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## Picking a college: Finding the best fit

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In any aspect of life and specifically in women's basketball recruiting, the only bad question is the one that doesn't get asked.

If there's something you want to know about a school, a coach or a program, ask. Good coaches will want you comfortable with your decision and they know that they're the ones who initiated and cultivated your relationship. They, in turn, should always be willing to provide any information that's important to you.

Questions become important as this year's senior-class recruits make their college choices and conclude, hopefully, a productive recruiting process. With almost 350 Division I programs competing in women's basketball and a scholarship limit of 15 per program, there are approximately 1,250 scholarships offered each year.

Despite all the commitments we've got so far, there are still a lot of questions to be asked and decisions to be made before the fall signing period begins on Nov. 11.

The recruiting process is a lot like the stock market. Good decisions are based on diligent homework and accurate information. Hunches occasionally pay off for people in the financial markets, but more often than not risky choices lead to predictable results and the loss of money.

In recruiting, hunches, quick decisions and unanswered questions also can lead to a bad fit, maybe a transfer and ultimately the loss of time. Money you can recover, but time is gone forever.

At this point, most recruits are deep into the process and looking to see things firsthand on a campus visit or scrambling to find answers to a final few difficult questions. Those questions sometimes are the source of a drawn out decision-making process.

**Will the coaches stay put?** One of the questions that often isn't asked or gets a less than specific answer is the length of time remaining on a coach's contract. It's a good answer to get whether the coach is coming off a national championship or back-to-back five-win seasons.

If there's a chance of a coaching change on the horizon you'll want to weigh that against how much other aspects of the program and university appeal to you. Don't accept that he or she has a "multiyear contract," get the exact number of years remaining. "Multi" could mean two, and the coach could be heading for the exit after your freshman season.



Take time to ponder your college choices to make sure the school you pick is the right fit.

Along those same lines, ask if the coach intends to be there for your entire career. You can follow that up with whether the coach has a buyout clause in her or his contract that might allow her or him to leave early if a better offer comes along. How much it might be isn't anyone's business, but knowing that they may be in a position to seek or accept other offers can be important to your decision. This can be especially true if the coach is an up-and-comer or has experienced tremendous success at a mid- or lower-level program.

Coaching moves by assistants are a very common occurrence, particularly with younger coaches looking to climb the ladder. They're still obligated to be up front with athletes and parents in terms of what they're hoping to accomplish professionally and how that might affect their stay in their current position.

Ask the questions and get their answers, but also take a look at turnover on the staff over the past five years to get an idea of what kind of stability you might expect. While no decision should ever be made based solely on a relationship with an assistant coach, it's important to know who you might be dealing with if you choose to wear that school's uniform.

By the way, this includes associate head coaches. There's only one head coach and associate head coaches still are assistants in the big scheme of things.

**Is there player turnover?** Transfers always are a red flag and it's important that you find out what prompted someone leaving the program in the middle of their career. There will be times that the answer will be for "personal reasons," and that may be the extent of what they can ethically share with you.

However, answers such as playing time, homesickness, academics and sometimes the breaking of team rules can be clues to compel a closer look.

**What is the scholarship's value?** Division I basketball players are full-scholarship athletes who receive room, board, tuition, books and required fees. That's self-explanatory for the traditional school year, but be sure things are crystal clear in regard to initial summer school (right after you graduate from high school), summer school throughout your playing career and fifth-year aid. Be sure you know up front if it's offered and if it's fully funded to cover all expenses, including room and board. Also, be sure that you know if summer school is available to you every year or how many sessions you can enroll in for each summer. Get specifics. Calling it a "full ride" doesn't always mean it covers all that the NCAA permits schools to pay for.

**What are the graduation rates?** Get the specifics on graduation rates and GPAs, as well. Be sure you get information based on the all players who have signed with the coach over recent years. If they had a seven-player signing class and only four finished their careers, find out what happened to the other three. Don't just take the NCAA graduation rates or how they might "spin" them for you.

A lot of coaches will offer up: "Every player who has finished their career here has graduated." Well, I hope so. After four years that should be a given. Ask if there have been academic casualties. Obviously, they can't give you details or names but if there have been several, you'll again want to look closer.

**Is the coach open and honest?** Any coach who's soliciting an athlete to be a part of his or her program should be an open book to recruits and their parents in every way. This includes aspects of their personal life. Coaches are referred to as surrogate parents, role models, mentors and teachers.

In asking to play that role in the life of a young person, there has to be a trust and openness that will allow the relationship to evolve in a supportive and honest way. A coach can't be fully effective in the

growth and development of their athletes if there are lines drawn and parts of their life that are off limits.

Teams often portray themselves as a family and meeting a coach's husband, wife or partner can be a good indicator of what family means to them. If there are things that you want to know, it's not only OK to ask, it's important that you do.

If there are rumors that you've heard or shots that other programs have taken at a coach, address them directly with that specific coach. Not only should you consider the replies that you get, but see how comfortable they are in addressing your questions. Even if the answer you get isn't ideal, the directness of their response will tell you how they'll deal with issues.

When you get past the size of a school, the majors that they offer, where the athletes live, what shoes they wear and all the other obvious questions that are a part of the recruiting process, there are always a few more that can be difficult or awkward to ask.

From Final Four teams to programs just trying to get their feet on the ground, there is no such thing as a perfect fit. But if you look close enough and pose those challenging questions you might just find your best fit. You can't ask for more than that.

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