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Hit the road, parents

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In less than a month the Big Top opens and the annual circus of the NCAA-certified July evaluation period will be underway. It would be great to say it's all about the basketball and the improvement of each athlete's skills.



When players hit the road for evaluation tournaments in July, parents can be more than unwanted baggage.

However, the reality of July is that those certified events are the only settings that Division I college coaching staffs can observe non-scholastic basketball between mid-April and the end of September. The massive spotlight on those two-10 day segments is because those coaches happen to be sitting courtside.

Trying to portray it any other way is simply denying reality.

As such, I wanted to provide a few thoughts for parents hoping to put their daughters in a better position to offer up their best basketball.

First off, take it upon yourself to make sure that coaches at schools of interest know with whom she'll be playing and where that team will be competing. Don't assume anything. Share with the coaches a numerical team roster as well as the name, date, location and division of play for each event. On the topic of rosters, if you're traveling with the team, carry extra copies or a flash drive with the information. While most events have them available to college coaches you don't want to risk even one game with anyone guessing who's who on the court because of someone else's error.

While Division I coaches cannot respond to any communication during the evaluation segments, you still need to be sure to immediately notify them of any schedule changes or if for any reason (illness, injury, etc.) your daughter won't be playing. You won't hear back from them but since their time is very limited they'll be appreciative and likely will try to catch her in action at another time.

There's no need to inundate coaches with results and stats. Who beats whom and how many points she

had or whom she locked up defensively carries little weight from a recruiting standpoint. None of that information is really a factor in the evaluation process and has little relevance to any assessment of your daughter's play. Coaches may tell you to keep them up to date or they may act as if they're appreciative, but keep in mind, they're recruiters and they're not about to tell you to stop.

Whether traveling with you or with the team, try to make sure that your daughter and her teammates are not driving all night or arriving at an event an hour before their first game. The challenge on the court is hard enough without adding a lack of sleep or legs cramped from a long ride. Even on a game-to-game basis, make sure she's getting to the gym with no need to rush and plenty of time to stretch and warm up. You never know when a coach may be seeing her play for the first time and a slow start or tired performance may mean they don't see her best or, worse yet, don't come to see her play again.

Avoiding fatigue is a challenge with the intense schedule and the possibility of up to three games in a single day. While the mall seems like a good way to keep teenage girls entertained, such an activity also is unneeded time on their feet. A lot of hotels have nice pools and the July sun is tempting but it also will drain your energy level as quickly as a set of sprints at the end of practice. Keep the iPods charged, the knees and ankles iced and spring for a few in-room movies. Remind all of them why they're there and what they're trying to accomplish.

Diet on the road is important. Limit the stops for fast food and keep in mind that Pizza Hut, Dominoes and Papa John's aren't offering any scholarships. Sit-down restaurants may take a little more time but usually can offer more options better suited for the rigors of the tournament trail. This is where the parents can really step up with trips to the grocery store for healthy snacks and making sure that breakfast isn't taking a backseat to some extra pillow time. Energy drinks and their use is a serious topic for discussion between an athlete and her parents but should never be used to compensate for a lack of rest and a poor diet.

From the stands your daughter needs your support, not your coaching. Be positive, provide encouragement and keep some perspective. As a parent you're not there to be in her ear on the floor -- that's somebody else's job and college coaches will notice if she's paying attention to voices belonging to anyone other than her coaches. Even after the game, it's not wise to contradict her coach or criticize decisions that he or she might have made. The same goes with officiating. You may not like every call being made but the complaining that parents have been doing lately allows players to rationalize their mistakes or bad play rather than be accountable. Athletes take cues from their folks and their own immature complaining to officials seems to be on the rise. Help them out and keep them focused on their play.

Perspective also is important for parents when talking with their daughters before or after games. Through the years I've seen player after player talked out of any chance of a good performance when mom or dad offered up some unneeded reminders and advice. She knows the college coaches are there; they're hard to miss covered in their logo gear. If she has a bad game it's important to help her focus on the next one. The last thing she needs is a reminder of how much money you've spent or the fact that she needs to play better. Trust me, she already knows.

Lastly, as a parent you're a pseudo team member. In that light, you don't want to critique her teammates in front of her nor do you want to let her go off on a rant about them to you. Help keep the attention on her play and what she can do better next time out herself. It's also important that you don't confront the coach over Xs and Os or playing time and constantly offering threats of leaving the team serves no purpose for anyone. Your daughter doesn't benefit in any way by that and bailing out when the going gets tough is a major red flag for recruiters.

It's her game, her future and, ultimately her responsibility. However no one ever accomplishes anything meaningful on her own. The more you can help her off the floor, the more she's likely to accomplish on it.

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