	% to Division I
Ice Hockey	9,589	32.1%	9.3%
Lacrosse	99,292	14.0%	4.4%
Field Hockey	50,764	13.0%	3.9%
Swimming & Diving	138,303	9.4%	4.2%
Soccer	393,048	7.9%	2.8%
Softball	338,315	6.5%	2.1%
Basketball	356,240	4.7%	1.4%
Volleyball	492,799	4.0%	1.3%
Tennis	204,721	4.0%	1.4%

***Women's wrestling became a "NCAA Championship Sport" in 2026 & there were 6-7 NCAA DI Women's Wrestling programs sponsored then.

Analysis: The "So What?" for Students ↓

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When looking at these numbers, we can identify clear trends regarding which transitions are statistically "easiest" or "toughest" in terms of raw NCAA roster availability.

- **Men's Top 3 (Easiest Transitions):** Lacrosse (**14.7%**), Ice Hockey (**14.1%**), & Baseball (**8.8%**).
- **Men's Bottom 3 (Toughest Transitions):** Wrestling (**3.0%**), Basketball (**3.6%**), & Volleyball (**3.6%**).
- **Women's Top 3 (Easiest Transitions):** Ice Hockey (**32.1%**), Lacrosse (**14.0%**), & Field Hockey (**13.0%**).
- **Women's Bottom 3 (Toughest Transitions):** Tennis (**4.0%**), Volleyball (**4.0%**), & Basketball (**4.7%**).

*******Women's Gymnastics (Not Included in Table):** There are 62 NCAA Division 1 women's gymnastics teams with about 1,286 total participants, and high school girls gymnastics features approximately 14,996 participants nationwide.*

Higher transition percentages often correlate with smaller high school participation pools or highly specialized infrastructure requirements, such as ice rinks or lacrosse fields. Conversely, the low transition rates in basketball & volleyball are a reflection of the sports' global popularity plus the minimal equipment needed to compete, which creates a massive high school denominator. However, these raw numbers can be deceptive; to find your true path, we must look at why sports like ice hockey & basketball sit at opposite ends of the spectrum.

*****High school girls gymnastics is an anomaly and was not included exhaustively here. Many high level high school girl gymnasts train in clubs and bypass college altogether. See below for more on the "Club Sport Factor".*

3. The "Hockey vs. Basketball" Paradox: Why the Data Can Be Deceptive

A glance at the data might suggest that it is "easier" to play college ice hockey than college basketball. However, the "Club Sport Factor" creates a significant statistical nuance that student-athletes must understand.

For sports like Ice Hockey, Tennis, * Lacrosse, many elite players do not compete for their high school teams; instead, they play exclusively for high-level **club or travel teams**. Because the NFHS denominator only counts school-registered participants, the transition rate appears artificially high.

*****In the case of girls gymnastics, many elite gymnasts do not compete for their high school teams nor college teams; instead, they train exclusively for high-level **clubs or travel teams**.*

Feature	Ice Hockey (Women's example)	Basketball (Men's example)
Data Reality	32.1% transition rate.	3.6% transition rate.
The "Myth"	Nearly 1 in 3 high school players make an NCAA roster.	It is nearly impossible to play at the next level.
The "Reality"	The percentage is skewed because many NCAA recruits come from club teams not counted in the high school total.	The massive high school base (~540k) makes the path to a limited number of roster spots extremely narrow.

It is essential to remember that while these NCAA percentages are the gold standard for data, the NCAA is only one part of a much larger collegiate ecosystem.

4. Expanding the Horizon: The Full Collegiate Ecosystem

Many student-athletes mistakenly believe that "college sports" only means NCAA Division I. In reality, the majority of collegiate opportunities exist in Division III & other athletic associations.

1. **NCAA Division III Primary Benefit: The primary benefit is the emphasis on the "student" in student-athlete, offering the most schools & roster spots without the pressure of a scholarship-only model.** Often overlooked, D3 represents the largest portion of the NCAA, accounting for **21.7% of all varsity-sponsoring schools**. For many sports, D3 offers more total teams & roster spots than D1 or D2.
2. **NAIA (National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics) Primary Benefit: The NAIA provides a highly competitive environment with its own unique scholarship structures & flexibility for smaller institutions.** Comprised of approximately 250 member schools & 87,000 student-athletes, the NAIA is a major pathway that can raise overall transition rates by several percentage points.

3. **NJCAA (JUCO) Primary Benefit:** Junior colleges serve as a vital academic & athletic stepping stone for athletes looking to develop before transferring to a 4-year institution. The NJCAA supports over 60,000 athletes across 500+ colleges & is a significant pipeline for sports like baseball, where it can push the transition rate from 8.8% to over 11%.
4. **CCCAA Primary Benefit:** This association provides a robust, state-wide California community college system for regional athletes to compete at a high level. The CCCAA governs 24 sports across 108+ colleges, supporting approximately 25,000 student-athletes within the California system.

By exploring this broader landscape, you'll find that the "participation explosion" in certain sports is creating more opportunities than ever before.

5. Case Study: Wrestling & Rapidly Growing Sports

Wrestling provides a perfect example of why looking beyond the "NCAA-only" data is crucial for an accurate perspective.

- **The Wrestling Pipeline:** While Men's Wrestling appears to have a very low **3.0%** transition rate at the NCAA level, the inclusion of NAIA, NJCAA, & NCWA (National Collegiate Wrestling Association) programs raises the total continuation rate to approximately **5.2%**.
- **The Women's Wrestling Explosion:** Women's wrestling is currently one of the fastest-growing sports in the country. It became an official NCAA championship sport in the 2025–26 season, with 95 schools (all divisions) & over 1,700 athletes already participating.
- **Emerging Sports:** Other sports are seeing similar surges. Girls' Flag Football, for example, saw a **60% increase** in high school participation over the last year.

"The landscape is shifting rapidly. Women's wrestling & girls' flag football are no longer just 'emerging'—they are becoming pillars of the collegiate athletic map."

6. Key Takeaways for Aspiring Student-Athletes

As you navigate your recruiting process, remember that the data is a tool to help you find your fit. Keep these 3 core lessons in mind:

1. **Look Beyond Division I:** Because NCAA Division III, NAIA, & NJCAA schools often have more total teams plus roster spots, your best chance of competing—and your best academic fit—may reside outside of the D1 spotlight.

2. **Understand the "Club Factor":** If you play a sport like hockey, lacrosse, or tennis, be aware that you are competing for spots against a massive pool of club-only athletes who may not appear in high school statistics. (*****This also applies to high school aged girls gymnastics.*)
3. **The System is Tiered:** While a **"3.6% chance"** in basketball sounds slim, that number only accounts for 1 association. When you factor in the full ecosystem, the room for dedicated, hardworking athletes is much larger than the initial data suggests.

Main Data Source Attribution:

- NCAA "Probability of Competing Beyond High School" (2024–25)
- NFHS High School Athletics Participation Survey (2024–25)
- ScholarshipStats Collegiate Participation Records (2024–25)

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