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Unofficial visits a valuable resource

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In a world of ever-increasing means of communication and information sharing, the best way to evaluate and get a feel for something still is doing it in person. Nowhere is that more true than in the recruiting process. Some of the best marketing experts in the world are college recruiters.

If Fortune 500 companies were smart, they would have their headhunters get a few Division I assistants under contract and put them to work on selling their latest useless items. Coaches can paint a picture and sell virtually anything. Between the letters, emails, phone calls and faxes, today's recruit is better informed than ever before and, with all that information in hand, it's time to get on campus and see things for real.

Unofficial visits can occur at any time in the recruiting process and this is one area where there's no such thing as too much. The junior year is really the ideal time to zero in on schools you're interested in as well as the programs that have shown interest in you. By the time you reach your junior year, you've evolved both as a player and a student to the point that you're beginning to get a solid idea of what's going to be important to you, your decision and your future. In addition, with the all the correspondence coming your way as of September 1, you'll also be getting an idea of what school has what level of interest. Your time is too limited to be visiting schools that may not be an option for you when the time comes.

The role of unofficial visits may vary from recruit to recruit. The reason for that is usually two-fold, with geography and money coming into play. If the schools you want to visit are regionally located and you can get to campus multiple times, take advantage of that opportunity. As with any decision you'll ever make, the more information you have, the better choice you can make.

If you live farther away and finances, as well as time, will be an issue, you'll have to narrow the list of schools with which you'll take an unofficial visit. You'll also want to know more specifically where you stand with a program before you and Priceline start "negotiating" for airfares. I don't think an offer has to be on the table to take an unofficial visit, but I would suggest allocating resources towards the programs that you like and the ones that are showing a greater interest in you. I'm going to straddle the fence on another thought process that goes into visiting campuses. Guess I've been watching too much of the presidential candidates. Programs will invite you to come to campus when they have home football games or other athletic events, including their own games or practices. By all means, take them up on those invitations and enjoy the experience.

But I also think it's a good idea going a day earlier or even making a separate trip to campus to see things in an everyday setting. Football weekends at a couple of the schools I coached were quite the events and didn't really allow for recruits or their family to see what normal life was like outside those five or six weekends each fall. Another "event" type visit surrounds the first practice. Midnight Madness and other promotional activities are fun and worth checking out if invited. However, keep in mind it's a one-time event and set up to create hype and excitement. It's a good chance to see and learn some things about a program, but if you can only make one unofficial visit, I would shoot for another time that is less scripted and more what you would experience daily if you were to choose that institution.

Another aspect of "when" to take an unofficial is visiting in season. This gets tricky with your own practices and games but is well worth the effort to see the players and coaches on the floor. In a moment we'll talk about some things to explore on your visit outside of basketball, but since the reason you're being recruited is the game itself, a first-hand look is appropriate and critical to your decision.

Games are great to see and important in determining a program's style. You can get a good feel for the atmosphere and interest around the program and it's also a great time to see if you can visualize yourself out there with them. Practice offers the chance to really see the interworking of the relationship between the players and coaches. You also experience what approach they take day to day in training and preparation. If you make the effort to see practice, try to catch one that isn't the day before a game. That may seem convenient so you can see both, but those practices are often shorter and geared more towards their opponent the next day.

Early season practices are a great way to see how a coach teaches and to get a good feel again for the philosophy and style of a program. Catching two on a weekend is worth a night in a hotel if you have to travel.

Discuss this on our [Message Board](#) Mark Lewis is a columnist and national evaluator for ESPN HoopGurlz. Twice ranked as one of the top 25 assistant coaches in the game by the Women's Basketball Coaches Association, he has more than 20 years of college coaching experience at Memphis State, Cincinnati, Arizona State, Western Kentucky and, most recently, Washington State. He can be reached at mark@hoopgurlz.com.
