

Joe Paterno reflects on college recruiting ills

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College football is a great game and I'm very happy to be a part of it. Recruiting excesses and abuses disturb me, as they do all people committed to sound intercollegiate athletics. But rather than elaborating on what has been written, I believe we can perform a more useful service if we first explore the recruiting syndrome from a coach's viewpoint — to try to give you a better insight into why we have the abuses and excesses and then suggest remedies to cure the disease.

Recruiting performs worthwhile functions. It introduces a university as an opportunity to a student-athlete with an ambition. It gives the player a chance to choose and to investigate different programs. It helps him to find the right institution for him, and it certainly introduces him to the world of mature decision-making.

He weighs the importance of environment and facilities. He makes value decisions on sincerity and personalities. He has to analyze personal priorities, sorting out relevant considerations from irrelevant ones.

The proselytizing also forces a young man to look at himself, especially where he truly wants his ambitions and abilities to carry him. He is being told by college representatives what is best for him (not really being asked what he wants). Self-analysis under this pressure is difficult.

How then does recruiting become a sinister practice that many times confuses, frustrates, emotionally disturbs, psychologically damages and even corrupts the people to whom it should be a useful experience.

Almost by definition, coaches are extremely competitive, and once they get involved in a recruiting battle they are determined to win. Without even realizing it, the proselytizing frequently becomes an end in itself and not a means of putting together a successful squad.

Don't be quick to criticize coaches, because this sophistry somewhat parallels the malady our leaders suffered in Vietnam. When you have fiercely competitive, personable coaches with great energy and ambition getting emotionally involved in the life of the prospect they are pursuing, you can see how easy it is for the recruiters to get carried away. Add to this the importance the athletic milieu places on the recruiting ability of a prospective coach.

Because we are not different from other segments of our society, often the word is "Get 'em; I don't care how, but get 'em."

(Some of the personalities in Watergate resemble an aggressive head coach and his staff determined to make their team undefeated and national champions at any price.)

It's all so tremendous for the high-school athlete — a dream fulfilled for him and his family and everything for which he has worked hard. The college coaches descend on him, his school and his home.

At first the attention is wonderful. And then it starts to snowball. If one of our opponents drops around the school once a week, our staff is competitive. We aren't going to get outworked; we are going to get in there twice a week. A third school is just as determined and a fourth, etc., and the vicious cycle has begun.

Soon, the strain of the big decision starts to wear on the family and they may begin to take sides. Advisers pop out of the woodwork. Each college makes it tougher and tougher to say no. Everybody is so nice (say what you want about college coaches, but we are good salesmen).

As the boy's indecisiveness mounts, the more resources we expend. After all, we have spent all this time, money and energy on him and he hasn't told us no; maybe one more pitch will do it for us (the same mentality we saw with our involvement in Vietnam).

Finally, a school appears to be losing out. Accordingly, a coach whose job is on the line or who has been hired by a college president and told to win — not teach well, but win — may do what he believes the college president, the athletic director, the alumni, and friends of the institution want him to do.

He arranges for the prospect to be offered extra money, clothes or other illegal inducements. He isn't really concerned about getting caught because the N.C.A.A. (National Collegiate Athletic Association) has ineffective investigation and enforcement apparatus.

The coach may directly make the illegal overture or he may have a friend or alumnus contact the player, appearing to do so without the knowledge of the coach. In some cases an overzealous supporter will take it upon himself to secure a prospect for his school.

Although there are such covert propositions, the present-day high-school athlete has generally resisted the temptation and is turned off by this hypocrisy. Furthermore, I believe the coaches who do get involved in these activities are usually doing what their president and athletic coterie want done.

Through all this we build up the athlete: We exaggerate his ability; we flatter him; we idolize him; we kneel at his feet and tell him how great he is and how much we need him. We almost lead him to believe that if he doesn't come to our in-



stitution the entire university is going to collapse. We barely discuss what efforts he must make in his academic life.

These mendacious promises start a new vicious cycle. The youngster now develops distorted values about himself. We create imaginary utopias and don't prepare him for the realities of college life.

We compound our errors when we allow athletes to make unlimited expense-paid visits to campuses all over the country. Often, they are not really interested in all these schools, but they like the idea of traveling and being entertained.

The recruiting rat race is finally over. The youngster has been lionized, wined and dined. He has been told how great he is and how much he is needed.

And, after the big buildup, he finds out he's just another player, just another student. He is not the star anymore. He has to make the team and study like everybody else. It's a tremendous let-down, and not every youngster can adjust to it. But many athletes do have the resilience and stability to bounce back.

How can we cure this syndrome?

First, the leaders of the N.C.A.A., college presidents and athletic directors must realize their college coaches are under tremendous pressure to win and that there are no miracle coaches and no miraculous recruiters. These leaders cannot abrogate their responsibility to the

coaches — too many administrators have ostrich tendencies. Coaches should not be fired arbitrarily and should not have their tenure based on won-lost record only.

Second, the N.C.A.A. must protect the coach and athlete by having strong and efficient investigation, enforcement and punitive capabilities. N.C.A.A. investigators should make unannounced appearances on campuses. There is no sense having rules you can't enforce, and we can't begin to solve the problems of recruiting without a new approach to N.C.A.A. meetings.

Third, more good highschool players must be available to more schools. The N.C.A.A. took a giant step in this direction when it recently passed a national limit of 30 grants-in-aid a year for football. This will help, but 25 a year would be better.

Fourth, reduce the vicious cycle patterns of recruiting. Do not allow the athlete to make paid visits to more than five campuses. Shorten the recruiting season. Make all university representatives refrain from contact with a prospect for one week prior to the date for signing the national letter of intent.

It is impossible to present these thoughts without appearing to cast oneself in the role of "holier than thou." That is not our purpose. Instead, we want to give insight and views on a major problem in intercollegiate athletics.

Justifying big-time athletics in the university

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ments in the academic affairs of its athletes, lowered admissions standards for athletes etc., these are all targets for needed reform in intercollegiate athletics.

Paterno in the past has commented on his desire to make a true and lasting contribution to the football program at Penn State, and to the university itself. More than a national championship in football, initiating some corrective and worthwhile policy changes in his program

would do far more to contribute to the welfare of the Penn State University community, his football program, and college football in general.

Three recommendations would do much:

1) Keep the Athletic Department totally out of the private affairs of its athletes, specifically academic affairs. The department should only be notified of an athlete's performance if he or she becomes ineligible.

2) Since it is impossible to end the scholarship program and remain competitive, drop one football scholarship each year. Scholarships were designed as an aid to education, but when they are used to buy the services of athletes, the educational system is perverted. This was recognized in 1929. Forty-five years have not altered that fact.

3) Institute a new policy for allotting remaining scholarships. Withhold scholarships from all athletes who are not

accepted to the university through the regular admissions procedure, without Athletic Department pull or interference.

Penn State is respected enough to really make waves in the NCAA. Instituting any of the above plans would only enhance that respect.

College athletics are a legitimate part of the university, but the big-time athletic program is still blemished.

The Athletic Department at least owes it to the university to try and end this.