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Consider all sides before signing early

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With a few exceptions in the United States you can get your driver's license at 16. You have to be 18 to vote, buy tobacco or join the military without parental consent. At 21 you can legally buy and drink alcohol and at 25 you can run for election to the U.S. House of Representatives. At 30 you're eligible for election to the United States Senate and at 35 you can take a shot at President Obama's job. All that goes to say that as a society, we place a value on age and subsequently the maturity and experience that comes with it.

Today, more than ever, prospective student athletes are demonstrating the talent and potential to play college basketball at younger ages. While their game may show a maturity beyond their years, the reality is that an eighth grader is still 13 or 14 years old and these freshman and sophomores have barely gotten their feet wet in waters of high school life. Asking someone that age to decide their athletic future is unrealistic and borders on the absurd.



Wait and watch carefully when choosing a school.

The decision an athlete makes concerning the location of her academic and athletic future has a tremendous impact on the quality of her collegiate experience and ultimately her education and final direction. While that may not rank up there with risking your life for your country or the responsibility that comes with getting behind the wheel, a youthful, rushed decision can turn a hard-earned, much deserved opportunity into a nightmare and lead to transfers, missed goals and unrealized potential.

Over the years the recruiting process has morphed into a four-ring circus. I say four rings because it now seems to include all four high school classes and, just like the circus, there are some extraordinarily talented artists under the big top. Problem is there are a lot of clowns as well, and they're leading recruits and programs to some early decisions that have disastrous results for both athletes and programs.

While a young person may have the physical and fundamental skills recruiters look for, there is no way coaches can know who that individual is going to evolve into over the course of her high school career. Emotional maturity, love of and commitment to the game and academic performance are all only an estimation at this point.

Some solid indicators for each may be in place, but for a college coach to extend a scholarship offer based solely on play and long term projections demonstrates the real priority he or she has in recruiting.

Of course, coaches want to sign the best players they possibly can. But not all of that is specifically determined on the court. Character, work ethic, personal investment in the game, leadership and many other intangibles are the things that set a great player apart from just a talented one.

A coach who makes an offer but has had minimal, if any, contact with a recruit and her family is saying: If you can play, we want you. Personal and family issues and classroom question marks are all

secondary to getting that early offer out and taking a commitment.

How early an offer is made to a prospect has no bearing on whether or not a particular school is the right place for an athlete. Any attempt by a coach to explain it as being important in the process is an insult to the recruit and the people who surround her.

Making pitches to eighth graders, freshmen and sophomores does nothing to make a school the right choice. "We were the first to offer," is the most meaningless statement in recruiting. It doesn't change anything about what a university and program can provide to help the player find success academically, athletically and personally.

In addition, while it may well be promising, there's no guarantee that all that on-floor potential will develop as projected. Schools that offer and receive early commitments can be put in the awkward position when a player fails to develop as projected. They face the decision of renegeing on their offer or keeping their word and possibly having an athlete who will be unhappy and not have the success she envisioned when she committed.

Some schools choose to address the situation by painting a bleak picture for playing time and discourage an athlete from actually sticking with her decision. It may be honest, but it's a slap in the face of the player because the coaches did a poor job of evaluating.

That early commitment may well have kept the athlete from exploring options that may have ultimately been a better fit for the level of play she attained.

In the end, the reality is that early commitments are the result of early offers. If coaches begin placing a higher premium on getting to know an athlete beyond just her ability on the floor, a lot of the wrong choices, miserable experiences and transfer situations we see today might be minimized.

It would be a challenge for the NCAA to legislate against offers before a certain age. It could lead to a lot of under-the-table agreements and deals with club and high school coaches.

Not all of the blame for the early commitment problems lies with the college recruiters. The athlete and her family have to bear responsibility as well. The attention, the excitement and the gratification that come from a school's interest in an athlete's future is undeniable.

However, it's no reason to abandon common sense. Parents and coaches have to be the ones to hold the reins on the recruiting process and keep things from accelerating and operating on the recruiter's timetable. This process is about the athlete, not the school's and programs who may be willing to take risks with her future.

Many early commitments work out well and ultimately have been outstanding choices. They would have been good choices at a later date as well and without the risk. Just because a school has offered doesn't mean you have to make a decision before you choose your classes for your sophomore year in high school. If they like you now, they're going to like you even more later. And if they're not willing to wait on your decision, they're not the coaches you want to play for anyway. Lastly, making an early commitment because you like a school and fear they might take a commitment from someone else is devaluing yourself.

Not truly getting to know someone has led to some bad marriages both in romance and in recruiting. You've got your whole life to enjoy the right decision with the love of your life. You've only got four

years to enjoy the right decision with your education and basketball career. There's nothing wrong with playing the field and dating before you settle down and you're much more likely to make a lasting commitment. Take your time and get it right.

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