



The Urgent Need to Stop Early Recruiting

In a few weeks, the NCAA will vote on a proposal submitted by the women's collegiate lacrosse coaches' organization (IWLCA) in the fall of 2015, asking for increased regulation of early recruiting. Since it was filed, the IWLCA has gained vocal supporters in an array of organizations, including the coaching organization governing collegiate men's lacrosse (IMLCA), the Ivy League athletic departments, and the organizations of other sports' collegiate coaches. A few weeks ago, US Lacrosse Magazine's cover story further exposed the perils of early recruiting, firmly establishing the governing organization as supporting this proposed change.

Currently, while a college coach cannot formally initiate contact with a prospective player until September 1 of her junior year, she can respond to emails – and include a good time to call, for example! – host the player on her college campus at the student's initiative, and communicate thoroughly with the player's club coach. And the result? Coaches are making verbal commitments to players as early as five years before they would matriculate. You've heard these stories before.

The proposal before the NCAA – which would close loopholes in the early, indirect communication college coaches have with prospective players -- is unique in one particular respect: it has no opponents. Other than the NCAA's unwillingness to date to regulate early recruiting and a small handful of holdout coaches, who were overwhelmingly outvoted when the IWLCA drafted their proposal, there are no constituencies arguing in favor of the status quo. Truly, the consensus is that these changes, which would take effect this August, are reasonable, enforceable, and long overdue.

I am a high school lacrosse coach, a youth not-for-profit club coach, and a college counselor, and so I work with aspirational young athletes as well as juniors and seniors going through a traditional college search. I believe this proposed change could really influence how our high school student-athletes experience their adolescent years – and I'll argue they'd likely have far-reaching positive effects on even our younger students, too.

Our college office is on the front lines of all the applications our students – athlete or not – send to colleges. As a point of reference, a number of our seniors get flagged in college admissions with athletic support each year, meaning the student is listed as one of the athletes so critical to the college program that the coach is willing to use his or her formal leverage to help her get in.

Interestingly, of the athletic recruits we've seen over the past five years, many more than you might expect were on profile, or very close to profile: their academic records were near to what the college has come to expect from our pure academic applicants. Unless you are an athlete



who could change the fate of the college program – taking it from the bottom of the rankings to a league championship, for example – you will not be able to leapfrog a substantial gap between your academic profile and the profile of the college’s admitted students.

Increasingly, this offer of support – while informal -- gets issued well before the student’s senior year application process. Essentially, college coaches are placing two bets on the young player at once: that the player will develop into the athlete he or she hopes; and that she will produce an academic profile that will be admissible based on the expectations of the university when the time comes. And these bets are getting placed earlier and earlier.

Across the board, these early commitments are happening in many sports, but they’re more prevalent in lacrosse. In a recent survey of college guidance counselors across the country, lacrosse – both boys’ and girls’ – was a distinct outlier in the proliferation of early commitments.

Why? Several reasons, I think. First, the explosion in youth participation in girls’ lacrosse, relative to the number of college programs available, has created a frenzy among coaches for the best prospects – who are identified most efficiently through the youth club circuit and showcase-style tournaments.

As you can imagine, especially in wealthy areas, this trend has triggered increased interest in lacrosse as a vehicle for admission to the most selective schools, a second feature of early recruiting unique to the sport. The list of the top-25 NCAA Division I women’s lacrosse programs in 2015 includes eight schools that admit 20% or fewer of its applicants. (The men’s list is about the same.) Other sports reveal similar patterns – rowing, squash and fencing, for example – but as sports with more objective measures of success, the recruiting process behaves differently, leaving more time for athletes to mature.

It’s especially tempting to chase these early commitments if a family thinks they might be eligible for scholarship money. But it’s costly. In money terms, consider the expense of year-round club play, equipment, uniforms, airfare and accommodations at showcases, tournaments and “unofficial” visits all over the country – which are formally initiated by the student but triggered by the college coach and facilitated by the club-coach-as-agent. I’d estimate that the cost of trying to get recruited – and that’s really what it is – can approach \$10,000 a year for several years. For families who can afford it, recruiting is a process they seek out early and commit extraordinary amounts of time – consider what it means for a parent to be able to chaperone these tournaments and visits -- and money to pursue it. Many talented student-athletes are precluded from even stepping down this path because they simply don’t have the resources. And others are stretching their limited resources to capacity.



Even more families are deterred by the prospective cost of college. In lacrosse for example, early commitments that include full scholarships are rare because coaches, like admissions offices at schools that offer merit scholarships, engage in “preferential packaging” to leverage their limited scholarship money as judiciously as possible. Even if a student with moderate to high need could afford to pursue the recruiting process, she could never accept a partial scholarship without seeing the financial aid package that doesn’t arrive until the offer of admission senior year. As a result, athletic scholarships – which by design are granted on the basis of merit and not need – seem to be disproportionately awarded to the families who need them least: the financial barriers to entry to the recruiting process are too high, and because the early commitments necessarily exclude students who need to wait for financial reasons.

The trickle down costs of early recruiting bear plenty of weight on our middle school and youth players, too. Time, first. Consider that current young players are on the field up to *ten times* as much as they were a generation ago. If you’re not sure about that math, think about how many hours a day, or week, a middle schooler is practicing or competing. For one thing, the days of single-season, introductory athletic instruction for middle schoolers is gone; many clubs, responding to this current landscape by promising professional “instruction” and expensive access to showcase events, require a year-round commitment and tryouts up to a year in advance. Families face an impossible choice: specialize early, crush your child with multiple year-round programs, or opt out with limited alternatives. Understandably, families delay that decision as long as possible, meaning that, around here at least, a 5th grader might attend after-school sessions in multiple sports on the same day, creating other consequences.

By high school lacrosse, weekend showcases and tournaments begin on Fridays, pulling kids out of their classes and in-season sports. Time from homework, time from meals, time from classes, time from family, time from sleep: these dilemmas are direct consequences of early recruiting, and are becoming more urgent.

Not at all new, though, is the challenge of being an adolescent. This iconic rite of passage seems to persist through the dynamic influences of any generation. With respect to recruiting, some players may think, ‘I just want to be wanted!’ – revealing how uniquely this process exaggerates the fragile emotional state of high school. It’s hard enough to be a sophomore in real time; imagine being a sophomore co-existing in real time and also in future time, trying to understand what she may or may not want in college in three years (assuming she can impress the coach enough to be wanted back.) As well meaning as so many collegiate coaches are, this is a relationship dynamic that we would urge our daughters to avoid in so many other contexts. Consider the lessons about agency we want them to learn as they navigate school and their personal relationships, for example.



I worry that parents, understandably mindful about the stress of the college process on the horizon, see early recruiting as an opportunity to spare their children that anxiety. If she can just find that right coach at the right school, she'll be able to breathe a sigh of relief through the rest of high school, knowing her college choice is secure.

It's a little more complicated than that, for a few reasons. Early commitments that do work out, and most of them do, are successful because a seasoned collegiate coach is accurately predicting how the admission office will behave several years down the road – since in many cases, college admission offices don't even see a file on that prospective student athlete until much later in the process. (Ironically, the more selective the school, the less likely it is that the admission office is aware of the applicant.) There's plenty of uncertainty in those intervening years. The coach may leave or be terminated, and the new coach may not honor the incumbent commitments. The student's scores, grades, or rigor – the three pillars of any selective institution's admission process – may not meet the coach's predictions. And the student may not develop as an athlete the way the coach had hoped.

While these exceptions aren't common, they do happen – enough that a committed recruit, instead of bounding joyously through the last couple of years of high school, buoyed with an abundance of confidence and exempt from the anxiety of the college search, experiences a different kind of stress. It's worrying about the what-ifs: a coaching change, a low grade, the ongoing gauntlet of standardized testing that for this student probably started earlier than most. And she'll likely feel plenty of woolier concerns, like how to keep producing statistics to protect her commitment, or what position she needs to play to best develop for college. (Imagine the effect on the player of her future coach's offhand, presumably innocuous comment encouraging her to keep working on her drive.) That college coach is now permanently at the table, both in practical terms and in the abstract, like the ghost of Christmas future. Some of our student-athletes drop other sports *after* an early commitment is made, worried they might get injured.

In essence, our high schooler is trading the anxiety of uncertainty – which college am I going to go to? – for the anxiety of meeting ongoing expectations. I'd argue that the latter is worse than the former: a healthy college search – even as it brings some anxiety -- also develops a student's introspection, self-awareness and sense of perspective.

I think we all know this, but this exogenous force of early recruiting – and the more, sooner, better this implies – intervenes.

If these proposed changes are approved and enforced well, plenty of good things could happen. The pressures to specialize, which are beginning to converge in middle school, especially for players aspiring to D1 commitments, will be delayed. In sports where raw



materials like speed, agility, and hand-eye coordination are so crucial, players will have more time to develop. And perhaps, the time a player dedicates to a sport will be spent more in real instruction and local competition, and less in events organized expressly for recruiting.

The recruiting universe could open up to players for whom the process has been prohibitively expensive. These changes would delay the onset of showcase-style tournaments and recruiting camps, not to mention under-the-radar campus visits and coach meetings. Moreover, they would narrow the time between a scholarship offer and the receipt of a financial aid package that, combined, inform a family about what they will need to pay for college.

These changes could moderate – and extend the longevity of -- youth sports. The impulse to professionalize earlier will subside, making the time commitment and intensity of the youth experience more humane. That, in turn, could keep younger players in those youth leagues longer – giving them a better experience and, if they do have collegiate ambitions, a chance to develop on their own timeline.

Last, these changes could recast the college search experience for many prospective student athletes. Every year that a prospective college athlete can keep her focus on her high school experience, she will gain information: about what type of student she is, what she wants out of college, and what college will be the right fit. That knowledge will empower her even as she continues to aspire to competitive collegiate athletics, helping her navigate the recruiting landscape with more information and emotional leverage.

Considered together, a revision of the recruiting timeline gives us all the chance to help our young people live in the here and now, a worthy and realistic ambition for teachers, coaches and parents alike. We hope the NCAA recognizes these imperatives and responds in kind.

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