

SPORTS

Coaches' New Overture: Limit Early Recruiting

By **NATHANIEL POPPER** DEC. 7, 2015

College coaches are pushing the N.C.A.A. to end a largely hidden practice that has become increasingly common: the recruitment of young high school and occasionally even middle school students.

Women's lacrosse and softball coaches separately sought approval from the N.C.A.A. this fall for proposals that would limit recruiting of younger students. Men's lacrosse coaches are set to discuss doing something similar at their annual meeting this month. Ivy League universities have recently started sending letters of caution to young students involved in so-called early recruiting.

The athletics director at Harvard, Bob Scalise, wrote a letter to the Harvard community this fall pointing to the problems created by early recruiting — both for students and universities — arguing that the “N.C.A.A. needs to acknowledge the elephant in the room and engage in meaningful dialogue with its member institutions in order to find a workable solution to this alarming trend.”

In his letter, Mr. Scalise referred to statistics on early recruiting from a 2014 New York Times article. That data suggested that a quarter of all women's soccer players and a third of men's lacrosse players in Division I

received and accepted scholarship offers before official recruiting was supposed to begin.

The N.C.A.A. bars coaches in most sports from directly contacting students before their junior year of high school. But coaches have, with increasing frequency, gone around those rules by reaching students through an intermediary, like a high school or club coach.

That has given way to an unofficial but well-traveled route of gifted athletes' committing to college teams before official recruiting begins. This practice appears to be more common in women's sports, but it has been spreading, coaches and athletic directors say, and has been leading to the recruitment of younger and younger players. In women's soccer, for instance, 157 high school sophomores, eight freshmen and one eighth grader are currently committed to play for specific colleges, according to the website Top Drawer Soccer.

Many college coaches have complained about the pressure they face to recruit young students, and the damage it can do to both players and teams. But coaches generally say that as long as it is not explicitly prohibited, they have to do it to snare the best athletes.

"If we think it's just going to miraculously stop from getting earlier and earlier, we are kidding ourselves," said Kerstin Kimel, the women's lacrosse coach at Duke, who is among those leading the sport's effort to seek new rules. "People see this is a real problem now that really needs to be dealt with."

The N.C.A.A. so far has hesitated to endorse any new limits on recruiting. A few years back, it rebuffed the first proposals from men's lacrosse coaches seeking to restrict early recruiting, and for the last few years it had a moratorium on new rules of all sorts.

The coaches pushing for change now say that the N.C.A.A. has indicated that it is reluctant to create new rules for individual sports. But reform-minded

coaches note that big-money sports like basketball and football have been able to secure new, sport-specific rules from the N.C.A.A., which has generally loosened, rather than tightened, recruiting restrictions.

“As much as we have said to the N.C.A.A. that we need further restrictions, the N.C.A.A. has not been willing to support us in developing those restrictions,” Phil Buttafuoco, the head of the men’s lacrosse coaching association, said in an interview.

A spokeswoman for the N.C.A.A., Stacey Osburn, declined to comment on the proposals because, she said, all decisions are made by committees of coaches and university administrators.

The coaches pushing for change have gained an important ally in Mr. Scalise, the Harvard athletic director. He is the head of the N.C.A.A. student-athlete experience committee, which is considering the proposal from women’s lacrosse. The committee will discuss it this month and could then pass it along for approval to the highest N.C.A.A. decision-making body, the legislative council.

The women’s lacrosse coaches are asking for a ban on any recruiting conversations with students before Sept. 1 of a student’s junior year of high school. Currently coaches can talk with younger students if the student initiates the contact — the main way that early recruiting takes place.

Representatives from Mr. Scalise’s committee have told the association of women’s lacrosse coaches that the committee wants to see what coaches in other sports think of the lacrosse proposal before passing it along.

The women’s softball coaches submitted a proposal with a similar cutoff date this year, but they are reworking it for resubmission after facing questions from Mr. Scalise’s committee about the details of their plan.

The softball proposal is being spearheaded by Natalie Poole, the coach of

the softball team at the University of Memphis.

“This is getting out of control,” Ms. Poole said. “Without legislation to back it up, there’s a free-for-all — no one is going to ethically do the right thing.”

The eight universities in the Ivy League last year began sending out letters whenever they become aware of a student committing early. The letters generally explain that even if a student commits to an Ivy League coach early, the colleges will make their official admission decisions only when a student is a senior in high school.

The practice of early recruiting appears to have developed quietly and slowly over the last 10 or 15 years — moving first from high school seniors to juniors and then from there to the current situation, in which talented middle school students are heavily recruited.

Early recruiting has now become the dominant method in which elite teams in sports like soccer, lacrosse, volleyball and softball build their rosters. A handful of sports have resisted the trend, including some hypercompetitive ones like football, where a player’s physical development during high school is particularly important.

Many coaches have said they dislike the practice because it forces them to commit to players before they are confident the players will be talented enough for their team. Early recruiting also significantly expands the pool of potential recruits and the hours that coaches have to work. The association of women’s lacrosse coaches said that 85 percent of Division I coaches backed the newly proposed limits on early recruiting.

Some young students and parents enjoy the attention that early recruiting brings — and the opportunity to essentially lock up a college scholarship. But coaches worry that the students are making uninformed choices about college, and they say they have seen an uptick in disappointed early recruits’

transferring. The women's lacrosse coaches found that a vast majority of the college players they surveyed thought early recruiting was a bad idea.

“This is incredibly important for the mental health of high school athletes as well as for our sport in general,” one current player said in the survey, which was shared with the N.C.A.A.

“Please, make the madness stop,” another player said.

A version of this article appears in print on December 8, 2015, on page B9 of the New York edition with the headline: Coaches' New Overture: Limit Early Recruiting .