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Evaluating prospective coaches

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In my [most recent column](#), I talked about the growing numbers of athletes who are transferring, and some of the circumstances and issues surrounding the trend. An unfortunate reality is that players aren't the only ones to change their address over the course of their career.

While the number of coaching changes has been lower in recent years, there have been seasons when we've seen in excess of 50 Division I head coach hirings, firings and resignations. Regardless of the total number in a given year, the impact on an individual student athlete at a program where a change occurs is significant.

The National Letter of Intent is specific in reminding athletes that they are signing with a school, not a coach. No athlete, parent or coach believes that prospects make their colligate choice embracing that philosophy. The perfect university, campus, facilities and conference becomes a poor option if the head coach, and subsequently his or her staff, isn't a trusted and comfortable fit.

But even if you're fortunate enough to find that great combination of athletic and academic resources to go with the right coach, there's no guarantee that the coach will be there your entire career or even when you first arrive on campus as a freshman. The best you can do is explore any particular coach's prospects and professional future to the fullest extent and hope that the conclusions and answers will bear out should you make a commitment to their program.

It's important to keep in mind that you're talking about their career and livelihood. Though it may be tempting, comparing the decisions that coaches face with the one that recruits face is not quite the same thing. Their choices often involve their families, lifestyle and even retirement. While the impact of those choices is significant on their athletes and recruits, the scope coaches have to consider is expansive and far reaching in every aspect of their lives.

When considering a program, research how long a coach has been at that school and how successful he or she has been. If a new staff recently took over, odds are they'll be there for a little while. If they've been there a few seasons, you have to look at the competitive level of their program and conference and the possibility that there may be options at a perceived higher level that would appeal to them. A large number of high major positions often go to head coaches from mid- or low-major programs. (Of course, after this year's NCAA tournament, you may need to redefine just what high, mid and low really mean.)

How can recruits get the answers and reassurances regarding coaching stability that they need to make the right choice? Here are a few questions that might help you. No coach truly interested in your future should have any reservations about providing you the answers you need to help you in your decision-making process.

How many years are remaining on your contract? This should be your first question and you have to consider their recent success (or lack of it) as you look at the answer. If they've been winning, fewer years left on a contract probably isn't that big of a deal. However, if the wins have not been there and

they've only got a year or two remaining, you'll need to look closer at their prospects for success during the next couple of seasons. As coaching salaries have increased, so have the expectations of the universities for a return on their investment. The choice for change isn't always the coach's alone.

Is there a buyout clause in your contract? A buyout clause gives the coach an option to leave before his or her contract expires for a price. Coaches often request this in the event a specific job comes open (their alma mater, hometown, dream job etc.) or if they have the opportunity to move to certain conference or higher level of play. If there is a buyout, it tells you that there are circumstances in which the coach would consider leaving and obviously you need to know what those might be and the likelihood that a coach would pursue them.

Have you interviewed for any other jobs in the past two years? If a coach has been in demand with other programs or they're just carrying around their résumé on a flash drive, his or her roots may not be too deep. Don't jump to conclusions though. Sometimes exploring job options with another program can remind coaches of how good they have it. On the other hand, if their bag is always packed for interviews, it's likely they're always packed to leave as well. None the less, give them the benefit of the doubt and ask them where and why and judge for yourself what it might mean.

Will you be here for my entire career? This one really doesn't have a definitive good or bad answer. It's more about how they reply. If they tell you "Absolutely, no doubt, I'll be there," I might be a bit nervous. You want someone who's realistic and will at least acknowledge that there could be circumstances for a change. The coaches who will say anything to sign a recruit are the ones who'll be out the door at the first opportunity. If a coach says "It's my intent to be there" then you can follow up and ask what kinds of situations might change their intent. This question usually separates the coaches who understand your concerns from the used-car salesmen looking to advance their own future job prospects.

While the position of the National Letter of Intent may be naïve and unrealistic, it does magnify the importance of choosing a school based on more than just the coach and their staff. Even with the best circumstances and all the right answers, there's never an ironclad guarantee that the coach who signs you will be there your entire career. All you can do is look at each coach from every personal and professional angle, ask any question that might concern you and your family and ultimately go with your instincts.

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