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Advice to juniors: Check out programs

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There's an old adage among football coaches that says recruiting is like shaving: If you don't do it every day, you look like a bum.

From the perspective of college basketball programs, that sentiment isn't too far from the truth. For athletes and their families, it's not quite as demanding and all-consuming, but it does require time and attention, or it can evolve into a mess quicker than Samantha Prahalis can push the ball on a fast break. Worse yet, it could lead to wasted time or missed opportunities for both programs and athletes.

This time of year, the recruiting world has zeroed in and focused on the commitments that are coming fast and furious from the senior class. Of course, while all the i's are being dotted and the t's are being crossed for the 2010s, the juniors and sophomores are still receiving lots of love and attention from college staffs hoping to nail down early commitments.

While a few juniors have already pulled the trigger (seven of the ESPNU HoopGurlz Super 60 have already made verbal commitments), the great majority of underclassmen will take their time, and explore current and new options throughout the year before narrowing the scope of their searches. Here are a few things prospects can be doing to make the process smoother and more efficient for themselves and recruiters alike.

Make additional unofficial visits to see things both on campus and on the court. With "official" practice now underway, it's a great chance to watch a coach and the staff in action. Since they won't be playing games for a while yet, they should be working out six days a week and you won't have to worry about catching them on a light day before competition. Be sure to double-check their practice schedule, because the NCAA does require that they take one day in seven off.

It's also a much simpler time, hopefully, to fit these trips in without conflicts with your own practices and games. When the end of November rolls around, finding an opportunity that will work for both you and the school you want to visit will become more challenging than breaking a good half-court trap. On top of that, nothing is more important than the commitment you have to your teammates and your own season.

Give programs involved in your recruitment your playing schedule. College coaches have a limited number of days the NCAA allows them to recruit off campus. To make the most of their time, they plan their travel well in advance for when and where they'll be hitting the recruiting trail. They also have to contend with their own game schedule when making their plans, so be sure the information you send is



As college teams begin practice, this is an ideal time for juniors to get a jump-start on their recruiting process.

complete and final. Include accurate starting times for all your games and, for away games, what town the opposing school is located in.

Highlight competitive games. No recruiter likes to sit in the stands watching a 40-point blowout. While recruiters might already have an idea of what they think about your game, they're always looking for confirmation, and playing against the Air Ball Academy Varsity might raise more questions in their minds than it would answer.

List tournaments. Coaches want to make the most of the time they spend in the gym. If they know they can see your team and seven others play in a day, it increases the odds that they'll be sitting there when you take the floor.

Answer e-mails from coaches. This is the stuff that gets tricky and often starts to seem overwhelming to some prospects. As an underclassman, it's still on your timetable, not theirs. Set aside time on a regular basis to give some feedback to the schools you like on the computer and the phone. It doesn't have to be everybody, and just because they say "drop me a line" or "give me a call" doesn't mean you're obligated to. Recruiters will be talking with your high school and club coaches trying to get them to encourage you to call.

That being said, it's important to keep in mind that college coaches can be highly insecure individuals, especially when it comes to recruiting. Be sure the ones you like are hearing from you and getting some feedback so they know you're interested and where they stand. If they don't receive any communication back from you, it's difficult to judge your interest, and they might well start looking another direction. It doesn't have to be e-mails the length of a novel or hour-long phone calls.

Take the time to let them get to know you and, more importantly, for you to get to know them. When you make those calls, be sure you're trying to touch base with the head coach. You might not always get to talk with them, but if you're important in their recruiting plans, they'll find time for you. There's nothing wrong with e-mailing and calling assistants, but the head coach is the one you'll be playing for.

Once you rule out a school, let them know. Once you know a school is not an option for your academic and athletic future, let them know. It's nice to get all the attention from a lot of schools and to always see your inbox and mailbox full. What's important, though, is that you're focusing on realistic possibilities and coaches aren't wasting their limited time, effort and money on recruits not actually considering their program.

Recruiting is about you, your goals and your future. It's not about the school's. While you still have to play an active role in the process, there is no need to hurry or rush a decision that will affect four or five years of your life. If you're feeling pressured or pressed by someone, they might well have an agenda that serves them and not you. Take the time to stay on top of things and do your homework throughout your sophomore and junior years. When the time comes to make a decision about your future, you'll be in a better position make a smart and knowledgeable choice.

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