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May 21, 2010

Unexpected Turns Mark Athletes' Journey

By **BILL PENNINGTON**

HAVERFORD, Pa. — Each coach at [Haverford College](#) has a similar office along one long corridor in the athletic complex.

Four years ago, Jen Ward's was at the end of the hall, and she was at the end of her rope as a softball coach. She had spent a year trying to recruit a catcher. At the last minute, she got one, but the catcher transferred after one season.

Ward's only notable recruit that year was an outfielder/pitcher from Green Brook, N.J., Cassandra Searls.

"I didn't think of Cassandra as a pitcher," Ward said recently, looking back to 2006. "And while I knew she was a good player, I didn't really know how good." Searls became Ward's pitching ace and the team's career home run leader during four winning seasons.

A few doors from Ward's office, Coach Dave Beccaria had a similarly perplexing baseball recruiting season. He also wanted a catcher and never got one. "Plenty of arms, but I'm not sure who will catch them," he said.

In the next four years, pitching depth proved to be a backbone of teams that twice advanced to the Centennial Conference championship game while compiling a record of 90-60-2.

In the middle of the coaching row, Amy Bergin seemingly had one of the least productive volleyball recruiting seasons four years ago. She had contacted more than 1,000 players and landed two, twins from La Canada, Calif. Rachel and Rebecca Salvo, the "[volleyball twins](#)" as

they are now known on campus, became all-Americans and led Haverford to four conference championships and four N.C.A.A. tournament appearances, including one run to the Round of 16.

As recruit after recruit went elsewhere in 2006, Bergin was asked how she absorbed the disappointment.

“You go home and cry, maybe pound a few beers,” she said.

Bergin laughed recently when she was reminded of that remark.

“I guess it turned out pretty good after all, huh?” she said. “It’s crazy when your job is based on the decisions of 17-year-olds. But I’m getting better at it. And I’ve got two little kids now, so I can’t pound beers anymore.”

The New York Times examined the increasingly competitive athletic recruiting environment at small colleges in a [2005-6 series](#). For a year, Haverford, a highly selective college outside Philadelphia, granted access to its athletic recruiting and admissions process.

The college admitted about 65 recruited athletes, or about 15 percent of the 2006 incoming class. Most of them graduated from Haverford last weekend.

Team success is one way to evaluate the value of the recruiting process, and almost universally, Haverford athletics prospered with nine sports winning 23 conference championships in the past four years. It is perhaps just as revealing, and pertinent, to note that about 25 percent of the recruited athletes had limited playing time, or had careers cut short by injuries or chose to pursue other interests.

The Haverford recruiting class of 2006 included a talented women’s soccer player, Monica Stegman, who spent last fall — what would have been her senior season — at a marine biology laboratory on Cape Cod.

“Academics and other things eventually took precedence,” said Stegman, who also stopped playing because she feared recurring concussions.

Another senior, Nick Farina, was a track and field recruit who stopped running because of an ailment that caused him extreme chest pain. Last year, Farina started a blog and a business

geared toward advising students on financial matters. He researched the enterprise during a year abroad at Oxford.

Stefan Pappius-Lefebvre was a recruited pitcher who lost interest in baseball and quit during his freshman year. He returned to play the next two seasons and developed into one of the conference's best pitchers. An arm injury as a senior ended his collegiate career.

"I played baseball for a long time," said Pappius-Lefebvre, who will enter law school this fall, "and I know the whole college recruiting thing can be a long and crazy process. It worked out for me; I have known other people who would say otherwise. And that's the biggest message. You better pick a college where you will be happy even if you never play a single game. Because you might not."

A vast majority of recruited athletes competed for four years at Haverford. A not insignificant portion of them would probably not have been accepted without their athletic credentials.

To that end, their graduation represents the culmination of a process that began when many of them were in middle school and started playing on travel teams. That commitment usually led to specialized year-round tutoring, then a grueling regimen of recruiting events and a dizzying schedule of summer camps meant to showcase their talents to college coaches.

Most of the Haverford athletes were veterans of this demanding and sometimes dehumanizing recruiting routine.

Four years later, was it all worth it?

"It was for me, and I would do it all again tomorrow," said Searls, who went to pitching instruction twice a week as a teenager and often missed Thursdays and Fridays in high school to attend softball showcases.

Searls, who earned a degree in chemistry, said: "All that work helped me get into a great academic college where I learned and grew. The youth sports recruiting process is unpredictable and fickle, but without it, I'm not the same person."

Brian Fleishhacker, one of Haverford's top lacrosse recruits in 2006, did not disappoint, helping the program reach the N.C.A.A. Division III quarterfinals for the first time last weekend. In high school, Fleishhacker was busy on the recruiting circuit.

“It was a lot of work week after week, and maybe you’re at some summer camp while other kids are at the beach,” he said. “But where you go to college is a huge decision. And every little thing adds up to giving you more exposure and the chance to make the best decision.”

Fleishhacker, who graduated with a degree in economics, was among 10 lacrosse recruits admitted in 2006, all of them on a list Mike Murphy, then the coach, presented to the admissions department. Murphy hoped their athletic credentials would buttress their academic qualifications, which in most cases were within Haverford’s admission standards, or fairly close.

“Was it all worth it to take those 10 kids?” Murphy, now coaching at the [University of Pennsylvania](#), said recently. “What does opportunity cost? Did they take 10 spots from 10 other kids who weren’t athletes? Maybe, maybe not. But I know Haverford is a better place for having those kids around for four years, and not just for all the games they won.”

Three of Murphy’s top 2006 recruits who submitted early-decision applications provide snapshots of the possible outcomes in the ever-evolving recruiting dance.

Alex Guy, a midfielder from Easton, Md., had his application deferred to the regular decision process.

“It was an awful feeling,” said Guy, who was finally accepted in the spring.

But Kevin Friedenber, a standout lacrosse goalie from Needham, Mass., was rejected outright.

“I was devastated,” he said.

John-Paul Cashiola of Houston recalled the joy of opening his acceptance letter, which he knew he received in part because he had been the top goalie on Murphy’s list.

Guy was not the significant contributor he expected to be on the field, but he played all four years and graduated last weekend.

“I made friends on the team that will last for life,” said Guy, who will soon apply to graduate schools and hopes to become a college history professor.

On Sunday, Friedenber will graduate with a degree in history and English from [Swarthmore College](#) — 10 miles from Haverford, its chief rival. He was a two-time all-conference lacrosse

player.

“They say everything happens for a reason, and maybe it does,” Friedenberg said. “Does Haverford wish I ended up there? Probably. Do I wish that? Not at all.”

Cashiola never realized his promise as a goalie. He played some as a freshman, lost the starter's job, then sustained a serious back injury that ended his athletic career. Cashiola has taken a year off from his studies but says he expects to graduate from Haverford next year.

“I didn't work hard enough as a goalie, and there's no cutting corners at that level,” said Cashiola, who is working for an international development company in California. “I wish I had done more. But you could say I used lacrosse as a tool to get a great education, and that is going to serve me well. I'm excited about my future.”

In the end, Friedenberg, who had a rough ride on the recruiting carousel four years ago, was the most philosophical.

“The recruiting process can have some unfortunate outcomes,” he said. “But if you look around, one way or another, most of us are doing pretty well. It's a long, wild ride, but we are happy survivors.”