

A Parent's View of College Recruiting

Laurie Richter

The year my son was getting recruited for college basketball, there was a scene that played out over and over again. My husband and I would be at an adult gathering where at least a few of the attendees were parents of an aspiring college athlete, and all of them had recruiting tales to share. The story exchange would start innocently enough. But before long, the simmering frustration and anxiety of a parent being churned up in the recruiting mill would lead to a hostile case of the blame game and a few choice expletives. And guess who was invariably the subject? The high school coach, the devil incarnate of the college recruiting process. This kind of scorn was irrational and I had never heard this level of discontent expressed about any of these coaches until the season of recruiting was upon us. What was behind it?

First, a little background. One eventual outcome of my involvement with my son's recruiting was that I wrote and published *Put Me In, Coach: A Parent's Guide to Winning the Game of College Recruiting*. The prospect of simplifying it for the next generation of recruits seemed more productive to me than whining about how complicated and unfair it was. As a result, many of the parents in my community identified me as knowledgeable about recruiting and a sympathetic ear. But I came to realize that their anger and frustration were focused on the wrong target. High school coaches are not to blame.

So what's wrong with recruiting anyway? Well, it depends on who you ask. We have all heard the rumors about the questionable ethics of a handful of college coaches in persuasion mode, or the baited athletes whose promised spots are taken away when a prospect higher on the depth chart suddenly changes their mind and accepts an

offer. But for the most part, the elite athlete has few complaints with recruiting. They are sought after by many and their biggest issues are how to know which offer will be the best fit and how to maintain their sanity and privacy during the year when college coaches will try to dominate their every waking moment. Elite athletes aside, the reality is that the majority of college athletes are not blue chippers and recruiting is much more difficult for them. With only about 325 NCAA Division I schools, and another 1400 schools between the rest of the NCAA, NAIA and junior colleges, a lot of spots will go to second tier athletes. In pursuit of those spots, they find that it's tough to get exposure, they can't get enough scholarship money to afford college, and they struggle with how to differentiate themselves from all the other equally talented kids they're competing against. As they try to figure out how to make themselves known and how to be competitive, they run into what I have come to believe is one of the biggest problems in college recruiting: it's total anarchy. Here is a snapshot:

There is no one person or organization in charge.

There is nothing centralized or institutionalized to simplify it.

You don't know who your competition is, how many you're up against, and where you are in the pecking order.

There is no application form or 800 number to call for help.

There is no credentialing of people or groups you can hire to help you.

And most athletes and their families are going through it for the first and only time.

There is a logical tendency for an

athlete's parents to assume that as novices, they know less about what to do than anyone else involved, and that eventually someone in a position of authority will take the lead. And that's where it all begins to fall apart, because what they fail to realize is that the responsibility for making it happen is, first and foremost, the athlete's. By the time they realize no one else is in charge, it's often too late. That's usually when I would start to hear the stories about the "rotten coach that didn't lift a finger," or "the jerk that sabotaged their kids' recruiting." Yet, you can understand the logic that gets parents to this place.

While I was researching my book, there were several coaches who read early drafts and mentioned how much they had learned by reading it. This was an unexpected surprise because, prior to writing it, I too naively assumed that every high school coach would know all there is to know about recruiting and would have dozens of contacts within the college coaching community. I now know better. No one can possibly know everything, the NCAA rules change daily, and the typical coach will never work with enough college prospects to develop more than a handful of contacts. Consider this example. Suppose you are a high school varsity basketball coach with about 7 years of coaching experience and you carry 20 kids on your roster. About half of them turn over every year. So after 7 years, you've coached about 80 kids. According to NCAA statistics, only 3 out of 100 high school seniors playing basketball, girls or boys, will go on to play at any level in the NCAA. So of your 80, you may have encountered 2-3 who went on to play NCAA college ball. Not a lot of opportunity to get experience with recruiting. And clearly, not a lot of opportunity to make the kinds of contacts in the college coaching community that a parent would hope to leverage. We all know of high school programs that produce college ready recruits year after year, and high school coaches who seem to be connected to the immediate world. But I'm guessing

many high school coaches probably see themselves in my example.

Going through recruiting and selecting the right college fit is no small task so let's be realistic about who should be doing what. Taking the lead on getting a kid recruited is a high-effort-low-return activity for a coach. The time spent on planning the future of one kid takes away from time that could be spent developing skills and strategy for the rest of the kids on the high school team. While the vast majority of them will never grace a college field or court, their continued success in high school is a coach's day to day responsibility and must come first. Despite this, most coaches are (and should be) willing to help with recruiting in any way they can, and take great pride in the accomplishments of their athletes. But it just makes more sense for recruiting to be led by the athlete. Since the majority of college athletes will end their competitive sports career four years after high school graduation, the choice of a college needs to reflect as much focus on getting the necessary education and training for whatever comes next, as it does on the athletic program. Clearly, no one is better suited to understand those needs than the athlete and his or her family.

By now you know that I'm firmly in the camp that believes high school coaches should play a supporting role but they shouldn't be expected to play the leading role in the recruiting of their athletes. I'd love to give you cause for optimism, but the simple truth is that parents will continue to look for someone who knows more than they do to take charge of at least the athletic portion of the college search. This tension between the high expectations of parents and many coaches' inability to fulfill it comes down to this: until some structure and organization is brought into the confusing and complex recruiting process, parents will continue to assume that recruiting is a coach responsibility, and the majority of coaches will continue to lack the resources to fulfill this expectation. And we can all guess how likely structure

and organization are to materialize.

The simplest solution I can suggest is to better manage these expectations by putting some parameters around them from the beginning. As a kid enters a high school athletic program, the family should be presented with a policy statement or paper that spells out some guidelines for college recruiting. It should include a checklist of what the athlete has to do at each point in the process, and unless a coach is willing to shoulder the full responsibility of an athletes' recruiting, it should be made clear that the athlete is the one who needs to own this process. It should also clearly delineate what the coach can be expected to do, and what the athlete and family are expected to do. If this had been done at my son's school, the grumbling malcontents might have switched their cocktail party conversation to politics or the economy. What a happy thought.

About the Author

As a marketing research professional for 24 years, Laurie Richter, PhD, has tackled all kinds of assignments. But it was as a parent that she faced her most challenging research project to date: figuring out the complex and mysterious world of athletic recruiting so that her son Dylan could choose the right school and continue playing basketball. The result of her involvement in the recruiting process is two books: *Put Me In, Coach : A Parent's Guide to Winning the Game of College Recruiting*, and *The Recruiting Companion for College Sports: Over 100 Winning Tips*. Both can be found on www.rightfitpress.com and on Amazon.