

## Visa Options for Foreign Athletes

By [Pam Prather](#)

Basketball, Tennis, Hockey, Golf, Gymnastics....we American's love sports, and sports mean competition. When it comes down to contests between the best of the best, nationality doesn't matter.

Whether you're a Swiss tennis player, a British football (a.k.a. soccer) player, or a Russian hockey player, at some point you'll want to come to the U.S. to compete with the biggest names in your game. Luckily, there are several visa options available to international sports figures.

For temporary (or "nonimmigrant") visas, the following are possibilities.

**The [O-1 visa](#)** is for athletes of extraordinary ability, or those who have achieved "a level of expertise indicating that the person is one of the small percentage who have risen to the very top of the field of endeavor". The application for this visa must include documentation that the person has national or international acclaim, e.g. an Olympic medal for a Russian skater, a Wimbledon championship for [Rafael Nadal](#), or a World Cup for [David Beckham](#).

But do you really have to be at that level to qualify for an O-1 visa?

No.

But you do have to prove significant accomplishments in your sport.

If issued an O-1 visa, the nonimmigrant may live and compete in the U.S. for an initial period of three years. The status can then be extended indefinitely in one-year increments.

**A [P-1 visa](#)** is more commonly used for athletes coming to the U.S. for a shorter period of time. The standard of achievement is also not quite as high as the O-1.

The P-1 visa applicant provides evidence that he/she competes at "an internationally recognized" level of competition. This could be appropriate for the Dominican Major League Baseball team member, or even a minor league/amateur athletic competition of some kind.

The P visa is typically issued for up to one year, but sometimes for up to five years. One extension of up to five years is allowed.

Both the O and P visas require the sponsorship of a corporation, agent, or team.

**[B-1](#)** is a business visitor visa category. It can, however, be appropriate for those foreign athletes who support themselves on tournament prize money rather than a salary (think Italian auto racer).

He/she (or the team for which they play) must be based outside the United States. And if it is a team, it must be part of an international sports league.

The B-1 can be issued for up to one year, and may sometimes be extended in six-month increments.

There are also several options for foreign athletes who wish to remain in the U.S. permanently. Obtaining a [Green Card](#), or an *Immigrant Visa*, requires careful planning with an experienced [immigration attorney](#).

So if you're a foreign athlete and need to perform at a sporting event in the U.S., or even want to permanently live here, there are various visa options available to you.