

5 Recruiting Mistakes That Cost Families the Most

*What a Former D1 Recruiting Coordinator
Wants Every Family to Know Before They Start*

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Here's what most parents feel about six months into the recruiting process: overwhelmed, behind, and convinced that every other family has a plan they don't. If that sounds familiar, you're not alone — and you're not actually behind.

I'm Jay Johnson — a former Division I recruiting coordinator at the University of Colorado and a parent going through the same process with my daughter that you're going through. I wrote this guide because I've watched families make some — or all — of these five mistakes for over 25 years. The good news is every one of them is fixable once you get clarity on how this process works.

I've sat on the other side of this process, evaluating athletes and figuring out if they would be a good fit for our program (and if a scholarship was involved, how much we'd invest, if at all — more on that below). The flip side is I've seen families who avoided these mistakes end up with better outcomes, at a better fit for their student-athlete, with less stress throughout the process. What follows are not obscure edge cases. I can't think of a family that hasn't made at least one of these mistakes.

This is a focused read — I know your time is limited, and I've kept it tight. If you don't have 15 minutes now, make sure to bookmark this or print it and come back to it.

MISTAKE #1

Waiting Until Senior Year to Start the Process

This is the most common timing mistake in distance running recruiting, and it's the hardest one to recover from because you can't get the time back.

Why Families Wait

Most families think of recruiting as a senior-year activity. It makes sense — your kid is still learning how to race as a sophomore, still balancing bigger mileage as a junior, while taking on a challenging course load. Why rush, or put pressure on them? They'll be faster next year. Or maybe your kid's high school coach told you not to worry about it yet. And if you think a scholarship is in the cards, you think the offers will come when they run some big PRs.

That's not completely wrong, but the flip side is an athlete with similar PRs who reached out early is already on the coach's radar.

What's Actually Happening While You Wait

College coaches aren't waiting. They're building lists of recruits as early as sophomore year for national caliber recruits, and starting in March and April for juniors. They're identifying athletes whose trajectory suggests they'll be competitive by April and May of their senior year.

By the time a family starts reaching out in September or October of senior year, many programs have already identified their top recruiting targets, inviting athletes on visits and when a scholarship is in play, extending those offers. The roster spots that were available in the spring are spoken for by fall. And for some prestigious Division 3 schools that can't offer scholarships — schools like Amherst and Williams and Denison — they run out of spots as early as September. I spoke to a D3 coach at a school like this who said she's had to turn away recruits who would have been the best recruit they've had in years in December because they had filled all the spots by late September.

What Changes When You Start Earlier

Families who begin the process during the fall of junior year have time to build relationships with coaches rather than cold-emailing them under a deadline. As you likely know, the junior year track season is a crucial season in this process. Athletes will run PRs that give college coaches an idea of where they would fit on their team. **Track times are much more important than cross country times because you can compare them within a state and from state to state.** Sophomore times may matter for the 50–100 best sophomores in the

country as some D1 programs will start recruiting the summer before junior year, but for the tens of thousands of athletes that will eventually run in college, **it's the junior track times that matter.**

Starting earlier doesn't mean committing earlier. It means giving yourself the space to make a better decision when the time comes.

MISTAKE #2

Fixating on Division I When D2 or D3 Is the Better Fit

This is the most expensive mistake on this list — not in dollars, but in time and opportunity cost.

Why Families Make This Mistake

Division I has brand recognition. It's what you see on TV. When someone at a dinner party asks *"Where does your kid run?"* saying a Power 4 school sounds impressive. D2 and D3 carry a stigma in many families' minds — they think it means the athlete wasn't good enough. And nobody wants to feel like their kid is settling.

What Families Don't See

The Division I distance running landscape has changed dramatically in the last five years — and not in your favor. **As many as half of the athletes on many D1 distance rosters are now international recruits.** The transfer portal means coaches are also filling spots with experienced college athletes who are already proven at the collegiate level. An American high school runner is now competing for roster spots against Kenyan, Ethiopian, and European athletes who may already have faster PRs, plus current college athletes looking to transfer. The math has gotten brutal, especially for male athletes.

Meanwhile, D2 and D3 programs have invested heavily in coaching, facilities, and recruiting. I interviewed Travis Floeck, a D2 head coach at Colorado Mesa, and what he described — the coaching attention, the development focus, the competitive environment — would surprise most families who've written off D2 without looking into it. **A 4:20 1600m boy and a 5:20 girl both have limited options at the D1 level. Those same athletes are strong recruits at competitive D2 programs and top-tier D3 programs** — programs with excellent coaching, real team culture, and in many cases a better development environment for a young runner.

The Real Cost of D1 Tunnel Vision

Every month a family spends chasing programs where their athlete isn't realistically competitive is a month not spent building relationships with programs where they would thrive. I've seen families spend all of junior year emailing Power 4 coaches who were never going to recruit their kid, then scramble in the fall of senior year to find D2 and D3 programs — programs that would have been thrilled to recruit them six months earlier but have since filled their roster.

The families who end up happiest four years later are almost always the ones who picked the right fit, not the biggest name. The right coach and the right teammates can transform your athlete into an exceptional collegiate runner. To think that all of those situations are at schools where the football team plays on TV on Saturday isn't correct.

So what should you do? Build a target list that spans divisions based on where your athlete actually fits — athletically, academically, socially, and financially. Visit before you eliminate. Talk to coaches at every level. Understanding which programs are realistic at each division level — and which ones are a reach, a fit, or a safety — is one of the core things we help families figure out at Next Mile Recruiting.

MISTAKE #3

Sending the Wrong Type of Email to College Coaches

If Mistake #1 is the most common timing error, this is the most common communication error. And it's the one that's easiest to fix once you know what coaches are actually looking for.

Why Families Make This Mistake

You Googled "how to email a college coach" and every article told you to create an athletic resume and send it out. So you built a nice document — name, GPA, list of PRs, maybe a headshot, your kid's schedule for the upcoming season, all of their All-Conference awards — and you emailed it to 30 or 40 programs. It felt efficient. It felt professional. You checked the box.

What Coaches See When That Email Arrives

College coaches can spot a mass email instantly. When an email doesn't mention anything specific about their program — their coaching philosophy, their conference, their training approach, a recent team result — the coach knows this athlete didn't do any research. It signals "I'm emailing every program in the country and hoping someone responds." From the coach's perspective, that's spam.

Here's the deal: coaches delete these emails. Not all of them, and not every time. But a generic email with an attached resume PDF is fighting for attention against recruits who took the time to write something specific. The coach who has 45 minutes to review recruiting emails before heading to the track is going to spend their time on the athlete who clearly wants to be at their program, not the one who sent the same email to 40 schools.

One college coach I interviewed put it simply — emails with obvious spelling errors, hardly any detail, or no indication that the athlete knows anything about the program get deleted immediately. It shows a lack of attention. And in a process where coaches are evaluating character as much as talent, that first impression matters more than most families realize.

The uncomfortable truth is that sending fewer, better emails works dramatically better than blasting out a mass resume. Ten personalized emails to programs you've genuinely researched will generate more responses than fifty generic ones. The first email is not a resume — it's the start of a relationship. And like any relationship, it starts with showing the other person you actually care about the program they've worked so hard to build.

The other communication mistake families make is what happens after that first email. A coach responds positively and the family goes silent — waiting for a new PR to share, not wanting to seem pushy, or just getting busy with life. **Coaches interpret silence as lost interest.** Multiple coaches I've interviewed have said the same thing: when a recruit goes quiet, they assume that athlete has committed somewhere else and they move on.

How families approach this communication — the first email and every follow-up after it — is something we spend a lot of time on at Next Mile Recruiting, because it's the highest-leverage skill in the entire process.

MISTAKE #4

Assuming Full Scholarships Exist for Most Distance Runners

This mistake sets up the wrong expectations before the first conversation with a coach even happens — and it can create an awkward dynamic that's hard to recover from.

Why Families Assume This

Football and basketball dominate the college scholarship conversation in American sports culture. Full rides are what you see celebrated on social media — the signing day photos and the "full-ride" offers. Parents naturally assume track and cross country works the same way. They also hear about specific distance runners getting "scholarships" and assume that means full tuition, room, and board.

The Actual Numbers

For decades, NCAA Division I men's track and cross country programs had 12.6 total scholarships to split across an entire roster — sprinters, jumpers, throwers, and distance runners. Women's programs had 18. When you consider that most head track coaches want between 35 and 50 athletes per gender on the roster, you can see that many athletes won't be on a "full ride." So the track team had three types of athletes: walk-ons who were recruited but weren't on scholarship, full-ride athletes on a 100% scholarship covering the total cost of attendance — tuition, housing, books, etc. — and athletes on partial scholarships at some percentage less than 100%.

When I was the recruiting coordinator at the University of Colorado, a Power 4 D1 school in the Big 12 conference, my job was not only to get the best athletes to come to school, but to get them at the right level of scholarship. **At that time a male running 4:10 for 1600m was very good (before super shoes). But we wouldn't offer him a full ride.** The flip side is he likely wasn't going to turn down other scholarships to walk on. In two cases we were able to get 4:10 milers to come on small scholarships. These athletes developed into contributors that earned bigger scholarships throughout their careers, something we always did at CU, and something you'll want to ask about in this process. As an aside, **it's a bit of a red flag if a coach can't articulate their process for bumping up a walk-on to a scholarship, or a small scholarship to a bigger one**, when an athlete hits a certain time or places in the top few at the conference cross country meet.

The New Rules Families Need to Know

In 2025, the House v. NCAA settlement fundamentally restructured how Division I scholarships work. Schools that opted into the settlement — all Power 4 schools plus many others — moved from those old scholarship caps to a roster-based system. **The new limits are 45 athletes for track and field and 17 for cross country, per gender, and schools can now offer scholarships to any or all of those athletes.** The old 12.6 and 18 equivalency caps are gone at these programs.

What that means on paper is significant. A men's cross country program that used to fight over a share of 12.6 scholarships can now fund all 17 roster spots if the budget supports it. At well-funded Power 4 programs, full scholarships for distance runners are now structurally possible in a way they weren't for 40 years.

But here's what families need to understand: the rules allow it, the budgets often don't.

Whether a roster spot comes with a full ride, a partial, or no athletic aid at all is entirely a school-by-school decision. At many programs, the practical reality hasn't changed as much as the headlines suggest. And the SEC made it even more complicated by imposing its own stricter limits — just 10 men's cross country roster spots, and just 35 track roster spots, which means fewer opportunities, not more. And if you're thinking, *"Wait, what if four athletes get hurt and the team only has six athletes in a race"* you're spot on. It's a completely different reality in the SEC compared to your kid's high school team.

Not every D1 school opted into the settlement. For schools that didn't, the old system still applies — no roster caps, the old equivalency scholarship limits, and walk-on culture is still intact. The College Sports Commission publishes a list of participating schools each year on its website, and as of 2025–26, 310 Division I programs opted in while 54 did not.

All Power 4 and SEC schools are in. The Ivy League and Patriot League are entirely out. But here's the catch — schools can change their status every year.

Northern Arizona, for example, announced in March 2026 that they'd be opting in starting in 2026–27. That kind of change won't show up on the list until it's updated, and it might only surface in a press release buried on an athletics website. The list is a great starting point, but families still need to ask coaches directly: does your program operate under the House settlement roster model or the traditional equivalency model? The answer changes everything about how scholarship money works at that school.

The scarce resource used to be scholarship dollars. Now it's the roster spot itself. Under the old system, walk-on culture was a core part of distance running — athletes could join the team, develop over time, and earn scholarship money as they improved. With hard roster caps, coaches at opt-in schools have far less room to carry developmental athletes.

What This Means for Your Family

When a parent walks into a recruiting conversation expecting a full ride, the coach knows immediately that this family hasn't done their homework. Coaches have limited time and limited dollars, and they gravitate toward recruits whose families understand the landscape.

The financial picture for most distance running families is a combination of athletic money, academic merit aid, need-based financial aid, and family contribution. D3 schools offer zero athletic scholarships but often have strong academic aid packages. Ivy League programs are need-based only. **The total cost picture at a D3 school with generous academic aid or a D2 program with a partial scholarship can look better than a D1 program offering 25 percent athletic money when the cost of attendance is \$65,000.**

The families who understand how the financial side actually works — across divisions and across the old and new scholarship systems — make dramatically better decisions. This is one of the areas where families tell us they get the most clarity from Next Mile Recruiting, because the landscape just shifted in ways that most parents, and frankly, most high school coaches, haven't caught up with yet.

MISTAKE #5

Sticking to an Arbitrary Commitment Timeline

This is the mistake that tends to show up late in the process, after a family has done a lot of things right — and it can undo all of that work.

Why Families Create Timelines

At some point during the recruiting process, many families sit down and decide when they're going to commit.

"We'll make our decision over Christmas break."

"We're going to wait until after senior cross country season."

"We want to take all five official visits before we decide."

It feels measured. It feels fair to all the programs involved. It feels like good decision-making. And it's wrong.

Why Coaches Can't Wait for Your Timeline

When a recruit visits campus and a coach feels like it's a good fit, they make an offer and are transparent about it. Sometimes this is during cross country season. If that recruit says they want to wait until spring of senior year, that's a problem — **the coach can't hold a scholarship or roster spot open indefinitely**. They have a team to build. If they wait and the recruit chooses another school, they're left scrambling to fill a spot late in the cycle. So they keep recruiting other athletes — which means the offer that was on the table in October may not be there in March.

This is not a scare tactic. This is roster management. Every college coach faces this same pressure. They have a finite number of spots, a finite amount of scholarship money, and a recruiting class they need to assemble by a certain date (this is especially true at more prestigious academic schools). **When a family imposes an arbitrary timeline that doesn't align with the coach's needs, the family is essentially asking the coach to take a risk on them.** Most coaches won't.

The flip side is also true. Some coaches will pressure families to commit quickly, and often that pressure isn't legitimate. There are programs that create false urgency to lock in a recruit before they've had time to explore other options. **Knowing the difference between a coach who genuinely needs an answer because their roster is filling and a coach who's using pressure tactics is a critical skill.**

What Changes When You Stay Flexible

The families who handle the commitment decision well are the ones who stay responsive to what's actually happening rather than sticking to a date they picked months ago. If a coach makes an offer in October and you like the program, waiting until April isn't strategic — it's a risk. If you're genuinely not ready to decide, communicate that honestly and ask the coach what their timeline looks like. That conversation alone tells you a lot about the program.

The commitment decision is the final step in a long process — and by that point, if you've done the earlier steps well (started on time, broadened your list, communicated effectively, understood the financial picture), the decision often becomes much clearer than families expect.

What to Do Next

If any of these mistakes surprised you, that's a good sign. It means you're paying attention. And the fact that you read this entire guide puts you ahead of most families, who don't start looking into this until they're already behind.

But these five mistakes are just the starting point. There's a lot I couldn't fit into this guide.

If you go to go.nextmilerecruiting.com/pdf-signup and share your email, I'll send you a short series of emails over the next few days that go deeper into the parts of this process that the guide could only touch on. Here's what I'll cover:

How the rules just changed. I mentioned the House v. NCAA settlement briefly in Mistake #4. What I didn't have room to explain is how it restructured roster spots, scholarship money, and walk-on opportunities at every level. This is the biggest change to college recruiting in 40 years, and most families haven't caught up.

What college coaches told me they actually look for. Over the past year I've interviewed coaches across D1, D2, D3, NAIA, and JUCO. I asked them what makes them respond to a recruiting email, what makes them delete one, and what separates the families who handle this process well from the ones who don't. What they said was consistent, specific, and not what most families expect.

The data gap that's sending families to the wrong schools. The performance standards you find online are often incomplete, outdated, or just wrong. I'll show you why, and I'll introduce the tool I built to fix it.

These emails are free. They're written by me, not generated by a marketing team. And every one of them teaches something you can use whether or not you ever buy anything from Next Mile Recruiting.

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In the meantime, go back to Mistake #3. If your athlete has a coach who responded positively and you haven't followed up in a while, send that email today. You'd be surprised how much one follow-up can change.

– Jay

ABOUT JAY JOHNSON

Jay Johnson is the founder of Next Mile Recruiting. He has over 25 years of coaching experience, including time as a Division I recruiting coordinator at the University of Colorado. He has coached athletes from college through the professional level and currently works with distance running families navigating the college recruiting process. He lives in Denver, Colorado, and has a teenage daughter going through this process.

Learn more at nextmilerecruiting.com or send your questions to info@nextmilerecruiting.com.