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Lewis: What a verbal commitment means

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The holy grail of recruiting: The verbal commitment. In theory it brings ecstasy to coaches and relief to recruits and their families. Officially the culmination of the recruiting process is the signing of a National Letter of Intent (NLI) during either the fall or spring signing periods of a recruit's senior year. Over the time, however, a nonbinding and NCAA non-recognized status has emerged. When asked who a prospect is looking at, coaches often get the reply, "She's verballed."

Just for the record, spell check, performed by Mr. Webster and Mr. Gates, says "verballed" is not even a word. That's OK. If ever there has been a profession which took liberties with the English language, it's coaching. Given that, we'll run with it and explore the impact and ramifications of verbal commitments.

Essentially a verbal is a recruited athlete telling one of the programs pursuing her they've won the sweepstakes. More and more of these commitments are coming earlier in the recruiting process and essentially ending all the letters, e-mails, faxes, phone calls, instant messages, unofficial visits, home visits and of course, official visits. With all that to look forward to, it's hard to imagine why anyone would ever want it to be over -- especially when you consider all that multiplied by the number of schools recruiting said athlete.

The attention that comes from recruiting is nice and flattering, but it can become overwhelming. This becomes very evident when schools believe in the "more is better" theory. Somehow they've come to the conclusion that their offer is a better option if they inundate you in every way possible. Not true. If an offer is on the table, how much they've done won't make their scholarship worth any more than another.

What a verbal should do is end all communication with any schools other than the chosen one. An athlete making that commitment has the obligation to let other recruiters know that she has made a choice and end the process with them. When an NLI is signed, the NCAA takes care of that part, but with a verbal having no "official" status, it's entirely up to the recruit and her family.

Most coaches will respect that decision and move on. When your mind is made up, coaches want to know. They are always disappointed to lose a recruit but appreciate the opportunity to use their time and resources with other prospects.

Unfortunately, there are coaches out there who don't acknowledge a verbal commitment. While that may appear to be an undying adherence to NCAA guidelines, it's really a lack of respect for an athlete and their family. If the recruit has found the fit she's looking for and made a verbal commitment there is no valid reason for another school to continue the process. It's simply another case of a program or coach putting their needs first and if they do it in recruiting, they'll do it while you're in their program, too. You've told them your choice and they should move on.

"How about if I call you next week just to check in?"

"Give me a chance to change your mind."

"I'm concerned about you."

"Our relationship has been about more than recruiting."

The list goes on and on with excuses you may hear in an attempt to keep the door open.

When you verbal, thank the others and then slam that door shut. Once you've shared your decision with them, don't take their calls and delete their e mail. The NLI makes it official, but your word should make it final. You need to enjoy the rest of your high school career and start building an even better relationship with the program and coaches you've chosen.

In that light, you need to be 100 percent sure if you're going to make a verbal commitment. There are a lot of different things that are impacted by your decision. The school to which you've committed is going to drop some other recruits. If you change your mind and back out, they are losing you and most likely the ones they dropped earlier.

Keep in mind as well that you won't be taking any official visits other than to the campus of the school you've chosen. If you think you want to take some other visits, don't verbal. At the same time, don't take visits to schools you know in your heart that you wouldn't attend. Schools are allowed only 12 paid visits and they don't need to use them, or the money, on someone who isn't coming. Believe it or not, there have been a few recruits from the Britney Spears school of decision -- those who have committed without even seeing the campus of the school they've chosen. Do your homework. Get to know the coaches, check out the campus, see multiple practices and games (a future column), spend time with their team and get the answers you need academically and personally. There's nothing wrong with wanting the process over earlier and you can come to a good decision if you do your part.

If all that tells you that you've found home, then make your first contribution to the program and commit. It doesn't make sense to continue a process that already has a result. You're going to help your new coaches too by allowing them to focus their efforts on getting you the best teammates that they can. They'll also be getting a little more sleep at night! However, if you have any desire at all to continue talking to other coaches or look at other schools, don't make that verbal. It's not an insurance policy in case something better doesn't come along. It's a commitment and it's your word and you should never give those lightly.

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.
