

EARLY RECRUIT

THE ROLE OF SPORTS IN EDUCATION

EARLY RECRUITING IN WOMEN'S LACROSSE

Women's lacrosse is breaking barriers by pressuring 8th-grade girls to "commit" to one of the most accelerated early recruiting processes in college sports today. Lacrosse recruiting starts in middle school and requires year-round training to showcase for college coaches. Early recruiting undermines the role of sports in education and prioritizes a student's athletic ability over academics, years before the college admissions process.

Enabled by loopholes in the NCAA rules, student-athletes can verbally "commit" at any age. This unregulated process lacks transparency and often consists of an exploding "offer" which pressures a student-athlete to make a premature decision about where to attend college. College counselors who traditionally provided guidance on this important decision have been replaced by club coaches who often act as agents and operate outside the boundaries of educational institutions.

Driven by the continued expansion of women's lacrosse teams to comply with Title IX, a university arms race to showcase prestige and wealth, female athletes are in demand by even the elite academic institutions. While parents, coaches and administrators acknowledge early recruiting is detrimental to the "well-being" of student-athletes, they all actively participate. Parents make a significant investment in their daughter's athletic career and they expect a return. But the reality is that only a low percentage will be recruited and even fewer will receive any scholarship.

Sports is a business that is destroying amateurism. When lacrosse, a non-revenue generating sport, is showcasing early recruiting with teenage girls, the intercollegiate model and ideals of a "student-athlete" have broken down. It is no secret that sports can help with college admissions, but early recruiting disadvantages student-athletes who cannot afford to participate in the process or afford the high cost of education. For universities who value diversity, wealth disparity is a compelling reason to evaluate their internal recruiting policies and support the pending NCAA legislation.

The NCAA is currently reviewing early recruiting and will vote on this issue in April. While multiple sports have submitted different proposals, women's lacrosse has set forth the most comprehensive legislation which if approved could help to mitigate the problem and begin to address the role of sports in education.



"STUDENT-ATHLETE"

Early recruiting undermines the NCAA intercollegiate athletic model and the importance of being a "student-athlete".

DETRIMENTAL TO WELL-BEING

Early recruiting is detrimental to the physical, emotional and mental "well-being" of a student-athlete.

LACK OF TRANSPARENCY

Early recruiting lacks transparency with student-athletes "committing" years before the college admissions process.

WEALTH DISPARITY

Early recruiting creates a wealth disparity barrier that disadvantages student-athletes who cannot afford to be recruited.



DETRIMENTAL TO “WELL-BEING”

The NCAA is committed to protecting the health and safety of student-athletes, which should be a major consideration when reviewing the early recruiting legislation. By all accounts, early recruiting is detrimental to the physical, emotional and mental “well-being” of student-athletes. Pressuring student-athletes to make a premature decision about one of the most important aspects of her life, where to attend college, can have adverse consequences.

Tournaments, camps and clinics overlap almost daily during the permissible NCAA recruiting period, which was recently amended to mandate breaks from this year-round process. To meet the demands of this intense schedule, the traditional multi-sport athlete specializes in lacrosse, increasing injuries and burnout. Physically, young girls are putting undue stress on their bodies resulting in overuse injuries. The number of girls on the sidelines with knee, hip, ankle and head injuries is significant, but more concerning is the number of girls who are playing through these injuries to showcase for college coaches.

The early recruiting process has a limited window of opportunity pressuring many girls to play when they are injured. Division I recruiting for women’s lacrosse is essentially over by the sophomore year in high school. Attend any club tournament over the summer and the sidelines are packed with all of the top college coaches watching the freshmen. Girls will delay surgeries, ice between games, play with concussions, stress fractures and take painkillers -- they will do whatever it takes to be seen by the college coaches during this critical period because their futures depend on it.

While the physical injuries may be more apparent on the surface, the emotional and mental stress created by early recruiting is also very detrimental to the student-athlete’s “well-being”. The competing pressures faced to perform in the classroom and on the athletic field are overwhelming and compounded by parents living vicariously through their daughters. Parents view lacrosse as the “golden-ticket” for college admissions but are misguided by unrealistic expectations. Girls limit their search to where college coaches are interested in them. The result is a premature decision that requires significant input from the parents and often does not reflect the best interests of the student-athlete who is understandably too young.

Even for the elite student-athletes who have the privilege of being recruited early by the top programs, the process causes undue stress. Early recruits often feel like social outcasts who are resented by their peers and even their teachers for taking the “easy path” to college. And for the countless student-athletes who are never recruited, the process can be devastating making girls feel like they are failures at an early age before most of their peers would even consider college.



LACK OF TRANSPARENCY

College admissions is increasingly competitive with application deadlines, standardized tests and GPA requirements providing guidelines for the process. Early recruiting operates outside of these guidelines with student-athletes “committing” years before the NCAA can even assess academic eligibility. This lack of transparency is extremely problematic and complicated by the fact that college coaches are negotiating with minors.

Early recruiting is an unregulated, rolling “admissions” process often comprised of an exploding “offer” that pressures a student-athlete to make a premature decision. Student-athletes have a limited ability to shop an “offer” and lack a full understanding of what they are “committing” to at such an early age. While some coaches request a student-athlete to take the SATs early to provide a baseline score, others don’t even request a transcript. Either way, the academic information available is limited and should not serve as a basis for reassurances about future admissions. College admissions officers typically have no idea who the early recruit is until she applies years later, which is a major red flag and explains why the process can break down.

The NCAA defines verbal commitments as “non-binding” agreements between a student-athlete and a coach, not the college or university, which is why so many schools can look the other way and ignore early recruiting. As a minor, student-athletes should be able to back out of a commitment prior to signing a letter of intent, but colleges should assume responsibility for representations made by a coach. Historically, these non-binding agreements have been honored but as early recruiting accelerates, there is an increased likelihood that these agreements will break down and the issues will become more pronounced.

While the NCAA strictly prohibits agents to act on behalf of college student-athletes, club coaches often serve as 3rd-party representatives for high school girls. Club coaches are often not affiliated with an educational institution, which adds a layer of complexity to an already non-transparent process. Behind closed doors, college coaches are negotiating deals with minors. Parents and coaches participate in the process, but ultimately the student-athlete should be making the decision, her future is at stake.

The proposed NCAA legislation would streamline all contact and communication to a single date, September 1 of the junior year, but unfortunately will not resolve the agency issue. Transparency is critical for a student-athlete to engage in open communication with a coach so that she can make an informed decision about the most important opportunity of her life – where to attend college.



WEALTH DISPARITY

Historically, lacrosse is a sport played by more affluent student-athletes. The money behind lacrosse has enabled early recruiting and created one of the most disturbing aspects of this process, wealth disparity. Wealth disparity is an issue both on the front and back end of recruiting and disadvantages student-athletes who cannot afford to participate in the process or afford the high cost of education. For universities who value diversity, wealth disparity should be a major consideration when evaluating the NCAA legislation. Regardless if the pending legislation is passed, universities should review their own internal recruiting policies to ensure that student-athletes who lack financial resources are not categorically excluded from participating on a level playing field.

FRONT END - THE COST OF BEING RECRUITED

Ironically, while money is the driving force behind college football and basketball programs, recruiting is delayed in these sports compared to lacrosse where money enables and intensifies the process. On the front end, a student-athlete must be able to afford to participate in the early recruiting process. Playing on a club team, coupled with travel expenses and fees for tournaments, camps and clinics cost approximately \$10,000 per year.

High school lacrosse is secondary to club teams with many girls committing before they even play a varsity game in high school. Unofficial visits are a critical part of the process to bypass current NCAA rules that prohibit off-campus contact prior to July 1 of the junior year. While official visits in football and basketball play an important role and provide student-athletes from low-income backgrounds an opportunity to be recruited, in lacrosse the student-athlete's family must incur all of these expenses years before the official recruiting period begins.

BACK END - THE COST OF AN EDUCATION

With the cost of a student-athlete scholarship approaching \$70,000 a year, it is not surprising that parents are chasing after the few scholarships available in women's lacrosse. Unlike football and basketball, which provide full headcount scholarships to the majority of the team, lacrosse has equivalency scholarships that are divided among a team at the discretion of a coach. With only 12 scholarships to allocate to an average roster size of 30 athletes, early recruiting pressures a coach to value an 8th-grader based on incomplete academic and athletic information.

The high cost of education coupled with limited scholarships in lacrosse creates a wealth disparity barrier that influences who a coach recruits. For student-athletes who come from lower-income backgrounds, this can adversely impact their prospects of being recruited and leave qualified student-athletes on the sidelines.



“STUDENT-ATHLETE”

Early recruiting undermines the fundamental principles of being a “student-athlete” and the role of sports in education. When 13-year old girls are recruited for college sports before they even play a high school game, the model has broken down. The ideals of amateurism have eroded as universities compete to win, not just in sports, but campus facilities and national rankings. Sports helps to showcase a university’s prestige even in non-revenue generating sports like women’s lacrosse.

The NCAA President, Mark Emmert, set forth three pillars: academics, well-being and fairness, to ensure that college sports remain a pathway of opportunity for student-athletes to shape their future. Early recruiting infringes on these pillars and the NCAA’s “student-centered” mission to prioritize academics over athletics. The NCAA Constitution states,

2.9 The Principle of Amateurism

Student-athletes shall be amateurs in an intercollegiate sport, and their participation should be motivated primarily by education and by the physical, mental and social benefits to be derived.

Sports should play a positive role in the overall educational experience of a student-athlete, not facilitate a process that recruits years before college admissions and disadvantages those who cannot afford to participate. Guided by the principles set forth by the NCAA and ideals of amateurism, the pending early recruiting legislation should pass but unfortunately previous proposals have been rejected.

Over the course of the last three years, I have had the privilege to meet hundreds of female lacrosse players, their parents and coaches. These young women are tremendous student-athletes and should be commended for achieving such high levels both on the field and in the classroom. One of the most rewarding aspects is to see the evolution of women’s sports since I played at Brown in 1990s when the university faced a Title IX lawsuit.

The fact that universities are competing to recruit top female athletes at such an early age is a testament to how far women’s sports has evolved. However, the expansion of opportunities for girls to play sports should not come at the expense of their “well-being” and education. While the NCAA can mitigate issues with legislation, there will always be loopholes and universities will need to assume greater responsibility to determine the real future of the role of sports in education.



NCAA MISSION

“Our mission is to be an integral part of higher education and focus on the development of our student-athletes. We must be student-centered in all that we do. The Association was founded on the notion of integrating athletics into the educational experience, and we have to make sure we deliver on that 100-year old promise.”

NCAA President - Mark Emmert



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