

binding letter of intent for college football, college recruiting services and Web sites are sprouting up. They offer to broker dreams at both ends — scholarship money and a place to play for high school kids and their parents, and, for college coaches, athletes they might have missed.

Granted, there's a Grand Canyon-sized gap between some coaching graduate assistant merely surfing a Web site and a college actually dangling an athletic scholarship. But in the MySpace-Facebook-YouTube generation, in an age where college sports are corporations, at a time when affording higher education is a Hail Mary, this was bound to happen.

By one estimate, more than 200 services around the country claim some sort of recruiting guru status, marketing athletes in high school sports from football to field hockey.

Some offer do-it-yourself marketing, posting profiles, game film and statistics provided to them by athletes and their parents or high school coaches. Others walk customers through the entire recruiting process. Some evaluate a player's talent, create highlight films and profiles and shotgun college coaches with e-mails and follow-up phone calls.

"A legitimate scouting organization or service can push one button and get your son or daughter in front of every school they're qualified for," said Jack Renkens, a college recruiting adviser in Arizona who answers recruiting questions in a column in The Locker Room section of The Plain Dealer.

By NCAA rules, no service can guarantee a college scholarship. And consultants aren't allowed to set fees as a percentage of a scholarship, because billing athletes like an agent might threaten their amateur status.

Hounding coaches around the country with e-mails doesn't guarantee they'll be read. So, just how effective are these high-tech recruiting tools? And how necessary?

High school and college

So his staff and countless others attend recruiting nights that many high school coaches throughout Northeast Ohio stage each year to showcase top players. College coaches go table to table to hear each pitch and grab packets and game film — a one-stop shop of information.

"Going through a coach that you trust is still really the best way to go," said Doug Martin, Kent State's head football coach.

Beyond the coveted big-name recruit is where aggressive marketing and exposure from a hired gun may help. With tighter recruiting budgets and limited coaching staffs, smaller schools — Divisions II and III — don't have the time and money to scour the country.

"So," said Vern Sharbaugh, a former high school coach and sports agent in Rocky River, "if you're not a Division I player, you sort of get overlooked."

He created mygamefilm.com about nine months ago. It's a do-it-yourself site. Athletes and their parents complete profiles and load game film. A database of colleges can be sorted by division, region and state to help target e-mails. The service costs \$99 for high school seniors and \$199 for juniors — more because they're on the site longer.

Sharbaugh, who has posted 15 profiles so far, said it's too soon to tell how well the site draws interest in the athletes.

But Mark DiPalma, whose son Nick anchored Benedictine's offensive line in 2006, said the profile and highlight video that Cleveland's Athletic Scholarship Corp. (athleticscholarship-corp.com) created and sent to schools resulted in about 40 calls from coaches within the first two weeks. Nick accepted a scholarship from Division II Saginaw Valley State in Michigan, where he is a freshman.

Aside from the Division I can't-misses, it's even harder for high school athletes in so-called secondary sports and on women's teams to get noticed. Many college coaches attend summer volleyball, soccer and softball tour-

Wheeling Jesuit and Indiana Tech for basketball, and from Fairmont State and Gannon University for volleyball.

"Did it get us a Division I scholarship? No," Terry DuBroy said. "But it gave us the peace of mind knowing playing Division II is the best opportunity for Kristen."

Yet, some coaches and recruiting specialists are skeptical of services and Web sites that charge parents.

John McCallister has scouted Ohio high school football players for almost two decades and is paid by colleges for his reports. He recalled an Upper Sandusky football player whose parents paid a recruiting service \$350, only to wind up playing a half-hour away at Ohio Northern.

"They're making money off these kids, and I don't particularly care for that," McCallister said. "A high school coach should be able to [promote his players], if he's doing his job."

Ideally, but some high school coaches spend their own money to promote their players, and others won't lift a finger. Even coaches with solid contacts don't have the reach to cover the country, especially smaller, obscure colleges.

Each year, Brunswick head football coach Rich Nowak sends more than 40 player highlight films to schools of all levels throughout Ohio and surrounding states.

"But I don't know about any schools in Iowa, you know what I mean?" he said. "There might be a school in Montana. There might be a Division II school in Kansas that I don't know about. That's where those services come in handy."

The Web sites also are cost-effective for high school coaches, said Bob Mihalik, head football coach at Aurora. Instead of having to mail dozens of highlight films, he posts videos on scoutingohio.com and directs interested college coaches to check that first.

So the Web site is a starting point where college coaches can