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Coaches pick intangibles over size, skill

HoopGurlz

Let's face it -- in recruiting, college coaches want it all. They want great size and physical attributes. They want the requisite skill set. And they want the intangibles, such as leadership, discipline and work ethic.



Our survey of college coaches revealed a surprising change in what coaches are looking for.

To discover which of those they treasured most, we told more than 20 college coaches that they would be guaranteed a "sure thing" in a recruit. But they had to choose one -- physical, skills or intangibles.

If we had posed this question, say, five years ago, many coaches said they would have chosen physical attributes, which they mostly defined as size and athleticism. But the tide clearly has turned against recruiting players based mostly on athleticism, a trend that has been reflected in our ongoing discussions with coaches.

So it probably should not be entirely surprising that 60 percent of respondents chose intangibles as their "sure thing." The remainder of the college head coaches, assistants and recruiting coordinators were split evenly between physical and skill set. So many of the coaches who chose intangibles or skills also talked about physical attributes enough that it probably ought to be considered second of the three.

"I think athleticism trumps all but if I can only take one I would take intangibles," said one coach indicative of the split sentiments.

And one assistant who favored athleticism said, "If a kid is athletic, you can teach her some fundamentals. Some athletic kids just have never been taught."

But intangibles was a clear-cut winner.

"Five years ago, I probably still would have coveted more size," a mid-major head coach said. "But now I'm building a program. In the early years, we've had some talented players who have lacked character or

work ethic. They helped us win a few games, but you can't build a program with them. It's like building a house with a [poor] foundation. It's going to crumble eventually."

Another coach said, "I will say that I am confident I can coach and develop skills -- and physical attributes are easy to evaluate. But leadership and discipline is what really drives your program forward. It enhances what everyone else brings to the table. It is the attribute that not only raises the individual's game but also the level of everyone who watches and follows [the team]. That is very hard to teach. That comes from deep inside so I place a lot of value on the importance of recruiting leadership and discipline."

This latter coach reflected a pervasive attitude among those who favored intangibles -- that physical attributes can be identified and, especially, that skills can be taught. Intangibles such as discipline, work ethic and leadership just are not as easy to find. And they may be even more rare than, say, five or so years ago, according to respondents.

The most desirable intangible among the coaches we talked to is leadership, which some maintain is a fading art. Some even said that star athletes and leadership used to go hand in hand. But, more and more, coaches are looking for another voice to connect with their players -- the proverbial "coach on the floor."

"They need another voice on the floor, not just us coaches yelling to them," one coach said. "A lot of young ladies don't have the courage to step up and be a leader."

Players don't become leaders because this generation is losing valuable communication skills, according to one head coach. Players are starting to substitute social media for talking face to face, this coach asserts.

"You can't text your teammate during the game," the coach said, "or post on her Facebook [page] to stop jacking shots when the post needs the ball."

Still other coaches interpreted intangibles to focus on discipline. Mostly, this meant the discipline to get better, but one coach also raised the need for discipline in representing the program.

"It's easy to spot the basketball stuff almost immediately, but being a college coach, you have to trust they are going to make decisions off the court with the team's best interest at heart," the coach said. "I wish it was a given."

Our next installment will discuss the preferred size and makeup of a college women's basketball roster. That discussion could help recruits decipher where they might fit onto a team, logistically. However, their playing time will be determined by what they bring to the table as players and, for a majority of college coaches who spoke to ESPN HoopGurlz about this topic, that had better include a healthy helping of intangibles.

"You have to have talent, *but* when the game is on the line, if they don't have the intangibles they will fall short," one experienced head coach said. "The kids who go the furthest and surprise the most have the intangibles. What differentiates winning isn't the talent; it's the kid who has talent who also does all the others. Sheer talent *always* falls short because talent alone can't handle adversity."

Interviewers for ESPN HoopGurlz included Lisa Bodine, Chris Hansen, Kara Howe, Mark Lewis, Glenn Nelson and Kelvin Powell.

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