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In the dance of recruiting, timing matters

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They say timing is everything. Life, comedy, love and relationships, even the drive-through line at Starbucks -- you name it, and timing plays a big role. It's no different in recruiting. Timing comes into play at many points and from several perspectives, affecting both recruits and college programs. Here are some of the challenges schools face.

The pros and cons of first and last visits. This time of year, the timing of official visits seems to be coming into play more than it ever has in the past. College staffs once debated at what point between the start of a prospect's senior year and the initial signing date they wanted to bring top recruits on campus. Some wanted the first permissible weekend prospects could visit, regardless of all other factors. Making that first impression and being their first "official" was critical.

Conversely, hard as it might be to believe, there were a lot of coaches who actually wanted to be an athlete's last visit. Being fresh in that athlete's mind when she sat down to make that decision was the strategy a lot of coaches felt was more effective.



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Back then, most recruits scheduled and then took three, four or even all five visits. For the most part, they wouldn't make up their minds or commit until after visiting all their options.

More recently, being the last official visit a recruit has scheduled might well mean that a school won't get the opportunity to bring her to campus. In today's environment of earlier and earlier commitments, a large number of decisions are being made before that first opportunity for an official visit. Even if recruits choose to take some official visits, the schools scheduled for an athlete's third or fourth visit are finding themselves on the receiving end of an "I'm sorry, Coach" phone call.

Athletes are being pressured more by coaches, or they're simply tiring of the process and canceling additional visits. It's a risky trend that seems to be emphasizing the positioning of a visit, official or unofficial, on the calendar rather than the knowledge a recruit has gained from some good, old-fashioned comparison shopping.

Timing comes into play with several other considerations coaches and athletes face when scheduling campus visits.

The appeal of football. Football schools have always looked to bring their top prospects on campus for their first home game weekend and all the excitement. Forget the fact that most schools host only five or six games each season, and it really isn't an accurate portrayal of the everyday college life students experience the other 45 or so weekends of the year. Then again, very little of any official visit is about

normal college life.

The goal on these visits, of course, is to expose prospects to that great collegiate atmosphere. A lot of recruits were, and for that matter still are, caught up in the impressions they formed in the environment of a football weekend. If you think football coaches hate opening up their schedule with three consecutive road games, you should ask basketball recruiters what they think of it.

The quarter versus the semester system. Schools on the quarter system always have had a dilemma when it comes to the timing of recruiting visits. With their own athletes not being on campus until mid-September, it's difficult to host a recruit and allow her the opportunity to meet all her potential teammates. Summer classes might run into September and there might be a few players still around, but it's not quite the same as the traditional academic year. Additionally, while it might not be a ghost town, there just isn't quite as much happening on campus between the end of that last summer school term and the start of fall classes. The dilemma grows even more if your school has a couple of football weekends during that time frame.

And you thought coaching was as simple as deciding whether to go man or zone.

Hunting in October. Another factor that used to be more of a consideration for the timing of official visits was the formal starting date of practice in October. Coaches wanted athletes to see a couple of workouts, and recruits wanted to see coaches in action. Sometimes Midnight Madness-type events tied into the start of practice were a goal for coaching staffs to try to bring recruits to town for.

With today's NCAA legislation governing individual and team workouts in the fall, it's possible to cover that base earlier without having to wait a month and a half to get on campus. Those events are still great recruiting tools, but waiting that long to bring in a top recruit in mid-October could prove costly.

With four weeks left until this year's initial signing period, a lot of timing issues might well have already become moot points for both athletes and schools. At this point, many on both sides of the fence have had to move on to what might have been their second and third choices.

Unfortunately, the "timing" that seems to have taken over the recruiting process is leading to quicker, younger and much more hurried decisions. The negative things that are associated with a prolonged and thorough decision are really nothing compared to the nightmare that might come with the wrong choice.

Underclassmen should be watching this year's senior class closely and give thought to taking whatever time is necessary to get it right.

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