

COACH YOUR PLAYERS THROUGH THE RECRUITING PROCESS

By Denny Schuler

In this article I'm going to attempt to explain the recruiting process that develops between a recruiter and his college with a high school recruit and his family. It is my belief that the high school coach should actively act as a mediator to guide the recruit and his family through this unique experience. They, more than likely, haven't been through this before and probably won't go through it again. The recruiter and his college have an advantage in that they must do this every year very successfully or they will be looking for another job next year. Recruiting is the lifeblood of any college or university. Players win games. They are competing for these players just as hard as they compete on the field. They know and understand the process. Recruits and parents do not.

I'm going to outline

- ✓ ✓ What the college coaches (recruiters) are looking for initially and how to get their attention - if you as the coach already haven't.
- ✓ ✓ questions parents/ coaches should ask
- ✓ ✓ what parents should look for on the official visit
- ✓ ✓ the guidelines to request as they move through this experience

This should be a positive experience but if handled poorly from either end can be a very negative adventure. I believe the high school coach should coach his player and family through this delicate process.

I. Advise Potential Recruits Early

You the coach can tell your young sophomore/junior he "has a chance" if he jumps through certain off the field hurdles. If he wants to play college football his grades and character are always at the forefront. The NCAA requires that a student athlete must be at a certain level when they match his SAT/ACT score with his mandatory 14 core courses his senior year. Any drug or police issues will raise the "red flag" in a hurry. There are too many good players out there to take a chance on an "off the field" problem. Encourage them early and put the ball in their court. Making them accountable for their actions is one of the best lessons we can teach any student athlete, regardless if they are in junior high, high school or college.

From an athletic standpoint, I believe the young athlete should get involved with other sports. It does two things. First, other sports help develop them athletically. This is especially true for the big guys who think the weight room is the answer. It is only part of the answer. Just as important, if not more so, is improving their footwork. There are a lot of big guys out there, but not a lot of them that can move. Secondly, other sports provide exposure to the recruiter. I can tell a lot about a football player that plays basketball for example. Quickness, feet, physique, toughness, character and competitiveness all are visible during the winter/spring months when coaches are on the road evaluating talent. I've encouraged every athlete I've coached or recruited to go out for track. You cannot be fast enough in today's game of football as it moves more and more to a spread field. There are very few positions in football for players that

cannot move their feet. Moreover, a legitimate track time, jump or distance gives instant credibility to any athlete.

II. After the Junior Season

There are a number of services that provide names of potential collegiate recruits. The best and most widely used publication by colleges/universities is Collegiate Sports Data. Stay away from (and inform parents about) any service that says they will get your player a scholarship. There is no such animal! They extract a huge fee and do nothing you the coach cannot do for free by making a few phone calls.

Again, without hiring a recruiting service that builds a video, have your player make a hi-lite tape on his own if he's truly interested in playing at the next level. He can do it himself. If he's an elite player, he will not need to do this as everyone already knows about him, but this can help the marginal player. Have him put his 20+ best plays on a tape followed by his best game tape. Add basketball or track to show athletic ability. Remember, we many times haven't seen these kids without the pads on. Initially, each college coach (recruiter) has a large geographical area with many players to screen and he probably doesn't have the time to watch all the games you've given him. Tweak his interest by your player's best shots. They should show speed, toughness and athletic ability. Make sure they can find him on the video.

III The Summer Before Senior Season

Have your player make a realistic college wish list and match that with what schools he is hearing from after spring recruiting when the college coaches visited your school to start their senior list. From that combined list send the hi-lite tape to those schools ASAP.

In addition, from that list, plan if possible to attend, at a prorated fee, 2-3 summer camps offered by those colleges for one or two days only. As the college coaches cannot leave their campuses after May, your players must go to them. Again, if your player is an elite, he doesn't have to go anywhere. However, the rest should expose their football ability. Only one day at a reduced rate is enough. Summer camps also give the recruit and his family a chance to look at the school just as much as they're evaluating your player. These "unofficial visits" are very helpful (even if no summer football camp can be arranged) in getting a feel for that school. If your player is invited to a "junior day" in the spring take that as a compliment and plan to attend if possible.

IV. IV. Just What Are These College Coaches Looking For?

Recruiting is clearly not an exact science. Many "Blue-chip" recruits turn out to be a bust while many "walk-ons" eventually go on to the NFL. We've all made mistakes. However, I will always believe these qualities come into play in determining a recruit's chances:

- A. A. Character - Must be problem free, a bonus if a leader and team player.
- B. B. Grades - If marginal, the key question is "is he motivated academically?" because the resources are there to help him succeed. You can lead a horse to water...

- C. C. Height/Weight/Speed - Big and fast is good. Short and slow is bad. This is potential. The better the numbers the better the chance but no guarantee. The Doug Flutie in recruiting will always be the exception.
- D. D. Position Fundamentals - Can he play the game? Is he making plays? The better fundamentally the sooner they will play.
- E. E. Dying to be a Great Player? – This Don James question will answer so many work ethic, motivational questions. He'll do whatever it takes.
- F. F. Coachability – The hardest quality to determine but essential. Many outstanding athletes have stood next to me on the sideline because they made too many assignment errors. Consistency leads to trust. Trust leads to playing time.

V. V. The Fall - Both Seasons (Football and Recruiting) Begin for Real

The intensity gets kicked up a notch. Letters don't mean a thing at this point. Coaches making phone calls are a good thing. No personal contact can take place unless the recruit visits campus. In December home or school visits will take place. This is a good sign that the recruit is actually being recruited and not on the back burner just receiving letters. At this point I strongly suggest that the high school coach becomes increasingly involved.

Get in the loop. Offer your services to the parents and hopefully they'll accept you joining "the family". If the parent or parents are marginally involved that means the high school coach must take up the slack. Early on the college coach will always stop by the school to talk with you. He's on your turf. Ask him, "Hey Coach, what are you telling Johnny? Where does he stand?"

There are some key questions you and/or the parents should ask at this point

- A. A. Scholarship If not now, when will we know? Keep us informed of his status!
- B. B. Can he lose his scholarship? How? Football related? Do you cut if not playing?
- C. C. Academics Of yourseniors, how many will graduate this spring? There's a new NCAA Graduation Formula. How does your college rank?
- D. D. Academic Support Everyone has study halls, tutors, etc. How do the position coaches get involved academically with their players? How do you monitor class progress? How do you know if a player is skipping class? What are the consequences? What do you do when a Jr/Sr. has a class conflict with football practice?
- E. E. Drug Policy Outside of NCAA testing, do you test randomly, probable cause or not at all? What are the consequences if positive?
- F. F. Attrition Rate How many of your (pick a year) freshmen are still with you? If very few, why? This says a lot!
- G. G. Position Change or Redshirt Who decides? Player or coach?
- H. H. Spring Sports Can he participate in baseball/track and miss spring ball?
- I. I. Dormitory Mandatory after the first year? Grade related? Football roommate or not?

Hopefully by this time an official visit to the college has been scheduled or is in the process. Increasingly, these visits are being moved up to the fall from their traditional Dec/Jan time slots. The earlier the visit the more likely an offer. Note the tone of the answers to these questions. Are they taking shots at other schools? These coaches are the windows through which you view their college. They all turn into salesmen, some better than others, this time of year.

VI. The Official Trip - It's a 48-hour business trip

Encourage one or more parents to accompany the recruit on his official visit even if they have all taken an unofficial visit before (meaning the recruit and parents paid). It will look a lot different and be more impressive. The parents must pay for their transportation but once on campus, the college can provide food, lodging and entertainment. When it comes time for a decision, the parents will be in a better position to interpret the differences between the schools with their son.

Help establish decision-making criteria long before the official visits begin. A recruit can make 5 official visits beginning in October of his senior year. What are you looking for? I always felt they should be in the areas of football, academics, and environment. Weight rooms can be impressive but it is far more important that the people running that facility be of quality. This is true of everything that recruits will see. An expensive academic study center is wonderful but only if the support people operating that building are proficient at what they do. My point is look beyond the fluff and glitter. Evaluate the school on the quality of the people within that school. Who does the parent want to turn their son over to for the next 4-5 years? Who will lead and guide them in the parent's absence? That's far more important than the facilities that have become so visible recently.

Obviously the head coach, is the key figure as he guides the ship. But the position coach is the one the recruit will deal with day in and day out both on the field and off. Is there a good feeling between the two? What does his player host say about him? Is he a teacher or a tyrant?

The present players on the team are the best barometer for the mood or feel of the whole program. They are the least likely group of salesmen the recruit will meet during his official visit. Their actions and opinions say a lot about the character of the team at this point in time. The recruit's parents should also take a look at the other recruits on campus and ask the same questions. Do these young men sound and act like the type of teammates they would like their sons to be with for the next 4-5 years?

The recruit should also realize that he is being evaluated too. Don't do anything Saturday night that would jeopardize his chances of getting a scholarship. Don't be cool. Be attentive, courteous and respectful. An official visit does not automatically equate to a scholarship (55 visits per year allowed by NCAA rules). More than once I can remember a player host telling me, "We're not sure he'll fit in." Unfortunately, character (or lack of) is, I believe the single biggest issue facing college football today.

My last thought on the official trip is look, ask questions, enjoy the trip but be leery of promises or guarantees. There are only opportunities...

VI. VI. The Offer - "Show Me the Money"

At some point this Jerry McGuire line comes into play. If a school is truly interested in getting a commitment from the recruit they must ante up with a scholarship. This is especially true if another school has already offered. If a school hasn't offered by January ask where the recruit is ranked. How many at his position have been offered? How many are they going to take? Talk is cheap, show me the money!

If and when the offer comes, the parents/coach should make sure it is put in writing with any deadlines noted like "this offer is good through---". The NCAA does not have any rules regarding this offer other than the official February signing date when letter of intent and official scholarships are signed. All early offers are at best in letter form and simply say that the recruit has been offered a scholarship. They very seldom say that it can be pulled at anytime or lost because someone else took it. The parent/coach should demand that the college notify the recruit at least verbally if the offer is in jeopardy. Again, the recruit should know where he stands so he can make the choice and not the college.

It is only fair to explain the dilemma a college is in. If a school has a limit of 25 scholarships to give that year, it will almost always have to offer more, knowing they will not sign all their offers. No school signs 100%. The USC's of the world bat 80%-90% while the New Mexico States are in the 40%-50% range. Therein lies the problem. More offers are on the table than they can accept. As an example, if a school wants to sign 5 offensive linemen, they will offer official recruiting trips to 7-8 at that position. They will rank these recruits 1 through 8. Recruits 1-4 will be invited early with an offer, recruits 7-8 will be scheduled to come in later with no early offer. Ideally, 1-4 commit on their visit but just the opposite probably will happen. Recruits 5-8 are less heavily recruited, have fewer offers and are more likely to commit before 1-4, complete all their trips. Do you offer 7-8 on their trip while 1-2 are deliberating? You don't want to turn down 5-8 because you may lose everybody above. Add to this the possibility that a school may be able to sign the top two running backs they are recruiting. They were only going to sign one so should they sign one less offensive linemen? These are some of the questions every staff goes through during this recruiting process. The bottom line is the college cannot accept all their offers because they have an NCAA limit. Either the recruits choose other schools, a college will "greyshirt" a signee (let him enroll the following mid-year and add him to next year's signees) or the school will pull the offer. Hopefully, it is not the latter.

It is all unofficial before the February signing date. A 17 year old recruit can commit early, change his commit to another school or occasionally commit to more than one school. I've seen it all. It is my belief that a college or university should stand above the fickleness of a young recruit by dealing openly and fairly in this process. A family should not have to hear, "I'm sorry it's too late" unless

they've been alerted earlier. Demand honest, open dialogue with the recruiter and his school.

VII. VII. The Decision

- This can be very easy or very difficult depending on many circumstances. The number of schools offering this young man is obviously a factor. If only one offer, the recruit has no leverage. Don't lose it by waiting. If a college believes the recruit is waiting for a better offer they may not be willing to wait with so many scholarships on the line. If numerous schools offer, start by eliminating. Begin by deciding where he's not going to go. This is the tough part.

Finally, refer again to the criteria we set forth in the beginning. This is the recruit's first major decision of his life. The bottom line is, "What school will help me the most to attain my goals both in the near future (football) and in the long run (profession)?" It's important to choose a school, not a coach. College coaches move or get fired. Ask, "Would I want to go to school there if Coach _____ wasn't there?" Try to remove emotion from your decision.

Consequently, it's important to look at this decision rationally and objectively. However, I do believe that, "a gut feeling" comes into play as well. The decision may not clearly black or white. Very few decisions are. But in the end, with a good plan and parent's/coach's guidance a decision will be made.

After committing to a school, some very tough phone calls must be made to other schools. Thank them for their interest but the recruit must be firm in his decision. A "soft" commitment will only insure that the recruiting will continue. If phone calls or visits continue and the recruit is having difficulty saying "stop" the parent/coach must intervene. How a recruiter accepts "no" says a lot about that school. You, as the coach, take note for recruits down the road.

Hopefully, this recruiting experience from initial letters to signing date will be a positive one. It can be and should be. It helps to understand the process. Coach your players!