

INSIDE THE WORLD OF COLLEGE RECRUITING

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In order to be recruited to play college athletics requires a combination of two important factors: a player must have talent and the player must also be seen by the right people at the right time. The recruitment process, however, is not as forthcoming as it may seem.

I've had the benefit of seeing the recruitment process from four varying perspectives: as a former nationally recruited high school player out of Classical High School in Providence, Rhode Island, Division I basketball player at Stanford University, Division I basketball coach at Brown University, and youth coach in Rhode Island. It is my hope that the following narrative will shed some light on the sometimes fuzzy world of collegiate recruiting – what it takes to be recruited and how to navigate through the process.

The High School Player Perspective

As a youth basketball player, I was fortunate to be exposed to the right coaches at the right time in my basketball development. At the age of 13, I was spotted at a local basketball camp by an AAU coach out of Connecticut who shifted my entire perspective on the recruitment process.

For the next 3 years I played AAU basketball out of Connecticut. With the burgeoning popularity of the University of Connecticut's Husky women's team, Connecticut AAU basketball was advanced, organized, and guided.

We rarely attended a tournament that was outside of the college evaluation period - the time in which college coaches are allowed to attend and observe student-athletes play in tournaments and camps. From the age of 14 – 16, I had the opportunity to play up and down the Eastern seaboard, against some of the best competition in the nation while being watched by almost every college imaginable.

The recruiting letters began to arrive after playing in my first "exposure" tournament as a 14 year-old. I received two in the mail that summer and was overjoyed. Over the course of the next two years, I received letters from over 200 schools – big, small, Division I, II, & III. It was the most satisfying experience to rush home from school every day to check the mail.

The NCAA has a number of rules that college coaches must subscribe to throughout the recruiting process. The rules differ per sport and change slightly almost every year. From 1992 – 1996 the rules for women's basketball recruitment allowed coaches to attend high school games during the season and also make their first official phone call to perspective student-athletes on July 1st, prior to their senior year.

After having received over 200 letters, both hand-written and typed, only 3 schools came to watch me play at Classical High School. Of the 200 schools that had written, only about a dozen called me the first day of allowable phone calls. After the calling period was completed, I eventually heard from 50 - 60 schools that were actively interested in recruiting me.

In the end, I narrowed down the list to the last 5: Stanford University, Boston College, Wake Forest University, Tulane University, and Providence College. Choosing five schools was not arbitrary. By NCAA regulations, a student-athlete is only allowed five official visits – visits to a university when the athletic program pays the way for the student-athlete. Student-athletes, however, can take any number of unofficial visits – visits when the student-athlete pays the institution.

I scheduled 4 official visits (an official visit to Providence College was unnecessary because I lived across the street). Stanford University, however, was my one and only official visit that I actually went on. After seeing the campus, spending time with the coaches and players and getting acquainted with campus academic and social settings, I verbally agreed to attend Stanford University two days after returning home.

By verbally agreeing to attend Stanford, essentially I gave my word that upon signing day in November; I would sign a National Letter of Intent to attend Stanford University on a full athletic scholarship. A verbal agreement is not binding – it is more of a gentleman's agreement that is very rarely broken. By verbally agreeing to attend Stanford, I solidified my spot with their basketball program – thus not losing my spot to other players they were recruiting.

On signing day in November of 1995, I signed a National Letter of Intent to attend Stanford University on a basketball scholarship.

The College Player Perspective

Playing Division I basketball in college was a dream. In my four years at Stanford we went to the Final Four (eventually losing in overtime to Old Dominion University), won three Pacific 10 Conference Championships, had four NCAA appearances, and were also the number one ranked team in the nation during the 1997-98 season. We traveled across the entire country, playing games in Hawaii, Texas, Illinois, Colorado, Wisconsin, Florida, Tennessee, and Georgia just to name a few. It was an amazing time in my life.

There are, however, other realities of college athletics, of which many prospective student-athletes aren't aware, that aren't as glamorous. Regardless of the level one plays (Division I, II, or III), college athletics is demanding – more so than anyone outside the collegiate athletic world would ever imagine. We were in the gym at least 5 hours a day – whether that entailed preparation for practice, video, lifting weights, team meetings, or team training table.



Even though I attended an academically-inclined university, our class schedule was selected around our practice. The range of classes we could take was therefore limited to classes being held before noon each day. Every other week during the basketball season we were on the road, missing classes from Wednesday to Friday. It took an extraordinary work ethic and discipline to keep up with the academic challenges while literally giving everything (physical, mental, and emotional energy) to basketball.

The last element, and perhaps the most important element that high school player should understand is the fact that a recruited high school athlete is never loved again as much as they are loved during the recruitment process. I am sure there are some rare situations in college athletics when the coaching staff continues their zeal for a player once they are on campus and officially in uniform. In the years I have been involved in college athletics, however, I have found it the case that once on campus, athletics become more of a business than a pleasure and one either performs well and up to expectations or gets left behind.

Prospective student-athletes, therefore, need to be ready and aware of all the challenges collegiate athletics brings. From day one / practice one, you have to be ready to compete. You can't expect the same affable coaching staff that was encountered during the recruiting process. It's their job to win and if they don't, they lose their job. You have to be ready to be different from the other students on campus - the demands are different, the schedule is different, and your effort and dedication has to be different.

It's fun but mostly it's hard and demanding. But, after four years of college athletics, you have learned more and experienced more than the average student – and most importantly, you are undaunted by future challenges that adult-life may bring you. After all, if you can run repeat 400 meter intervals with active rest at 6 am in the morning, then go to a morning full of classes, to then head back to the gym for three hours of basketball and lifting, to be followed up with team training table (dinner), and studying at night - you can do almost anything.

The College Coach Perspective

After four years of playing professional basketball in Europe (Italy, Sweden, Switzerland, and Norway), I became an assistant coach for the Brown University women's basketball team. It was one of those rare situations that I referred to earlier where the coaching staff continued to have a genuine interest in the development of their players as people and athletes even after the recruitment process was over.

As an assistant coach, one of my major responsibilities was recruiting. In the past year, the recruiting calendar for women's basketball has changed, but at that point, almost the entire month of July was an open-window period for college coaches to evaluate prospective student-athletes. For 25 days straight I was on the road, watching games from 9 am – 10 pm. Overall, I must have seen 6000 high school girl's basketball players. Clearly, that is large number of girls to evaluate in a very short amount of time.

So, as an assistant coach and "scout", how did I determine which players were talented enough to recruit? In general and obvious terms, and this goes across the board for all sports, coaches recruit those that have noticeable talent, great fundamental skills, and superior athletic ability. Anyone in a gym, however, can pick out those types of players. A good college recruiter looks at the nuances and intangibles of players – that is what separates two seemingly similar players.

A strong academic background makes a big difference in the recruiting process. Most players and high school coaches either overlook or underemphasize the significance of having good grades. Outside of sheer talent and athletic ability, college recruiters look at the academic transcript to determine what type of work

ethic a player has. It is uncommon to find a player that slacks off in the class room but works extremely hard on the court.

College coaches also look for a specific attitude in high school athletes. The perfect basketball recruit is the "gym rat" that lives for the game and works hard on individual skills but embodies a team-first positive attitude. If at any point during a scrimmage, game, or camp, a player exhibits a negative, derisive attitude, 99% of coaches will immediately write them off the recruiting list, regardless of talent-level. No one wants to spend a scholarship spot on a future "bad seed" or "team cancer."

It is also common in the college recruiting world to hear the term "upside" – as in, "that player has a great upside." The upside of a player can be a number of things. Some examples of a good upside would be a player that exhibits great instincts but without the great fundamentals - something the player might attain in college, or a very smart and clever player that doesn't necessarily have blazing speed - a player that won't make many mistakes in college, or simply a "gamer", a player that plays extremely hard, with a great attitude and the natural ability to lead a team – someone a coach always wants on a team. Other upsides include things like good footwork, body size and frame, and playing for a great high school or AAU program.

It is important for players to not rely simply on attending big evaluation tournaments and camps. Chances are, many coaches will not have the time to see every team in every tournament and frequently, coaches only watch half games in order to see more teams.

In order to generate more interest from college coaches, high school athletes should be proactive in the recruiting process by sending letters, profiles, game tapes, and schedules to colleges. A short introductory letter with a brief profile that includes athletic statistics and awards, as well as a comprehensive academic profile (GPA, class rank, standardized test scores) should all be included.

A schedule needs to be included alerting the college coaches as to where, when, and on which team you will be playing. Most importantly, an interested student-athlete should send a game tape along with the written material. Coaches prefer full games or 2 half games, not highlight tapes. They also prefer to watch games on a VHS over a DVD format (it is easier to fast forward, rewind, and pause).

Make yourself as accessible as possible providing various ways to communicate with the coaches: cell phone and home number, email address, and even an instant message screen name. Building a strong relationship with a coach greatly influences your chances of being offered a scholarship. Some student-athletes work with recruiting agencies that help high school players increase their chances of earning a scholarship. While it usually costs an exorbitant amount of money, usually these recruiting agencies help promote the player by getting their information out to more colleges than the player could do on their own.

College coaches, at least for basketball, most likely will not recruit players strictly off their high school accomplishments. It is paramount for high school athletes to attend a camp or join a traveling team that competes during the evaluation period. As a high school player I averaged 32 points a game and only 3 colleges came to see me play in my high school gym – the rest of them saw AAU games and camp games.

While it is exciting and most certainly a compliment to receive a recruiting letter from a college, it doesn't necessarily mean they are recruiting you. Colleges send out hundred of form letters and introductory letters to high school athletes. I remember receiving some from schools that claimed to see me in a tournament I didn't even attend.

If the college hand-writes letters, calls your high school and travel team coaches – there's good chance they are serious about recruiting. It will also become apparent who is really interested once colleges can officially contact a recruit by phone. As aforementioned, I was contacted by over 200 schools by mail but about 60 actually called.

Once a student-athlete is actively recruited by colleges, it is easy to get overwhelmed with all of the attention. High school students should maintain a list of their top schools and slowly narrow it down over time – it not only helps them by limiting the number of phone calls per night but also helps college coaches to move on to someone else.

It is also essential that high school athletes know what they want in terms of a college experience. What type of team do you want to play for – uptempo, zone defense, man to man defense, etc? Do you want to play close to home? Do you want to play right away? Do you want to go to a school with a good academic reputation? Do you want to play for a coach that is close with his/her team or more business-like? The more you know, the easier the process is.

Taking an official or unofficial visit to the school might be the best way to really get a sense of the athletic program, coaches, players, and overall situation. In my case, I only took 1 of my 4 scheduled official visits. If I could do it again, I would have taken all four to at least have gotten the chance to at least compare things relatively.

Once on the visit, high school players should really spend as much time as possible with the team to get a sense of their overall happiness with the program, their coaches, and college experience. Do not be afraid to ask questions and lots of them – choosing a college is a decision that not just determines the next four years of your life, but really defines you, like it or not, throughout adulthood.

The Youth Coach Perspective

While coaching in college was a terrific experience, I found that I missed the other things in life like having time to coach kids. I currently run the Batastini School of Basketball (www.batschoolofbasketball.com), a coaching service dedicated to development of basketball players – youth to collegiate level. Through individual and group workouts, camps, clinics, and coaching consulting, I feel I can help players achieve their goals – whether they involve simply improving skills or earning a scholarship to college.



There are three integral pieces of advice I would give an aspiring athlete of any sport that wants to play in college.

1. You have to want it more than anyone. Your parents can't want it more. Your coaches can't want it more. You have to be the one that wakes up every day and be the one that wants to reach your goals.
2. You have to be willing to be different – to be an individual. When your friends are at the mall, you have to be willing to stay home and work on your game.
3. And, most importantly, you have to love it. It has to be your passion. You have to live, dream, and sleep it. It's a lot of work, a lot of discipline, and an extraordinary amount of time but if you truly love it, it will all be worth it.

I loved it. I still do. And that's why I continue coaching and working with current players that want to reach their goals. Please contact me with any questions at cbatastini@batschoolofbasketball.com.