Discus-thrower in for time of her life

Peter Barrett

In just over a week, 19-year-old Phoebe Sloane will board a plane and embark on a life-changing adventure. The 185-centimetre discus-thrower from Canterbury joins a growing number of young Australians leaving the country to pursue American college sports scholarships.

Sloane, who finished year 12 at Strathcona Baptist Girls Grammar School last year, is headed for the University of Memphis to study communications. She's on what's called in the business (and it is a business) "a full ride" — four years of study, board and high-performance sports coaching valued at about AUD$40,000 a year.

She has landed a spot in the premier athletes competition — the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), division one. "I'm pretty excited now that I've got my visa out of the way and my subjects confirmed," says Sloane, a natural athlete who first picked up a discus in grade 6 and, six weeks later, won a state championship final with a throw that beat her competitors by a whopping seven metres.

"It's an opportunity for me to leave home, to gain independence, to meet new people from a different culture, live in a different culture and have new experiences that I wouldn't have here."

For young athletes like Sloane it's also an opportunity to gain a HECS-free education while competing in the same hothouse sporting environment that has produced the likes of Carl Lewis, Jimmy Connors and Tiger Woods (not to mention pretty much every NBA basketball player).

Tim Lee, director of Melbourne University Sport, says universities in Australia provide flexible study arrangements for athletes but minimal financial assistance (up to $2000 at the University of Melbourne) and mainly for elite athletes who typically compete at Commonwealth Games or Olympic Games levels. "It's really about supporting them to be students. Whilist we'd love them to compete for the university — and many of them do at our limited competitions — one thing we haven't yet developed is a sub-elite university competition."

It has taken Sloane time and serious effort to win her sports scholarship in the US. Two-and-a-half years of choosing the right subjects (as early as year 9), schmoozing overseas coaches, preparing multimedia resumes, sitting Standard Academic Tests (SATs) and negotiating the strategic game of offer and counter-offer with the universities themselves.

It was such a job that her mother Sandra, then a sports administrator at Basketball Victoria, dedicated two days a week to her daughter's recruitment process. "There was very little housework done, for a while," laughs Sandra, who has since founded her own business in the area, called College Consulting.

"The best way of looking at college recruiting is to compare it to a job search," says Sandra. "You have to do a lot of research and preparation and then have the drive, persistence and initiative to make it happen. The single most important aspect is self-promotion."

Phoebe Sloane is excited about the future but has mixed feelings, as she leaves behind friends, family and "a good boyfriend". She's looking forward to the adventure but is most happy that she can now further her education and her athletic career at the same time. "I really love the fact that I can do both, that I don't have to choose."