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Narrowing the field for college

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OK, seniors. You've spent the years doing your homework, researching the schools and making the visits. You've made and taken the calls, read the e-mail and letters while faithfully following on Facebook and Twitter.

Now with the fall signing period closing in, your list is narrowed, and you've still got two or three programs and not a clue how to separate them.



Seniors can pare down a crowded field of college choices with a few key, additional questions.

Now what? That "feeling" that everyone talks about just isn't coming for you and each of those remaining programs seems like it could be the one. There may not be a bad choice in the bunch, but somehow you still have to find a way to make the right choice. This may be the time to re-ask some questions, reinterpret and reevaluate some of the information you've already received.

Obviously, if you've been thorough, you've already asked about the head coach's contract situation. Be sure you're crystal clear on exactly where they stand. I recently had a father tell me that he had been told that a particular head coach had a five-year contract. It's true, but the coach happens to be in the final year of that contract, and the last two seasons have been somewhat less than sparkling. That coach didn't lie but an evasive answer could say a lot about integrity as well as status. This kind of situation doesn't guarantee that there will be a coaching change, but it tells you that you need to be careful and understand that it is a very real possibility.

People are the defining elements of a program, and you may need to look beyond the head coach and deeper into those who might be surrounded you. It's great to have that special relationship with the staff, but take a closer look at those assistants. Know how long each staff member has been on board and how much turnover has taken place in recent years. Assistants often are a key component for recruits in their decision-making process, but some are young and upcoming coaches with career aspirations and may

not be there when you arrive on campus or for the entirety of your career. Also, look at their profiles on the website and see how long they've been coaching, what schools they've worked for and how long. There are some who change jobs like they do clothes and have a résumé longer than the Harry Potter series. It doesn't make them less of a coach, but they don't need to be a deciding factor in a critical decision.

Without a doubt you've already checked out the roster for the current athletes who play your position and what class they might be in. Look further still and see what the class breakdown is on the entire roster. If the team has a large group of seven or more in one class you may want to ask why. No rational coach intentionally wants almost half of their roster in just one of four classes. That imbalance may have come from injuries or other situations that are in no way a negative reflection on the program. On the other hand, they may have lost players to situations such as transfers or academic setbacks. It's not uncommon that some players don't evolve as coaches initially hoped, and they sign their replacements much earlier to make up for the lack of performance.

It also might be a good time for a "where are they now" moment with regard to former players. Find out what the players who have been on their roster the past five years are doing. Be wary of the "players who have completed their eligibility" qualifier that some coaches will use. Recruiters are quick to point out the ones who finished four years of playing, graduated and went to work out in the professional world, but not everyone goes the distance. Look back at some past rosters and randomly pick a few players to ask about that they haven't mentioned. A good staff will know where they are and what they're doing. An honest staff will tell you about the one who didn't finish her degree and should also tell you what they're trying to do to help her complete the job. This can be very revealing about just how involved and caring coaches can be during and after your career. It can also give you an indication of just how up front they're being with you in the recruiting process.

You still may want some definition about the scholarship being offered. Virtually all schools are providing summer school before your freshman year and throughout your career as well as financial aid following your playing days to complete your degree. However there are still some programs out there with some limits in those situations. You need to know if summer school is available to you every year and if complete tuition, room, board and books are included each time around. The same goes on the backend of your career if you need another term or two to finish your degree.

Some other quick questions to revisit:

Is academic tutoring unlimited, and is it in individual or group sessions? How are class conflicts and practice times handled? Some programs set a time, regardless of other considerations and some will tailor times to upperclassmen, who have less flexibility because of class options for graduation. What is the off-campus policy? Find out how the disbursement of scholarship money is handled and about eating arrangement because some require off-campus athletes to eat in the cafeteria or training table. Ask about future schedules and whether the team plans an international tour. With increased media coverage you also want to know about TV, radio and webcasts for both home and road games.

These are not make-or-break issues. However as you get down to the deciding factors that may allow one program to set themselves apart from your other finalists they could provide valuable information and insight.

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