

## College Opportunities for ALL Student Athletes by Pat Grecco

My initial contact with Xiaosi Gong was through her family friend, Dr. Jichuan Wang; he was referred to me by Student Athlete Magazine's editor, Bob Collins. With limited chess scholarships experience, I felt a bit strange about my assignment, but I accepted the challenge.

Dr. Wang, her mentor and family friend, provided information about Ms. Gong who lived in China, explaining that she was "a Chess Master" by the age of thirteen. Dr. Wang, a Professor of Medicine at Wright State University in Ohio, acted as an intermediary by Email. Without his input I might have been unsuccessful in helping Xiaosi secure a chess scholarship.

Xiaosi hoped to major in math. At Chengdu Shude High School, one of the top schools in China, Xiaosi was not only a "heavyweight" in the chess world but also in academics.

I was worried though as there was no way she could take the SAT but she did take the TOEFL and scored a 600 ... ranking first in her high school.

Wow! I was very impressed, this was exactly like dealing with a "blue chip" athlete only with chess as the sport.

Next, I identified twenty colleges and universities with chess scholarships; the two that offered the most money were U. of Maryland and U. of Texas making them my two top choice for Xiaosi.

The money for chess was labeled "special merit scholarships for chess for exceptionally talented chess players. Certainly, that had to describe our gifted chess master from China, Ms. Xiaosi Gong!!

My research continued and I found the names of the Chess Moderators of each of the twenty-five schools I wrote to. I created a "Chess and Academic Profile" much like the one I use for athletes but instead of a sport, chess was the name of the game. It was two page resume which included academic data, chess competition history, References as well as other pertinent information. Each Profile was accompanied by a cover letter which was addressed to the Chess Club Moderator.

In addition, I wrote a letter to the Director of Admissions of each school and was certain to request information for "International Students" as well as an application for admission, a catalog and video.

We began this college search process around December 2002 and I was concerned we would not have enough time. We used Dr. Wang's address, phone and fax numbers on the resume as well as his and Xiaosi's Email address. Admissions materials received by Dr. Wang were immediately forwarded to Xiaosi in China.

I was encouraged to read a piece on CNN On-line News "Move over, football and basketball stars. Now chess players are also being offered scholarships as colleges look

to world-class chess play to try to enhance their public image. Now, as many as 15 colleges and universities have followed suit in offering chess scholarships," said Frank Niro, the executive director of US Chess Federation headquartered in New Windsor, NY. I immediately called the US Chess Federation and received more information, things were looking good.



Grand Chess Master, Ms. Xiaosi Gong

On a long shot, I now wrote to schools that did not mention chess scholarships but have chess programs and were excellent schools. Among them were Johns Hopkins, Bucknell, MIT, Georgetown and prestigious Columbia University.

Initially, my correspondence with Dr. Wang and Xiaosi was heavy, almost daily and then it tapered off ... for a while I heard nothing.

After I had done the research and contact work and mailed out the materials, they did not keep me informed. Perhaps they failed to see how personally committed I had become to this assignment!

I received an Email from Dr. Wang on 2/19/03 at which time he said "I have received a lot of school application forms for Xiaosi from different universities but none of the schools have offered Xiaosi a

scholarship so far." I wrote back and explained she would have to network (a technique all student athletes must use) and perhaps apply to get things moving.

I was uneasy ... felt a little helpless at that point ... wished I could do more. Language, distance and the fact we had Emailed but never actually spoken and only made it more difficult for me.

I Emailed Dr. Wang on 2/20/03 and recommended Xiaosi apply to University of Maryland and University of Texas as I was certain she had a good chance there to receive money. From the beginning of our journey, Dr. Wang stated that money would be most important and a major factor in attending school in America.

Time passed. I did not hear from either Dr. Wang or Ms. Xiaosi Gong. In April I received an Email from Xiaosi. She wrote "I will be attending Columbia and received a full scholarship." I immediately responded, "THE Columbia University in New York City?" She replied a resounding YES! My long shot had paid off.

They explained that the scholarship was through endowment and private funding specially for chess champions. I was thrilled and as happy as I had been when my own daughter earned a full soccer scholarship.

Today Ms. Gong is a college freshman enjoying a \$40,000 chess scholarship and a new life-style at New York City's Ivy league jewel, Columbia University.

Her success demonstrates the validity of our concept: excellence in academics and athletics, combined with a structured plan always leads to college opportunities.