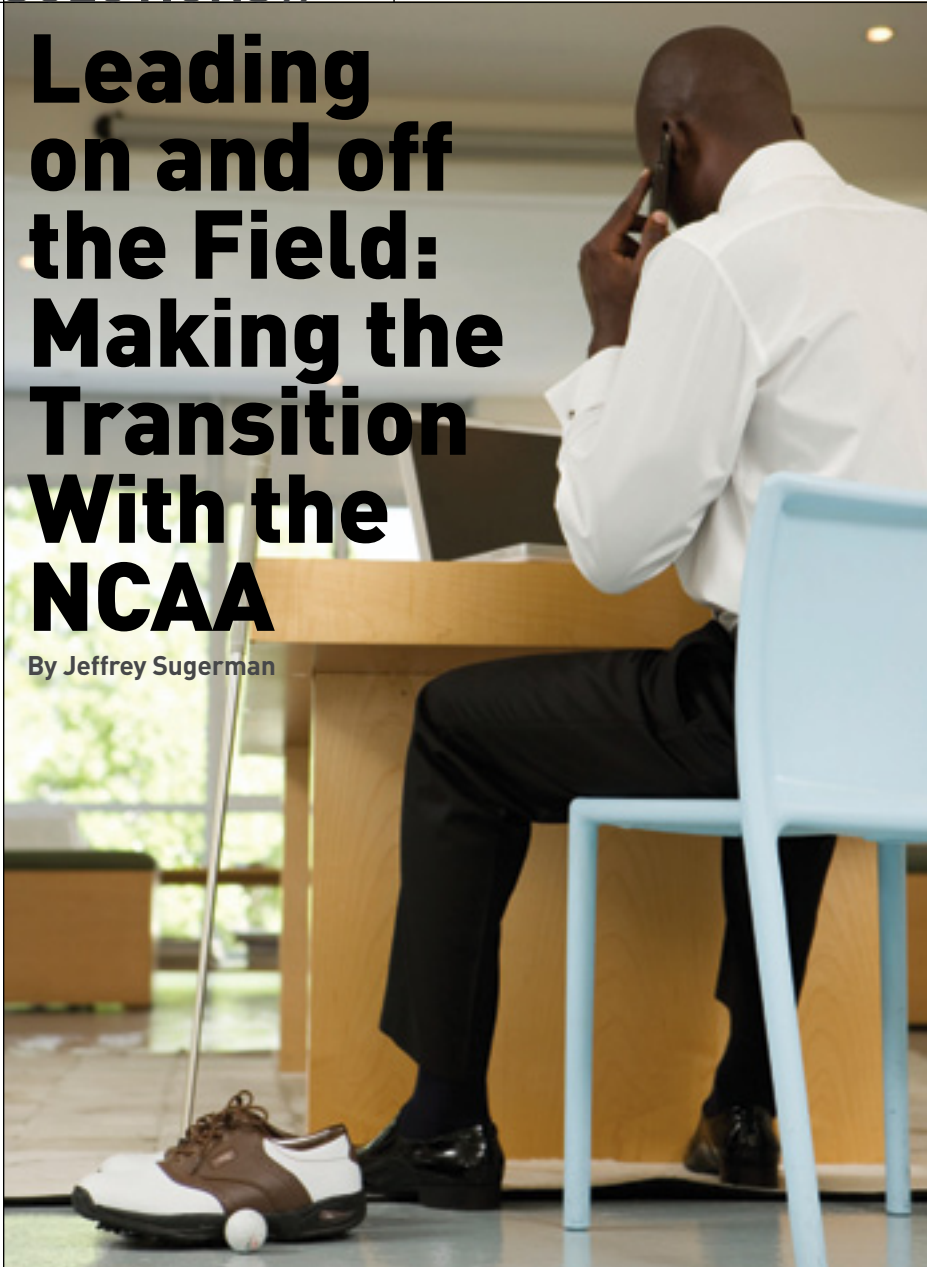


Leading on and off the Field: Making the Transition With the NCAA

By Jeffrey Sugerman



Each year, more than 400,000 student-athletes participate in 23 sports at more than 1,000 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) colleges and universities. Regardless of which sport they play (or how well they perform), when they graduate they all have one thing in common: the need to find a job. And while some aspire to “turn pro,” very few will have the opportunity to do so. In fact, according to the U.S. Department of Labor, there are only 16,000 professional athletes in the United States today. Talk about a competitive job market!

With such challenges for student-athletes today, it's no wonder that the NCAA saw the imperative to help these individuals make a move from leading on the field to leading in life. One of the ways they do that is through the NCAA Career in Sports Forum, and to assist in the program development for this powerful learning experience, they hired Lynne Kaplan. The president of an organizational development consulting company, Kaplan worked closely with two NCAA staff members—Curtis Hollomon, director of leadership development, and Christina Wright, assistant director of Student-Athlete Affairs—to develop the forum.

Life after college, with or without sports

Hosted each year by the NCAA, the NCAA Career in Sports Forum (Forum) is a four-day event that brings together several hundred selected student-athletes to learn about careers in sports. Although the chances of employment as a professional athlete are limited, there are many opportunities for careers and part-time work as coaches, officials, and administrators in intercollegiate athletics.

Focused primarily on these careers, the NCAA's Forum asks participants to choose from one of two tracks: coaching or administration. The coaching track, which is open to student-athletes interested in coaching any of the 23 sports the NCAA offers, includes sessions on sports performance, injury prevention,

With overwhelming odds against student-athletes going pro in sports, the NCAA decided to help them make the transition from leaders on the field to leaders in life.

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and conditioning, as well as budgeting, compliance, and ethics. The administration track includes similar sessions, all with an eye toward helping student-athletes prepare for a career in sports.

An important component of both tracks is a session called Self-Awareness and Communication. The session helps participants understand their own behavior styles and how they can use those styles to develop more effective and productive relationships—in classes and with their teammates and coaches today, and with co-workers, managers, and clients in the future.

In 2010, Kaplan brought Everything DiSC Workplace into the Forum curriculum. Everything DiSC Workplace is a classroom training program centered on the third-generation Everything DiSC assessment, which creates a richer, more personalized experience for each participant. It includes interactive facilitation with contemporary video and online follow-up, all with the goal of helping individuals understand their personal behavioral style, which is a combination of four behavioral tendencies: Dominance (D), Influence (i), Steadiness (S), and Conscientiousness (C).

“As an organization, the NCAA has been using assessment tools such as DiSC for many years,” says Wright. “We knew Everything DiSC Workplace could be a valuable tool in helping student-athletes figure out how to transition from college to career. So we made the decision to incorporate it in our NCAA Career in Sports Forum curriculum.”

The Forum has three major components—personal development, professional development, and leadership development.

“What the student-athletes learn from Everything DiSC Workplace, about themselves and others, is really important,” says Wright. “There are more than 400,000 NCAA student-athletes, and most of them go pro in something other than sports. That is why the Forum focuses on more than just coaching and sports administration. Our goal is to help student-athletes explore and enhance themselves so they’re prepared for what’s going to come after they graduate.”

“Wow, that’s so D of you!”

Everything DiSC Workplace kicks off the Forum, which is led by teams of trained facilitators from various NCAA member institutions—paired intentionally according to their DiSC styles. The facilitators use a detailed workbook, taking participants through interactive exercises on self-awareness and public presentation, nonverbal social signals, and inherent values. The students learn their individual styles, how to understand them, how to read styles in others, and how best to work together based on this knowledge.

DiSC is referenced throughout the week. This enables the student-athletes to apply the insight they gain to subsequent conversations about networking, resolving conflict, or personal branding. “The power of the program is that participants both understand it and see the application of it very quickly,” says Kaplan.

Wright agrees: “You know once a student-athlete has taken DiSC, because you hear comments like ‘Wow, that’s so D of you.’” It doesn’t take long for people to actually begin applying the information. For instance, someone who is a high C, meaning that he ranks high for Conscientiousness, quickly understands how his preference for details can be an asset. But even greater value comes when that same person learns how to embrace other types of behavior to become a more effective leader.

One thing that helps individuals embrace their DiSC profile is the accuracy of the information. “After they get their reports, we ask them to stand if they feel that 85 percent of what the DiSC assessment said about them is accurate,” explains Wright. “Everyone stands up. Most people continue standing, even when asked if they consider their DiSC profile to be 95 percent accurate.”

But far from simply labeling an individual’s style and placing him in a box, Everything DiSC Workplace demonstrates that the various work styles have much to learn from one another and reminds people that we each exhibit “shades” of all four styles.

The power of DiSC

“It changed my life,” says Wright, referring to her first DiSC assessment, which she took as a student-athlete while attending an NCAA leadership conference. “I learned so much about myself and intercollegiate athletics that I decided to pursue an internship with the NCAA.” That internship—and the self-knowledge Wright gained from DiSC—helped her land her current job and launch her career in sports administration.

“There are so many stories similar to mine,” says Wright, herself a former NCAA student-athlete.

Forum participant surveys confirm this—90 to 98 percent of those who attended last year’s conference rated their experience with DiSC as “useful” to their future careers. But the real benefit of Everything DiSC Workplace is unleashed when the students return to their campuses.

“It’s a little thing with many larger ripples,” explains Wright. “The student-athletes take back what they learned about themselves and how to work with others to their campuses, sharing what they learned with their teammates and their coaches.”

Hollomon agrees. “Everything DiSC Workplace is a tool to help our student-athletes engage with one another,” he says. “They are able to use what they learn to improve their college sports experience and their lives.”

And no matter what career they choose, the experience of playing college sports and the self-knowledge they gain at the NCAA Career in Sports Forum helps them become winners for life.

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T+D is published by the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD)

090938.63250

