

TAMING THE COLLEGE RECRUITMENT DRAGON

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By Rik Tod Johnson

Some kids seem to have it all: talent, a well-to-do family, connections – a glowingly certain future looms ahead for them. For these student-athletes, college is a definite lock. However, not all kids come from the same circumstances. It is one thing to have an extremely talented soccer player in the family; it is another thing altogether to get that child looked at by a college coach for possible scholarship opportunities. Most families cannot afford to send their kids to the proper camps or tournaments where a positive evaluation from a top coach could mean the world to someone with limited means.

In an effort to help guide those lost in the maze of college recruitment, we polled a cross-section of top college soccer coaches from all three divisions to get their opinions on some of the misconceptions that parents and prospects have regarding recruitment policies.

We also asked them to list the factors that coaches consider most when sizing up a prospect. Most coaches, understandably, respond to a student's athleticism first, including size, speed and movement. Technical ability and mental sharpness were the next most prized attributes, and academic profile rated high, too. Coaches also keep an eye out for positive character traits, such as a player's abilities as a teammate and personal attitude.

Negotiating the twin minefields of NCAA eligibility *and* recruiting rules can be a daunting task, and many coaches expressed a sincere wish that parents would familiarize themselves fully with the laws by which college sports are run. Too many parents make improper contact with coaches too early in the process, and too many students are not aware that college coaches are extremely limited in returning phone calls. "I would like parents and players to make sure they understand the NCAA rules in regards to contact periods," suggests Veronica O'Brien, Head Coach of Women's Soccer at the University of California-Riverside. "At a competition site, many parents and players believe they can walk up to a college coach and engage in a recruitment conversation. There are strict rules regarding this. Overall, whether it is by telephone or email, I prefer the player to make the first contact versus the parents."

When can a student-athlete make initial contact with a college coach? Confusingly, the rules change depending on the division. Division III coaches can send recruiting materials anytime and there is no limit on the number of calls you can make, and vice versa. Division II coaches have it tougher: they must wait until the beginning of your junior year to send materials, and they have to wait until June 15 after that year to call you by phone, and then, only once a week.

Division I is where things get truly convoluted. In Division II and III, the same rules apply to all sports, but in Division I, there are harsher rules for basketball and football. Soccer is lumped into a category called "Other Sports". It breaks down further into specifics, depending on the student-athlete's year. Sophomores may *only* receive brochures for camps and questionnaires from the college, and while students are free to call coaches at their own expense, the coach *cannot* initiate contact with a sophomore at all. The only personal contact allowed in sophomore year is if the student makes an unofficial visit to the college.

Juniors can receive recruitment materials on September 1st of that year, and coaches *can* call you, but only *once* during March in your junior year, and then once per week starting July 1st, at which point they can meet with you off-campus, as well. Prior to this, they can only meet you once during the month of April at your high school. As a senior, things loosen up a bit, and coaches can call you once a week, and you may begin making official visits to campuses, but only to a maximum of five Division I and II schools. Coaches, however, can only contact you off the college campus a maximum of three times in your senior year.

Most of our polled coaches had varying opinions as to exactly when they felt it was best for a student-athlete to make initial contact, but were divided evenly between the sophomore and junior years. One coach was very specific in their belief that kids were being recruited too early, but still chose the sophomore year as their choice, at least until NCAA rules change.

How should student-athletes make initial contact? The vast majority of coaches preferred email as the chief form of contact. Only two considered phone calls the best way to contact a coach initially, and personal letters were preferred by two coaches. Clearly, the most modern forms of communication are becoming more acceptable in reaching coaches. Because of this, student-athletes should make sure that their email writing

skills approximate those of a well-constructed letter. Another suggestion is that students go to a college's athletic website and fill out a recruitment form. Once you submit this form, you will at least be in their system for further recognition down the line.

Proper writing skills come in handy, too, when preparing your resumé for submission. Maintaining the proper amount of too much or too little information is a tricky balancing act, and not every coach is necessarily looking for the same information on a resumé. Overall, GPA and SAT scores were the most important item when looking at a student's resumé. Your club, their strength of schedule and level of competition were also deemed important, and the Cal South Olympic Development Program (ODP) was considered very highly when reviewing a resumé.

So, you connect with a coach following NCAA rules; now what happens? Where can one be seen by these coaches? Most are willing to do whatever it takes to see a talented player. However, the NCAA has limits on how many recruiting trips coaches may take. When coaches *do* make those trips, they seem to favor overwhelmingly the bigger tournaments where they can see a multitude of players in one place. For this reason, college camps, ODP events and combines are popular, too. Shannon Stiles, Head Coach of Women's Soccer at Gonzaga University, agrees: "We have a limited recruiting budget, so we go to the main college showcases. Generally, we would make trips to smaller tournaments... but only after identifying [that player's] talent from a bigger tournament, or, if we identify them when they are "guesting" for a team. It's very difficult to chase a needle in a haystack." Some even go out of their way to attend high school games when there is an athlete that particularly piques their interest. In all cases, though, coaches are *not* allowed to make personal contact with students until after the completion of a tournament.

Another important area that most coaches wish parents and students understood is the finite number of scholarships available each year at any school. If you are a high school senior playing soccer, the whisperings of "full ride" scholarships are more myth than reality. Soccer is considered an equivalency sport, and as an incoming college freshman, you will probably only be getting a partial scholarship, though success is often rewarded with increases in your annual scholarship amount. Even then, parents should be wary and look into all financial sources before agreeing to a college. Parents should weigh heavily the costs of the individual school versus the actual scholarship money their child would receive, as these two quantities rarely match up.

Finally, there are things a student can do to help further their chances of scoring well with a coach. Keeping the coach informed of your progress throughout the remainder of your high school years is a good start. Since there is no limit to how much a student-athlete can email a coach (depending on the year, of course), supplying a familiar coach with updates of your club, high school and tournament success is a good way to keep a coach clued into your continued interest in their program, as well as keeping *their* interest in you.

Students of any year can also make as many "unofficial visits" to a college as they wish. An "unofficial visit" is any visit you or your parents make to a college campus that is paid for by either you or your parents. The school may provide you with as many as three complimentary admissions to a home athletics contest, but this is the only expense during the visit that the school may incur. On an "unofficial visit", students may meet freely with a coach, but if the visit involves a game, you can meet only with the home coach, and not an away coach. Bret Simon, Head Coach of Men's Soccer at Stanford University, sums it up nicely: "It's important for a player to visit possible schools, to get to know the team and coaching staff, and to understand where they would fit in with that team. So, the most important thing would be for people to take their time making this big decision."

If you are considering continuing your education in both the classroom *and* on the soccer field, hopefully this journey through the maze of college recruitment will help you in determining the right course for you.

For more information, please go to the website for the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) at http://www2.ncaa.org/portal/legislation_and_governance/eligibility_and_recruiting/recruiting.html.