



ZONETALK PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

Zach Weissbach: NCAA / U Sport Scholarships – The recruiting edge

Introduction

In this *ZoneTalk* episode, we speak with Zach Weissbach, a senior executive and talent scout with Hudson Athletic Recruiting in Canada. When Zach played junior-level hockey, he saw a real need for athletic advice and assistance, particularly with respect to college scholarship opportunities, which would have been highly valuable for him when he was a young athlete looking at his future.

Now in his current role, he has the opportunity to influence the future of up and coming athletes. With sound, practical advice and comprehensive services for scholarship seekers, parents and coaches, Hudson's scouts aim to maximize the opportunities for pursuing athletic scholarships and financial aid packages to post-secondary institutions in both the US and Canada. This is especially critical at this time of the COVID-19 crisis when many sports have stalled.

Bob Palmer:

This is Bob Palmer, and you're listening to *ZoneTalk* by SportExcel where the magic of the Zone is a game changer. In every episode we dive into the lives of high performers and learn their amazing strategies so that you can take leadership of your game, your team, and your life.

Bob Palmer:

Zach Weissbach is a senior executive and talent scout with Hudson Athletic Recruiting. You'd be hard pressed to find an individual who loves sport and the game of hockey more than he does. He played goal at the junior level for a couple of seasons before beginning his business degree. Now he oversees Western Canada for Hudson Athletic Recruiting and works alongside amazing student athletes as well as managing and mentoring other scouts.



Bob Palmer:

He indicates his goal is to provide information and support for athletes, which would have been highly valuable for him when he was a young athlete looking at his future. And what better place to start than here and now to help young athletes? Welcome Zach.

Zach Weissbach:

Thanks for having me on, Bob.

Bob Palmer:

You were a competitive goaltender. What got you into sports in the first place and fueled the love you have for the sport where you are still helping others?

Zach Weissbach:

It definitely started with the family environment. And I think that's the case for a lot of the athletes that I work with. My dad was a multi-sport athlete. He was a club pro with golf, had a tryout with the Edmonton Eskimos, and had a full ride scholarship for basketball. Both my brothers have been playing multiple sports their whole lives. So it was just part of the process. I mean, everybody in the family was into sports other than my mom. I mean, she has very little athletic ability, to be honest with you! So it was one of those things that we were just surrounded by it. We always loved it, right from when we were three/four years old. And that kind of fueled the passion initially. And then after that, it just took off.

You know, as you start to excel, you start to experience some success. It takes over and training gets more and more intense. So now the passion, you know - it's carried on because after my career, I always wanted to stay involved with the game. I've always loved the sport of hockey, baseball, golf, and what an opportunity to be able to stay connected with athletes that are coming up, you know, experiencing the same things I was, so naturally it was a fit to stay involved in this manner and work with a lot of other like-minded individuals with it for sure.

Bob Palmer:

Did you have a key go-to resource or exercise when you were going through hockey? Because a lot of the stuff that we take for granted now in terms of the mental game, wasn't around at that time.

Zach Weissbach:

Yeah, absolutely. There is. There's probably two for myself. Being a goaltender in hockey, visualization was a big one. So before games, you know, I was the weird goalie, who kind of went off on his own, took his time before the game to get into the Zone and just visualize different scenarios from the game: Different circumstances, how I was going to react, how to keep my emotions under check and just different things like that. So that helped me prep for every game that I played in.

And then the other thing was goal setting. I'm a big believer in having the big picture, the overall vision and something to work towards and then setting the little measurable and attainable goals to get there.



Zach Weissbach:

So even when I was in net for a game, you don't think about little goals in a scenario like that too much. But it was - okay - Let's take this one save at time...One period at a time...One game at a time. So I wasn't so focused on - okay I'm going to make the NHL someday.

It was - let's make one save at a time along the way, play as strong as we can and stay emotionally and mentally in check. And it should take care of itself.

Bob Palmer:

They say goaltenders sort of march to their own drummers anyways, right?

Zach Weissbach:

Yes!

Bob Palmer:

Is there anything that would have made your junior career and amateur hockey career any easier?

Zach Weissbach:

Yeah, definitely. You know, you look back and especially, once you're out of your playing career and now you're seeing other guys that are going through it, you see little things along the way that are kind of like, oh, wow, I wish that had been around or present at the time. And I think that's what fuels what I do now.

To be honest, [it] is being a resource and a support system and an information source for all of the young guys as well as the families. Because, my dad, he was very involved with the sport. He was the guy that was at every practice, every game. He would do the road trips to come see me play, which sometimes wasn't always a great thing. But my mom was the anxiety case. So she's like, "You know what, dad's going to handle this. I don't want to see you get scored on."

So it was one of those things where he was doing the best he could with all the decisions along the way, which in sport there's a million obstacles and a million tough decisions. And having somebody in addition who is in my corner [and] had been through it themselves could have added to the support my dad was providing. I think that just would've made it easier and kind of taken the stress off of myself having to make [those] kinds of business decisions, I guess, coming up through the ranks. So that was one thing that, I didn't have. And now I've got the opportunity to provide it for athletes and families. And, I think that's why there's such a strong connection there.

Bob Palmer:

So now that we're on that topic, let's talk about what you do. What is athletic recruiting?

Zach Weissbach:

So essentially, it's kind of a two-pronged approach. First and foremost, every representative within our company, every guy that I look after or anybody that comes on board with us, we want to be exactly what I just described - a resource for the families we work with, an information source, a support system, and just be there for every decision and obstacle along the way. Because as I just described, it can be overwhelming.



Zach Weissbach:

There can be a lot of different things that come up where having somebody who's experienced it themselves, which every one of us [scouts] have. It's a huge, huge help. And it takes the pressure off the athlete to just perform, on the ice in my case or on the field, whatever it might be depending on the sport, as well as in the classroom.

And for the parents. They get to sit back and, say, "Okay, you know, the process is going to work itself out here. We don't need to stress about the little things along the way. And we just get to enjoy watching our son or daughter play the game."

The second side of things is the networking side. I mean, the world is a place of connections and networking and creating opportunities and seizing the opportunities that are available. So for us, we have a very built-in, ingrained network with the NCAA youth sports programs [and] the different junior clubs with the various sports. So it's trying to create additional opportunities so that every kid not only has the support along the way, but they hopefully have more doors to go through and it's easier to get through those doors as well. That's kind of the whole idea.

Bob Palmer:

Is there a timeframe for that? An ideal time, a grade that parents and their kids should be looking at scholarships and looking at perhaps hiring a professional like yourself to guide them through the process?

Zach Weissbach:

Yeah, definitely. I mean, the simple answer is as soon as possible. It's one of these things that the NCAA [US Colleges], for some of the sports, start recruiting in grade nine or grade 10 with a lot of kids. With USports [Canadian Colleges] there isn't much of a difference. Hockey players are one of the latest bloomers in terms of recruitment and they are in grade 10, grade 11, or grade 12.

And so the advice that I would give to anybody is to get started on it as soon as possible, because there's things you can be doing from a very young age that help to create that competitive advantage. Just like a company looks to create an edge and find something that differentiates their product or service, an athlete is going to look for that opportunity to separate themselves from the pack as well. So if you get started on it sooner, you've got more opportunity to get ahead with those steps [and] you get more opportunity for exposure. And to be honest, you're just better prepared for the process so that you've got less stress as some of those big, big decisions come up.

Bob Palmer:

Is having a recruiter a mandatory thing for some schools?

Zach Weissbach:

No, I wouldn't say it's mandatory, but it's definitely kind of the accepted practice and the preferred practice at this point, especially with the timing and everything that's going on now. Information has never been in higher demand. A lot of the programs [and] a lot of teams don't have the ability to see the athletes nearly as much as they normally would. Communication is obviously a little bit off right now because of everything going on.



Zach Weissbach:

So for schools, they're looking to be able to find information, find out about the different student athletes out there and they utilize companies like ours, whether it's through a phone call, or through an email. They want to find out as much as they can. And they expect that individuals like myself and like the other representatives with our company and many of the other ones that are out there, they anticipate that they're going to be involved and they're going to be a great source for that information. So it's not mandatory, but it's definitely an advantageous thing for families to look at.

Bob Palmer:

What kind of information do you give to schools?

Zach Weissbach:

Everything that they would be looking for. I mean, when it comes to scholarships, you can imagine these programs only have so many scholarships to give out. There's only so much money in terms of the funding that they are able to allocate. So those decisions are not taken lightly. They look at everything from the character of the athlete, their grades, their academics is huge, S.A.T. scores. What's the family like? Referrals from teachers; referrals from the coach.

They look for absolutely everything in your background. It's almost like doing literally a background check and a polygraph all at once! But it's just one of these things where they want to make the right decision with the athletes for a lot of reasons. And they want to gather as much info as possible. So the relationships we have with athletes allow us to be able to present that to them in an effective manner. And it makes the decision that much easier, whereas otherwise they have to go through a lot of different sources and that can be very difficult and cause a bit of a chink in the chain, so to speak.

Bob Palmer:

Now, there's a notion that being a great athlete is sufficient enough to get a scholarship. What is your experience with getting athletes placed, and marks and that kind of thing?

Zach Weissbach:

The easy way to look at it is the academics is absolutely critical. A lot of guys do have that perception where, you know, I'm a good enough player in whatever my sport is, and it's just going to take care of itself. And through my personal experience and through my career, you see a lot of guys that fall through the cracks, a lot of guys that unfortunately get missed or don't realize at the time how important their GPA, their S.A.T. score, and their work ethic with their academics are really going to be.

You've got to keep in mind, there are so many talented athletes out there, not just in Canada, but in the United States as well. We're talking about the NCAA. You've got to believe that they've got a bit of a preference for the home grown talent. So when you're comparing 50 athletes that are all comparative and all have a very similar skill set, the one thing that separates them is that academic performance. And it's really two-fold because there are academic scholarships as well, which means that you can get additional funding and you do get additional opportunities on the financial side if you're a strong student.



Zach Weissbach:

But it's also a work ethic and a consistency thing. If they see that you're an amazing athlete and an amazing student, they know that you're going to be able to handle the post-secondary process. You're going to go in there and you're going to excel no different than you have been. But if you're struggling in school or you just start putting in the work, that says something about what you're going to do when you get to post-secondary. And that's a risk that a lot of schools would rather mitigate.

Bob Palmer:

So if I'm that athlete seeking a scholarship and my grades could be higher, do you offer any services to get me up to scratch?

Zach Weissbach:

Yeah, absolutely. So this kind of circles back to the goal-setting side of things. We speak with our athletes consistently and set little benchmarks along the way when it comes to the marks. I mean, whether it's the GPA, specific courses, the S.A.T. score, they have the big vision. They know what they want to go after, whether that's playing Junior in their sports, acquiring a scholarship, going pro, they have the big vision. But the thing is, you need to have the little measurable benchmarks along the way. So we hope to set that with them so they can push themselves; they can work on their habits; and they can get themselves where they need to be.

Above and beyond that, we figure out, okay, based on the athlete, based on our relationship with them, what else can we do to support them and get them to that level? Sometimes it's figuring out a tutor. It's finding a tutor for a certain course or a certain subject that maybe they aren't the strongest with and just having them put in that little bit of extra work to get their marks up. Sometimes it's having to sit down with them and the parents and figure it out - okay - here's where we're at. Here's where we need to be. What's the easiest way for us to get there? Other times it's just being a pain in their butt and doing the weekly check-ins and annoying them by asking about their grades, which, yeah, you can imagine with 15 or 16 year olds, it goes off really, really well!

Bob Palmer:

So it sounds like you actually play the role of adviser/almost parent at some point. Do you offer any other kinds of things that go beyond what a parent, or an athlete might be attempting to do in this process to help them through this experience?

Zach Weissbach:

Yeah, definitely. You know, we as a company, we've been really, really expanding the scope of what we do and what we offer and the opportunity to provide more and more value to the athletes and the families is always an amazing thing, because that's exactly what I would have looked for being an athlete coming up through the ranks as well. I think this is actually originally how you and I connected and had some of the preliminary conversations that now allow me to be getting grilled on your podcast!



Zach Weissbach:

But an opportunity to work with a company like SportExcel and working on the mental strength side of the game. And being able to get into the Zone so that you're consistently performing and you're always having the ability to be exceptional with whatever your sport is. That's something that our partnership has already started helping athletes with and will continue to do so.

Curtis Moka is a local goaltender here in Edmonton. He's a great example of a guy that experienced everything you could with the sport and now is helping our goaltenders by providing an in-depth scouting analysis on their game in little areas that they can work on.

We've partnered with multiple strength and conditioning coaches across the country that—it's not only about the discount, which saves the few bucks, of course—but it's about providing the best possible trainers and people available during the off season because everyone knows it's not just during the year what you do, but it's the preparation outside of it during the off season.

We've started to partner up with different equipment manufacturers and companies that are going to allow our guys to get the best possible equipment and not spend a million dollars to do it, which for the parents, they know how important that is, of course. So there's a lot of things outside of just working with myself or one of our representatives that we're bringing to the table and we're continuing to find more and more to hopefully bring everything we can to the package.

Bob Palmer:

You've stated a lot of the benefits. What are some of the financial benefits of getting a scholarship? Is that a done deal or does that vary? What's the situation there?

Zach Weissbach:

Yes, it definitely depends on the program. Like each program from the NCAA to the USports programs, they're going to have different funding available, depending on the prestige of the school, depending on how they've performed in recent years. And right now, obviously, given the circumstances with COVID and everything else, that has had a financial impact. It's not just information, but it's also the financial side that's been very affected. So there's only certain opportunities that are available depending on the school.

So the benefit of acquiring a scholarship now is as great as ever because they're few and far between. The days of the full-ride scholarship - those are nearly over. They don't happen too often. So a lot of the time you're looking at athletic opportunities anywhere from half [scholarship] to three by four (three of your four years) or covered to 60%. There's a lot of different options there, but this is why the academics are so important.

And something that we stress with our athletes is because you could go play for a Division 1 program [which is the top NCAA league] and get a three by four where you've got one year that's not covered, if you're a strong student and you put up the good marks and you crush it with your S.A.T., you're going to be able to get the academic reimbursements where you're not going to have to pay for anything, when you're going to school. You have the opportunity to go and get your education, play for one of the best programs in the United States or in Canada, and experience all of that without having the financial stress of going to do so.



Zach Weissbach:

So, I mean, the opportunities on both the academic and athletic front are absolutely amazing, and the experience that you get from it is surreal, to say the least.

Bob Palmer:

Yes. Those of us who have been to university or have been to college really appreciate that experience as an experience. It's huge. So this COVID thing - Do you think that it's stopping the flow of athletes? Is it full stop right now or is it in some ways more important that they have someone like you?

Zach Weissbach:

You know what? It's created some interference for sure, without sports occurring across the entire spectrum that's really interfered with the ability for these programs, the coaches, the player development individuals and the scouts specifically to be able to go out and see the athletes and gather information. That's basically been brought to a halt, which is unfortunate because we all love the sporting world. Everyone is missing [it] of course and want to see it back.

But it definitely has increased the demand and the urgency for a company like ours, and many of the other companies that are out there that work with all of these athletes in various sports. Because now, for these programs to continue operating, which they all are planning on still operating here this coming season, for the most part, they need to be able to get that information. They need to be able to figure, "Okay, who is the right fit for what we're looking for? We've got a demand, but now we have an issue with the supply." And obviously there needs to be that connection.

So, yeah, we've been busier than ever, to be honest, because now we're basically a data source to help our athletes get in front of the right programs, the right teams. And it's helping out these teams, of course, because they still need to find the right fit, the right players to build their culture and their organization.

So, the one thing that I would urge any parent, any athlete right now is having somebody in their corner and having someone that can create that connection and get them the right opportunities and exposure. That's a great thing, whether or not that's our company or somebody else, it's something that I would definitely encourage, because the last thing you want is for this interruption, and that information being shared, to affect future opportunities.

Bob Palmer:

Now, there are a number of pathways for some sports, other than the college level, perhaps a junior level. Are there any advantages to doing that scholarship route and seeking life in sport beyond college?

Zach Weissbach:

Yeah. I mean, it's one of these things where I get asked that question a lot, and a lot of families will bring it up that there's two sides to a coin or maybe even more. There's a lot of different opportunities out there with sport.



Zach Weissbach:

And what I encourage any athlete or any family that I interact with or even those that I don't – is to keep all the options open. Don't ever burn a bridge, and really explore every door that you can. Are there opportunities and are there advantages to the NCAA path or the opportunity to go and get your education while you're pursuing the sport? Absolutely. From my experience and from 50 other athletes that I grew up with who went that path, it definitely has some incredible perks. And one of those that I look at is for athletes that are looking at going professional and they want to go as far as they can with their sport, to really explore every opportunity.

What they need to realize is that if you go, let's say the NCAA path or the USports path, it's giving you the opportunity, really, to do a couple of things. One is you're actually prepping for the pro level or semi-pro or going to Europe or whatever it might be, because those teams are looking for more mature athletes. Things have changed these last couple years where there are not many guys ready to go pro at 18 or 19 years old. You know, the Connor McDavid (superstars) of the world, they're few and far between. More often than not, people need that time to mature, to develop, to get into their early 20s, become who they're going to be moving forward before they're ready to make that jump [into professional sport].

Zach Weissbach:

And what going to college or university does, and playing for those programs does, it allows you to do that, to mature, to develop your skill set and to get ready for that jump and still have that opportunity. But at the same time, you're prepping for life after hockey or soccer or football or whatever the sport may be. You have the opportunity to get your education, get your preparation in place to go and have an impact in in your career. The business world or whatever it is. And at the same time, you're playing at one of the highest levels you possibly can with the sport.

It's really the best of both worlds and that's something that I see a lot more people starting to lean towards because at some point in time, your playing career will come to an end, whether it's having a 20-year professional career and you're retiring at 42 or it's playing just at college and then deciding that I'm going to go and run a business. It really doesn't matter. But having that preparation in place and having done both at the same time is absolutely amazing in terms of the opportunity that it provides as well.

Bob Palmer:

I know doctors and other professionals, physiotherapists that have gone through that program [NCAA/USports], and it almost seems that there would be a wealth of other opportunities as well, besides sport, coming out of college.

Zach Weissbach:

Yeah, definitely. The opportunities become endless in a way. And even, you look at right now and the circumstances [with COVID-19] and there's a lot of people that are out hunting for careers and positions. So having the piece of paper [degree], the documentation that college provides you, it gives you an upper hand. That's just the simple way to look at it. And every parent out there is very aware of that, which is why they're like, "You're going to college. You're going to university."



Zach Weissbach:

But, you know, the other thing is the experience. I mean, when you play college or university sports, the team environment, the culture, the work you put it in, day in and day out, that's going to carry over. That doesn't just help you with the sport. That helps you with life after the sport as well. I think that for myself, when I look at the success that I've had with my career and the different opportunities that I've gone after, I would not have been able to do all of that.

And I wouldn't have the experience or the drive that I do if it wasn't for the sport—for hockey, for baseball. I played up to a high level of baseball until I was about 15. And then I decided to continue with goaltending. Why I did that? I still cannot tell you. I've no idea. But, you know, the experiences that I had with those sports, it's created who I am now. And it's definitely allowing me to excel afterwards, for sure.

Bob Palmer:

So, one last question. Any last thoughts or advice for athletes or parents with athletes on this journey?

Zach Weissbach:

Yeah, definitely. You know, for the athletes, I mean, I could give a million pieces of advice and talk your ear off. But I think the big one is enjoy every moment of the process. Try to create an advantage where you can, be ahead of the game, be prepared and try and gather information wherever it's possible.

But just enjoy every single moment, because after your career wraps up, and when you look back and you start to get older like I am and you kind of reflect on your career, it's one of those things where you're going to love it and you want to finish with no regrets. But you just want to maximize every opportunity you have along the way and take that step back and no matter what happens, whether you get cut from a camp, or you make the team, or you get an amazing opportunity, or you miss an opportunity - Just enjoy the ride.

Zach Weissbach:

For coaches and those involved with the game, the piece of advice that I would give to all of my representatives here in western Canada, it's that you're more than just a coach or an adviser or a player development representative, whatever you want to look at. You're more than that. You're going to have the opportunity to impact the rest of that student athlete's life. You're going to instill values and beliefs and work ethic and a whole bunch of things that are going to last long after their sport is done. So you have that opportunity, make the most of it to go above and beyond for every athlete that you have an interaction with.

For parents, that's tough. I'm just thinking back to, you know, my dad's experience and piece of advice I'd give him - maybe a little different than others. But for parents, I think the piece of advice I would give is do your research, do your homework and try and put your son or daughter ahead if you can. There are opportunities to create that edge. And there's just so many amazing opportunities with sport and so many incredible things that people can accomplish. But you do have to be diligent, otherwise opportunities to pass by.



Zach Weissbach:

And you don't want to be the parent that has any doubt as to the steps you're taking for them. So a piece of advice would be do your research, ask questions, whether [or not] you have somebody else that's supportive and helping with the journey. Ask a lot of questions and definitely reach out to people. Never a bad thing.

Bob Palmer:

Thank you, Zach. This has been very informative.

Zach Weissbach:

I appreciate it Bob.

Bob Palmer: Okay. You take care. Thank you.

Zach Weissbach:

Thank you.

Bob Palmer:

Bye.

Bob Palmer:

This episode of *ZoneTalk* by SportExcel has ended. But be sure to subscribe, and be sure to review us so that we can continue to bring you the best Zone and high-performance content. See you on the next episode.

