

Beyond D-I: Navigating Collegiate Hockey Options – A Parent’s Perspective

Ask any group of Squirts or 10Us if they’d like to play college hockey someday, and the overwhelming response will be, “Yes!” Around here of course, those youthful intentions are typically colored maroon & gold – or perhaps for some, the hues of other nearby NCAA D-I teams. However, as even the best of our young players progress into and through high school, most learn that not only do the colors of their dreams eventually require tweaking, but so do the expectations around both level and location.

As both a high school coach and a parent of kids who recently went through the Wayzata youth and high school programs and then on to college, I have an appreciation for how difficult it can be for our teenagers to adjust those youthful assumptions - and to reconcile the desire to keep playing the game they love with the numerous other priorities inherent in college planning/decision-making. For the vast majority of high school players who don’t have NCAA D-I schools knocking at their door, the onus of determining the next step falls on them. And if the desire is to continue playing competitively, the trick becomes figuring out how hockey can fit into the college decision, not how college can fit around hockey.

“If I play juniors for a year or two, *maybe* I could play in the MIAC.” “They really want me, but I think I’d *maybe* prefer a bigger school.” “*Maybe* I should look more D-I, but do I really want to risk being stuck as a 4th-liner?” “*Maybe* I should consider my lacrosse options instead.” “Since they don’t have my field of study, *maybe* I’ll just do a different major.” “*Maybe* that’s too far from home.” “*Maybe* I’ll wish I’d gone farther from home.” “*Maybe* it’s just easier if I don’t play hockey.”

So many maybes, and plenty more. But each of them, along with the other questions and concerns they spawn, are very real – and can be quite daunting to students as they strive to maturely navigate what can be one of life’s biggest and most stressful processes.

My hope, based largely on our family’s experience over the past several years, is to provide some perspective and encouragement, so that the, “What’s next for me hockey-wise?” question doesn’t have to be fraught with disappointment and confusion when tackling those college decisions, or even in the anticipatory or anxious developmental years leading up to it. The bottom line is that for any player capable of playing high school hockey at Wayzata, there almost certainly is a good competitive college fit, most often in NCAA D-III or the ACHA.

Our second eldest, who graduated from WHS in 2020, was a two-year varsity letterwinner but more of a 3rd-pair defenseman. He could have tried juniors for a couple years with the hope of landing a spot with an NCAA D-III school, but he wanted to get started with college right away. Our eldest daughter, a 2022 grad, was recruited by the top MIAC program but decided that she wanted a bigger school, and one that offered her desired field of study. Finally, our youngest graduated this past spring. Like her older sister, she ultimately decided that she wanted a Big Ten-type college experience.

For each of them, a viable, competitive hockey option was a significant variable in their college planning equation, but it wasn’t by any means an overriding one. However, what we learned from each of them is that once at school, hockey quickly became a much bigger and richer part of their college experience than they could possibly have ever imaged. Our ’20 son went to Notre Dame and played for their ACHA team. He then played for Cornell last year during his master’s program there. Our ’22 daughter found both her desired large

school and Architecture program, as well as a great ACHA fit, at the University of Michigan where she's currently in her senior season. Finally, our '25 daughter followed her big sister east, but to Michigan State instead. She's having a blast with her new hockey friends after trying-out and securing a spot on their top ACHA team.

One advantageous thing about the colleges they picked is that they are all "hockey schools," in that they each have a big-time men's NCAA D-I program. Thus, there is inherently a hockey feel on campus, along with access for the club teams to those NCAA-quality rinks/facilities. Another aspect is the commitment those programs (and numerous others across NCAA D-III and ACHA) give to providing a truly competitive experience for their student-athletes. For example, tryouts at UMich and MSU occur around Labor Day, with games beginning the latter half of September and continuing through February – or late March if the team makes nationals. And during most of that stretch, there are required practices or drylands/lifts four or five days a week, plus a couple games. Also, for all three of our kids, the travel experiences from hockey have been amazing. Some cities they've played in include: Chicago, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, St. Louis, Denver, Boulder, Salt Lake City, Tempe, Nashville, Fort Myers, Lynchburg, Providence, Boston, Amherst, Torino (Italy), and numerous other college towns across the Midwest and Great Lakes regions.

So, what does all of this mean for those players and their parents who are looking to select a viable hockey option for college? For what it's worth, here are my big-picture nuggets of info/advice.

1.) For those who don't have the opportunity to go NCAA D-I (the vast majority of us), there are wonderful options to continue playing competitive hockey. In this area of the country, with the MIAC (9 men's teams, 10 women), WIAC (6 men, 5 women), and the NCHA (10 men & women), there are plenty of NCAA D-III schools. (Total number nationwide is 81 for men, 89 for women). These are perfect for those who want a small college experience. At a high school as big as Wayzata, however, there are often students who prefer a larger university feel not available at NCAA D-III. The other potential issue is field of study options. Many of the liberal arts colleges that comprise the bulk of NCAA D-III don't offer majors in Engineering, Business, Nursing, or other popular areas of interest for many students. This is often when ACHA options come into play.

The American Collegiate Hockey Association (ACHA) is the governing body of almost all non-NCAA college hockey programs in the country. *(Note: The vast majority are club teams; however, there are several NCAA D-II or NAIA schools that classify their top ACHA team as a fully-funded varsity program alongside their other NCAA or NAIA varsity sports).* The ACHA includes three men's divisions and two women's. On the men's side, in the 2025-'26 season there are 75 D1 teams, 195 D2, and 162 D3. For the women, there are 34 D1 and 85 D2. One key thing to know about the ACHA is the vast difference of competitiveness across, but often even within, its divisions. At its lower rungs, there are some teams that maybe skate once or twice a week and who play ten or less games per year, making it not much more than a recreational experience. And in some non-traditional hockey markets, teams might be driving an hour or more each way for ice. However, at the ACHA's D1 level especially, there are teams that are on the ice often seven days a week and play well over 40 games a season. The most serious programs have sizable coaching staffs and extensive recruiting processes. And many teams enjoy large followings, with on-campus arenas and dedicated broadcasting of games. (For example, Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia – a school that has a team in each of the five ACHA divisions - regularly sells out its 4,000-seat on-campus arena for its D1 men's games.

2.) Reasonable people can disagree on what the best developmental philosophy is for young players as they make their way from 10s through 14s/15s, or even through JV/V. Is it better to be a bottom player on a better team or a top player on a lesser team? I could argue either way. (Actually, I think I have). However, one perspective that I've confidently settled into these past few years is that when one is looking at college as the final landing spot (i.e., no more levels to climb), it's preferable to target being a relatively good player on your chosen team. So many college programs, NCAA D-I especially, carry such big rosters - often turning them over deeply from year to year - that one can't assume that if you come in as a fringe player (4th/5th-liner or a 6th-8th defenseman) you're going to move up in the ranks. Committing to that "reach" program simply because it's a more notable name or prestigious level may feel good early on, but often leads to regrets when the healthy scratches persist or meaningful playing time just doesn't materialize. My advice is to find a team and level where you can contribute quickly and feel like a valuable part of the program from day one. The transition to college is difficult enough without hockey adding to the stress. It should instead be a way to make that transition a bit easier, healthier, and more enjoyable.

3.) Parents, when the time is right, help your kids in the "adjustment of youthful assumptions" mentioned earlier. Do so by explaining and reinforcing that hockey opportunities will be there, even if not in the form they were expecting or hoping. And this applies not just to the high school players who are looking to compete collegiately, but even to those who perhaps didn't make the high school program and want to incorporate recreational or intramural options in their college planning. Also, this shouldn't wait until the college search begins in earnest. Having these conversations earlier can help alleviate the stress of what often seems like an all-or-nothing progression through the high school years. No matter where the chips may fall, things will be ok. "Competitive hockey can be a part of your college experience if you want it to be." That message, that perspective, can be very reassuring – for players and parents alike.

One other key thing to keep in mind, parents... You likely know your kids better than they know themselves. Thus, the vast majority of them will need your active yet patient help during the college planning process, and that can start by working through some key questions with them: The type of schools they might be interested in – Big, medium, or small? Public or private? Nearby or far away? Urban, suburban, or rural? Also, talking through majors that best align with their interests and abilities. And of course, given everything above, "How does hockey fit into your equation; and how can I help you navigate that?" Granted, our job as parents isn't to manage all of this, and ultimately, it's on our students to own the process and do the work. However, there's great value in helping them set up the pins. So that they can then focus on knocking them down.

And when it's all said and done, if there happens to be a hockey pin lying there somewhere? Well, how wonderful that can be.

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