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Wednesday, December 3, 2008

## Beyond talent: Evaluation considerations

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Walking into a gym to see a player that a recruiter has not seen before requires that a coach looks through the lens of several different pairs of glasses. You would think it was as simple as "can she play?" But their view almost always has more than one perspective to consider. It's not often that coaches can simply just go "shopping" for talent. The considerations that go into evaluating athletes vary from player to player, program to program and year to year. What might be a good signing this year may not be next year, or there may be a risk they can't afford to take on a prospect's potential in the current class, but would have been in a position to do so a just a few months later. Recruiting parameters change more often than Brittany Spears' wardrobe during a concert.

The first consideration is always the program's needs. Coaches know the number of athletes they want to carry on their roster and how many at each position they would like to have fill those spots. Additionally, recruiters are always very cognizant of how many they can sign each year and where their classes are split up. A big recruiting class now means a big class somewhere down the road. That's not something coaches look forward to. Class balance is a much desired, but very delicate, priority in a recruiting structure. Injuries and transfers can mess up the best laid plans.

The scholarship limit at the Division I level is 15 full, but a large majority of coaches don't carry that many active players. The great reality of basketball is that only five can play at one time and there's only 200 minutes available per game. Divide those minutes among 15 players and we're talking about 13.3 minutes a game. Naturally, the top six or seven players are going to get almost double or more of that total leaving less than 20 minutes per game for the remaining eight or nine players to split up. Someone's not going to have a smile in the locker room. A very common line of thought in recruiting decisions is that "you can't keep 15 happy." If a coach has a transfer sitting out or a medical redshirt not suiting up they're going to be in a better position to keep everyone satisfied. On top of that, quite a few coaches are very conscious of today's transfer rates and like to keep a scholarship or two available just in case their phone rings and the name on the caller ID can add some talent to their roster.

Another approach that might have a program holding a scholarship back is the opportunity to sign the best player available. If a staff feels that they've got their bases covered and are in a position to sign another, they'll often look for the prospect who can meet the recruiting gold standard: "Can she make us better?" Coaches also know well in advance what players they like in the next couple of classes. If there's a particular athlete whom they know they're going to target as a primary focus, they may sit on a scholarship for a year or two. One of the toughest recruiting situations to be in is to have your hands tied when there's someone special that you're interested in or, worse yet, is interested in you.

When a coaching staff looks at the makeup of its team by position, it ideally likes to go to the floor with a specific breakdown. That breakdown is defined differently by virtually every program in America, based on coaching philosophy and style of play. Most programs want to have two point guards on the roster, but some wouldn't dream of having less than three. Inside, where you're talking about two different spots and some of the most physical play, coaches get nervous having five or fewer. Some even get gray hair without six or seven "biggs" to work with. When you take a look at the wings, style of play seems to be getting redefined. The bigger players with strong perimeter skills are a premium these days

and seem to be filling two and, more often, three roster spots. The other "scoring" or "shooting" guard position has become more of a key for many coach's arsenals. Often these are the most versatile players on the floor and have the capacity to play two or even three positions. Coaches with the inclination to "play small" like to have the depth to put three ballhandlers who can create offensively in the same backcourt or defend like an attack squadron.

Other than the true post-up player, not too many athletes today are defined by one position on the floor. There are still some point guards and a few big wings that are limited to one spot as well, but for the most part, today's recruit usually has the versatility to take on a couple of roles come game time. A lot of post players can play either position inside depending on the other post in the line up or the makeup of the opponents inside game. More and more perimeter players can play either wing or they can be the classic combo guard playing the point and the other guard position. The toughest spot for crossover is playing the wing and the forward spot inside. Those particular skill sets differ greatly and the offensive and defensive X's and O's provide a much steeper learning curve.

Coaching staffs love to have their recruiting classes planned out years in advance and know exactly what they're looking for during evaluation periods. Unfortunately, college basketball usually has a way of rewriting the script through injury, transfer, academics or just a bad evaluation on a player's potential. Other times a talented player who can simply make you better comes along and doesn't fit the recruiting game plan. At that point a coach has to decide whether to "recruit over" athletes they've already got on the roster. Not an easy call, but in an era of fragile job security the choice is getting simpler to make but certainly not any easier.

There are lots of other considerations that show up like spam in a coach's email inbox. The local player who's a star and being heavily recruited by others, but just isn't what's needed or not quite your level. The sister of one of your current or former players or maybe even an athlete from another sport at your university that, again, isn't exactly in your best interests to sign. The high-profile player who has incredible stats but has spent her high school career playing against the lollipop guild in the Oz league. And there's always the unsolicited DVDs, letters, emails and calls about the "hardest working player they've ever had" -- the recruiting equivalent of a "great personality" for a blind date. Note to coaches and parents: Be more specific and don't put that hard work thing out there first. Working hard should be a given. Don't get me wrong, every once in a while those twists and turns lead to a great prospect that's worth tweaking the grand scheme over and good recruiters won't leave those stones unturned.

All of these thoughts and considerations are processed before a coach ever takes a seat on the sideline and begins to actually evaluate the playing and athletic potential of the players in front of them. We haven't even touched on the skills or qualities they'll be looking for on the court, but we'll get to that soon enough. With limited days on the road and an ultra-competitive recruiting environment coaches can't afford to lose sight of the big picture of their needs now and over the next several classes.

*Discuss this on our [Message Board](#) Mark Lewis is a columnist and national evaluator for ESPN HoopGurlz. Twice ranked as one of the top 25 assistant coaches in the game by the Women's Basketball Coaches Association, he has more than 20 years of college coaching experience at Memphis State, Cincinnati, Arizona State, Western Kentucky and, most recently, Washington State. He can be reached at [mark@hoopgurlz.com](mailto:mark@hoopgurlz.com).*

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