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From the issue dated December 19, 2008

THE CHASE

For College Athletes, Recruiting Is a Fair (but Flawed) Game

By LIBBY SANDER

This article is last in The Chase, a series on athletics recruiting.

Despite all the alarm that recruiting in college sports has spun out of control, for many athletes the process was neither as intrusive, nor as lavish, as its critics have warned, according to a *Chronicle* survey of hundreds of current Division I athletes.

But the accelerated pace of recruiting, and the demands it placed on athletes during their sophomore and junior years of high school, left many of them feeling overwhelmed.

Some said they were uncomfortable with having to make hasty decisions during their senior year, sometimes in a matter of days, about whether to accept scholarships. And the majority of athletes said they had little exposure to the academic side of campus life, such as meeting with professors or sitting in on classes, during their campus visits.

Most of the nearly 300 athletes who responded to the survey, representing 17 men's and women's teams (but not football) at seven universities in the Mid-American Conference, said the institutions they now attend were fairly portrayed to them during the

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recruiting process. But a few had harsh words for the coaches who recruited them.

"Coaches can tell you whatever they want, pretty much what you want to hear," one athlete wrote in response to the online survey, which was conducted in October and November. "But once you sign your name on the dotted line, they can do whatever they want, and you're stuck there."

Although a few athletes had no qualms about the process, many found the experience unsettling.

"It was very overwhelming and stressful at times," one athlete wrote. "It was a big decision, and not always having a clear idea of what I wanted made it more difficult, especially when I had to tell coaches 'No.'"

NCAA rules governing athletics recruiting have grown ever more intricate, restricting how and when coaches may communicate with prospective athletes. The rules are intended to protect recruits from overeager coaches who might otherwise push the limits with intrusive telephone calls and visits. Coaches and athletes have found the rules to be helpful and maddening to equal degrees, and the survey results reflected the paradox: For every complaint of having received too many phone calls or too many e-mail messages, there was a wish for more unfettered communication with coaches.

The survey also showed that as recruiting spreads to ever-younger athletes, the recruits are making greater numbers of unofficial visits to campuses before their senior year, trips that the students or their families must pay for. More than four-fifths of the surveyed athletes made at least one such visit, and nearly one in five players went on five or more unofficial recruiting trips.

The frequent visits also affect current athletes. Coaches call on them to entertain prospective athletes, show them around the campus, and escort them to team gatherings. More than half of the athletes surveyed, in fact, said that on their own official recruiting trips (those the colleges paid for), they had



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spent 12 or more hours with prospective teammates, attending games or going out for meals. After the visits, 62 percent of the respondents said they had stayed in touch with members of the team they met on their official visits.

The athletes urged coaches to offer recruits a practical view of their program both during campus visits and at other times, instead of an unrealistically polished version just for the sake of making a good impression.

"It's not terrible to show flaws," one athlete wrote. A program doesn't have to be "perfect" — it just has to be "the right fit."

In a trend that is trickling down from the high-profile sports of football and men's and women's basketball to almost all other sports at the Division I level, a third of the athletes surveyed said they had committed verbally to their college teams during their junior year of high school. Except for just 2 percent who committed during their sophomore year, the rest of the athletes who committed early did so during their senior year but before the sports' official signing dates.

While some athletes said committing early gave them a sense of relief and allowed them to put the recruiting process largely behind them, others said it placed them in the difficult position of having to make significant decisions far earlier than they would have liked, and often with little time to think the terms over.

"It's hard to know what you're going to want in a school and make such a huge life choice when you're 16," said one athlete.

IN PLAYERS' OWN WORDS

In a recent *Chronicle* survey of 300 current Division I athletes, most respondents said they found the recruiting process to be fair — but not without its shortcomings. Following are excerpts from the survey, which was conducted anonymously at seven institutions in the Mid-American Conference in October and November.

Communicating With Coaches

How did the recruiting process begin for the college you now attend?

A coach contacted me

54%

I initiated contact by sending an e-mail message or completing a recruiting questionnaire	28%
I initiated contact by sending a film, video, or DVD	9%
Other	8%

On average, how often did you communicate with coaches from your current college from your junior year in high school onward?

Once every two months	13%
Once a month	28%
Once every two weeks	30%
Once a week	24%
More than two times a week	2%
More than once a week	4%

Head coach
Assistant coach

During your junior and senior years of high school, how often did a head coach attend your high-school or club-team competitions? An assistant coach?

Once a week or more	9%
	8%
Once every two weeks	9%
	11%
Once a month	22%
	31%
Once every couple of months	60%
	50%

Head coach
Assistant coach

How would you describe the frequency of contact from head and assistant coaches before the signing period?

Not enough	8%
	12%
Barely enough to keep me interested	19%
	14%
Just right	68%
	63%
More than I would like, but tolerable	5%
	11%

Campus Visits

Number of official visits to the campus, per athlete:

1	46%
2	23%
3	9%
4 or more	5%
None	16%

On your official visit, did you sit in on a class or visit with a professor?

Yes	27%
No	73%

Number of unofficial visits to the campus, per athlete:

1-2	36%
3-4	27%
5-7	16%
8 or more	3%
None	16%

How would you rate the amount of time and attention devoted to discussion of academics during your official visit?

A lot	19%
Just the right amount	60%
A little	11%
We never talked about academics	10%

Percentages may not add up to 100 percent because of rounding.

Early Commitments**Did you make an early verbal commitment to play at your current school before the sport's official signing date?**

Yes	71%
No	29%

During what year of high school did you verbally commit?

Senior	63%
Junior	35%
Sophomore	2%

Making the Decision**How important was it that the institution, the athletics department, and the student body showed interest in your sport?**

	Institution	Athletics department	Student body
Extremely important	36%	50%	19%
Moderately important	59%	47%	64%
Not at all important	5%	3%	16%

How much time were you given to decide whether to accept a scholarship offer at your current college?

One week or more	85%
Three to six days	9%
Two days	3%

One day	2%	
Less than one day	2%	
How important was the head coach's reputation in deciding whether to join a certain program?		
Extremely important	42%	
Moderately important	46%	
Not very important	10%	
Not at all important	2%	
How important was the reputation/success of the overall athletics program, and your sport in particular, in making your decision?		
	Reputation of the athletics program	Success of my sport
The most important thing	9%	10%
Extremely important, but not the most significant factor	46%	49%
Moderately important	39%	35%
Not at all important	6%	6%
What Sealed the Deal?		
"[The] amount of scholarship [money] received at my current school relative to the amount offered at other schools. [It] was not my first choice academically."		
"The head coach and two assistant coaches making a home visit to meet me and my family."		
If You Could Change One Thing About the Recruiting Process, What Would It Be?		
"The pressure from coaches to know what other schools you are looking at."		
"That it would be easier to get your name out to the coaches, like more showcases and exposure camps that are not very expensive. I don't believe in having to pay a service to send your player information to coaches."		
"Getting called every week. But I would not have gone to my university if they had not done that."		
Percentages may not add up to 100 percent because of rounding.		
SOURCE: <i>Chronicle</i> survey		

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