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# Before Recruiting in Ivy League, Applying Some Math

By **BILL PENNINGTON**

The **Ivy League**, which is experiencing an athletic revival with several teams ranked nationally, is a doggedly atypical N.C.A.A. Division I sports conference. For starters, the eight members are virtual heretics in the landscape of American big-time college sports for fielding about 280 teams in 35 sports without athletic scholarships. The league also restricts activities like off-season practices, discourages weekday games and prohibits postseason play in football.

But there is one thing the Ivy League does that truly sets it apart from its sporting brethren nationwide: it tracks and scrutinizes the finite, detailed academic credentials of every recruited athlete welcomed through the doors of the eight member institutions. And it has done so for more than 25 years — creating a dossier of grades and test scores for more than 40,000 student-athletes.

To accomplish this, the league came up with a measurement called the Academic Index, which gives all prospective high school recruits a number, roughly from 170 to 240, that summarizes their high school grade-point averages and scores on standardized tests like the SAT. The index number of every admitted recruit is shared among the member institutions to guarantee that no vastly underqualified recruit has been admitted at a rival institution and to allow member universities to compare classwide index averages for athletes against similar averages for the overall student body.

While the Academic Index, referred to as the A.I., is a routine part of life in an Ivy League athletic department, outside those offices, it is frequently treated like the most furtive of secret fraternity handshakes. The specifics on how the Academic Index is calculated or how it is evaluated from university to university are not made public. The formula for calculating individual A.I. numbers is not available on the league Web site or in any other official public forum — even if there are dozens of such calculators listed online (nearly all of them inaccurate).

It is a league device established to ensure transparency, but many Ivy League coaches are instructed never to discuss it publicly, which adds to the sense of mystery.

“It is not a secret, but it is an internal tool,” said Robin Harris, the Ivy League executive director. “It’s a way for athletics to ensure a degree of competitive equality. Making it public is not within the intent of the A.I., because people might think it is a tool that determines admissibility, and it is not.

“Some people think if they get a certain A.I., they will automatically get into an Ivy League school, and that’s not the case, because so many factors come into that decision.”

Although the Academic Index has been around for a quarter-century, it has almost never been examined outside the educational community. But with the Ivy League having an athletic rebirth of sorts, the index will surely be the subject of scrutiny, especially because its basic minimum standard was raised this year.

If the Academic Index is not a material secret, it is certainly a sensitive topic. In the Ivy League, where the university presidents sometimes exert rigorous control of sports teams and can grow suspicious of too much athletic success, there may be no more prickly subject than the notion that athletes receive unduly preferential consideration in the admissions process. Recruited athletes are admitted from a list submitted by coaches and make up roughly 13 percent of each class, but the Academic Index was adopted for the eight institutions in the mid-1980s to make sure that each was making admissions decisions on athletes relatively consistent with its overall admissions requirements.

So while an individual Academic Index number is often used by coaches to gauge the likelihood of a recruit's being admitted, it is the sums of the numbers — computed by sport and by institution — that matter most. They measure whether the institution-wide cohort of recruited student-athletes is within one standard deviation of the mean for all students, which is the league's stated goal.

But getting to that average when it is based on about 200 recruited athletes a year per university, spread across about 35 sports and calculated over a rolling four-year period, is one complex task. Throw in the routine yet impassioned begging of some coaches who are desperate for a few recruits at the low end of the academic spectrum to bolster a lineup, and the machinations of the Academic Index keep athletic directors busy.

"It's a big mosaic, a living template of each institution and in turn a microcosm of the league," Thomas Beckett, Yale's longtime athletic director, said of the Academic Index. "But we always tell our coaches to go look for that superstar athlete intrigued by a Yale education. Bring forth the best high-achieving student-athletes who will give our teams a chance to be nationally competitive and win an Ivy League championship.

"We give our coaches a target A.I. average to meet, and they are very good at usually exceeding that. But yes, it will often lead to, well, negotiations."

### **At Least 3.0 and 1,140**

Perhaps the most talked about goal of the A.I. is the academic credential minimum it establishes, a number below which virtually no Ivy League recruit can be admitted. This summer, that floor was raised from an Academic Index of 171 to 176, which roughly translates to a B student (3.0 on a 4.0 scale) with a score of 1140 on the old two-part SAT.

(As seen in the accompanying chart, which is based on an academic index calculator obtained from league coaches and high school guidance counselors, broad estimates for calculating the A.I. can be made, but in practice, the A.I. usually uses a complex formula that takes into account SAT I and SAT II test scores or ACT scores in addition to high school grades issued on grade-point scales that vary from 4.0 to 12.0. To simplify the numerical comparisons in this article, all grades were based on a 4.0 scale and the SAT I scores listed will be fundamental, two-part math and verbal scores. The math score has a greater influence on the final index.)

Harris said the A.I. this year was not raised so much as adjusted. Class rank was once part of the formula, with grade-point average used only if class rank was not available. But because many high schools stopped reporting class rankings in recent years, it was eliminated over the summer. Harris said the change was made because when admissions directors recalculated multiple A.I.'s under the new system, a candidate who typically reached a score of 171 was now a 176.

It is also important to note that a 176 A.I. score is the lowest allowed, and that the number of recruits in any year admitted at that level is not plentiful.

“It’s not nearly as many as people seem to think,” Harris said. “So no one should fixate on that number.”

At the other end of the spectrum, virtually every coach interviewed had a story about a recruit with a 210 A.I. (a 4.0 student with roughly 1,300 on the two-part SAT) who was rejected for admission for various reasons — a poor interview, a sloppy essay, because the recruit had not taken chemistry since 10th grade or because the recruit’s transcript lacked enough [Advanced Placement classes](#).

“You learn the nuances and ignore some numbers,” said James Jones, who is in his 12th year as the Yale men’s basketball coach. “My team average is over 200. I know I’m not getting anybody admitted who is in the 170s, and I get very few, if any, in the 180s. So I’m looking at kids in the 190s and above — unless there’s a kid in the 180s that I really want or I feel will get through admissions for some other reason.”

One of the most misunderstood aspects of how the A.I. works is its fluctuation from institution to institution. Because the eight Ivy League members have varying academic standards and the basis for the athletic A.I. average is the overall student body, the average A.I. for the athletic cohort at [Harvard](#), for example, is several points higher than the average at Brown. That means a soccer recruit with a 210 A.I. who is rejected at Harvard might be accepted at Brown. And the whole league knows it.

“We all have numbers we are required to get to, but how we get there does vary,” Beckett said. “But we’re all O.K. with that. It balances out.”

Michael Goldberger, the Brown athletic director and the former dean of admissions at the university, conceded that coaches would be annoyed when a top recruit is turned away by the in-house admissions department but then appears on a league rival’s sideline — for the next four years.

“But in perspective, you have to realize we are dealing with a select group since Ivy League athletes are in the top 10 percent of all college applicants nationwide,” Goldberger said. “The average kid going to college across this country would have an A.I. of about 150.”

The discrepancies in who gets in also occur because each institution has different athletic priorities. Each Ivy university has sports teams that are historically more successful, and those teams are usually treated with favor. Other sports are lifted by design, as a way to bolster a new coach or to take advantage of an improved facility. In either case, these sports, in a system called tiering, are rewarded with more recruits, or a few from the middle to lower end of the A.I.

“An institutional autonomy that allows schools to support sports that they believe have a greater chance of success is one of the reasons the A.I. works and is accepted,” said Steve Bilsky, the athletic director at Penn. “That’s a vital component.”

### **Brilliant Bench Players**

The overall athletic A.I. can also be balanced by recruits with considerably higher A.I.’s who play other, lower-profile sports, or by recruits with exceedingly high A.I.’s who are stacked at the top end of a team’s roster.

“We see it all the time, a team with an A.I. number over 200, but when you get down to it, who plays?” Jones said. “You can make your number whatever you want by recruiting kids just for their high A.I., and who cares if they play? It is done. Not here at Yale, but it is done.”

Harris also explained that certain sports are scrutinized separately: football, basketball and ice hockey, in particular. Football teams, which are allowed to support an average of 30 recruits a year in the admissions process, are also regulated in four A.I. bands spaced from low to high, with each band’s A.I. rising by about 10 points. Al Bagnoli, the Penn football coach, said last year that he was given 2 spots in the lowest band, 8 in the second band, 12 in the third and 8 in the highest.

Over all, there are hundreds of teams with A.I. averages well into the 200s. In a response to a commissioned report on Brown athletics issued this year, the university’s president, Ruth J. Simmons, said that for the four most recent admissions classes throughout the league, Brown had seven sports with average A.I.’s under 200; Dartmouth and Penn had 5; Columbia 3; Yale 1; and Harvard and Princeton none. Simmons did not mention [Cornell](#) in her written response.

In the end, Beckett, Yale’s athletic director, said the Academic Index was another competitive mechanism — not unlike a referee — that helped eight longtime rivals fight it out in the recruiting wars in a fair and readily apparent way.

“Any one of the eight can go after some superstar athlete if he or she qualifies according to the Academic Index,” Beckett said. “Whoever gets that athlete, we tip our hat to them. Then we go back to trying to beat them by as many points as we can the next time we see them.”