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## Lewis: How to choose a coach

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By Mark Lewis  
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NCAA -- the rumor is that those letters actually stand for "not certain about anything." In recruiting it seems at times to be true. One thing it does seem certain about is the philosophy that a student athlete signs with a school, not a coach. Great theory... horrible reality.

The notion that the school should be at the center of the decision-making process makes sense and should, in fact, take precedence. At the same time, any attempt to downplay the role of the head coach or the coaching staff ranks up there with telling the little ones that Santa doesn't really have a big role in Christmas. Might be true, but try and cut the big guy in red from the holiday team. Just isn't going to happen.

Every recruit will have a different set of priorities in making their decision, but you can count on the coach being No. 1 or No. 2 with virtually all of them. What makes a coach the "right" one varies from prospect to prospect as well. Most players have experienced a long list of coaches from their first youth team to their club programs and ultimately their school teams. In great part that experience usually will help shape what a recruit is or, in some cases, is not looking for at the college level.

With transfer rates soaring higher than Geno Auriemma's new salary, getting this very subjective part of the decision process right becomes even more important. This is a person who will have a huge impact on you for the next four or five years. A coach isn't just part of your basketball career, they're part of your life. You have the chance in this process to find the individual who can best help you reach the goals you've set for yourself and your future. This is one area where you need high standards and very little flexibility.

So what is important in looking at a coach? The thing that usually comes up first is coaching style. This is a pretty broad area and can be defined several ways. On-the-court style may mean what they do and how they play. If you're a transition player and Coach Turtle is more inclined to the halfcourt approach, it might mean a checkmark in that school's "cons" column. If you consider yourself a defensive stopper and Coach "D" comes calling, take a closer look. You know what kind of player you are, what you bring to the table. The best way to see if you fit is to watch the team in question play. It's easy to say "we play this way" or "that way" in recruiting, but the proof is on the floor come game time.

Another aspect of on-floor coaching style isn't necessarily an X and O or strategy thing. It's a coach's demeanor. There are the screamers and disciplinarians, huggers and motivators, the IBM (all business types) and micro managers. And you can never forget the ever popular and incredibly undefined "player's coach," which make lots of parents and high school coaches extraordinarily nervous. Truth be told, most coaches are a combination of all these and it's your job to figure out which way they lean the most.

To really get to know any coach and their style, you need to see them in action. Games, practices, individual workouts, anything you can see and as often as you can see it. I would suggest even catching a few games on your own dime or slipping into the arena for practice after they start. Most coaches walk between the lines and are usually themselves, but there are a few who know when the recruits are

watching and Hollywood would be proud of their efforts.

Coaches have a style off the court, too. The relationship between themselves and their players is something that you need to know about. Most coaches have an open-door policy but, believe it or not, I've heard of a few you almost need an appointment to see. Some players just need more from a coach off the floor than others. They want to drop by the office and be able to plop down on the couch and talk about more than the next scouting report and turnovers. Others just need to know that they're there if they need them and that's enough. It may vary from player to player to some degree, but you'll find in general most coaches and their players will have a similar rapport. If you're going to spend four years in their "family," you'll want to know if they're close or destined to be on the next edition of Dr. Phil.

Keep one thing in mind right out of the gate: Coaches who are recruiting you are looking to build a relationship and get to know you better. They'll be putting their best foot forward and painting a picture for you showing why they're the "one" who fits your needs. The tough job is to sort through it all and find out what's real. I'm not saying all coaches are creative with the truth, but a lot of them portray themselves a little differently than what appears in their mirror. Make sure you're talking with the head coach as often as possible. Assistants are great, but you go straight to the horse's mouth if you want to get to know them. Talk with them about the usual things (basketball, academics, the university) but get into other things as well. You'll get a feel for who they are as a coach and who they are as a person as well.

Your best source for who and what a coach really is will be their players. Every opportunity you have, ask them about the coach and their relationship with them. If you're on a visit, talk with as many players as possible, especially the upperclassmen who have played for the coach for several seasons. Ask what about the coach is different from what they expected from their own recruiting. Find out what they like and don't like about playing for their coach. Don't be hesitant, you need answers and it's better to find out sooner than later. Also, don't rely just on your host for answers; they were picked to host you for a reason. Additionally, keep in mind there will be one or two who are not totally thrilled about their career so far. The reality you're looking for will lie with the players in between.

A coach can help make your college career everything you want it to be or they can turn it into a long nightmare. If you find the best fit up front, you might not have to be packing your bags and hoping someone will pick you up on the rebound (no pun intended!). Take your time, do your homework and get your own answers, not just the ones they provide you in their recruiting efforts. Oh yeah, don't forget to ask the coach the big question: How long is your contract? The rest might be irrelevant if they're not around in the future. But then that doesn't really matter because you sign with the school, not the coach. Seriously, just ask the NCAA.

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