

MATCH STRIKERS

College consulting company connects under-the-radar athletes with top schools.

BY JOHN DEEM

With his TV-analyst dad known as a college basketball power broker — especially during March Madness — Anthony Bilas could get the ear of just about any coach as he looked for a place to play after graduating from Charlotte Latin School last year. But Jay Bilas didn't want to play the influence game. Instead he directed his son to Lane Odom for advice on the best college fit. Anthony is among 60 clients of Charlotte-based Sportmatch LLC, which Odom started in 2010 to help high-school athletes use sports as leverage to enroll at academically challenging institutions. Odom, an assistant basketball coach for 16 years at Alabama, UNC Charlotte, Missouri and East Carolina University, launched the business after helping some friends connect their son to a college. He and partner David Lacy, a former Internet marketing executive, also work with baseball, football, soccer and lacrosse players, charging \$5,000 to \$7,500. Most clients are talented players but not the elites that populate big-time college sports programs.

"College is a 40-year decision, not a four-year decision," says Odom, whose father Dave coached at Wake Forest University and South Carolina. "Very few college athletes become professional athletes, but their college experience shapes the rest of their lives."



A TV commercial for soap maker Dove captured a "Real Moment" with father and son, Jay and Anthony Bilas, getting ready for the big high school dance. Fans may recognize Jay Bilas from ESPN. Anthony is now a freshman on Wake Forest University's men's basketball team.



Former basketball coach Lane Odom matches athletes with college baseball, basketball, football, lacrosse and soccer programs across the country.

Sportmatch has helped direct athletes to more than a dozen colleges including Davidson, Duke and the University of Virginia.

While many top universities don't offer athletic scholarships, well-regarded athletes often are favorites of admissions decision-makers. "The clearest way to differentiate your student in the process of getting into a prestigious school is athletics."

Odom cites a recent client who was a so-so football player with a desire to attend Massachusetts Institute of Technology, which plays in the New England Athletic Conference. "If not for football, I don't think he would have gotten in," Odom says. "Now, he's going to his dream school."

Anthony Bilas favored Wake Forest, where his mom, Wendy, earned an MBA. Though no Atlantic Coast Conference schools recruited him, Odom contacted Wake Forest's coaches, who liked what they saw and accepted him last year as a nonscholarship player. "He might never play, and he knows that," Jay Bilas says.

In Wake's first 21 games this year, Anthony, a 6'2" 165-pound freshman, played for one minute. He could have played more at a less-famous basketball school, his father says, "but he felt like Wake was the best fit academically and socially, and now he couldn't be happier."