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Where to go, who to see on unofficial visits

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One simple thing to keep in mind on your unofficial visits is just that... it's *your* visit. This one is on your dime, and you need to come away with some insight and answers that will help you as you evaluate that particular school. Previously we've talked about when to visit and the importance of seeing the team and coaches in action on the floor. Off the floor there are a lot resources and facilitates you'll want to see firsthand and learn more about.

When you set up your visit, let the coaches know when you'll be arriving and how long you'll be able to stay. Tell them specifically the things you want to see and the people you want to meet. Some coaches will tell you not to worry about a thing and that they'll set it all up. Tell them what you want to see anyway. As I said earlier, it's your visit. A program which views you as an important piece in its recruiting puzzle will want to plan and create an itinerary that will allow you have a great time but also be productive for your information gathering. Don't hesitate to ask the coaches to email you a copy of that itinerary in advance so you can be sure that you'll get the most out of your visit.

People to meet

First off, there are several people that you might want to meet with who can give you a better feel for whether or not this might be a good place to call home. Ask the coaches to set up a meeting with someone on campus in the major you're interested in. If you're not sure yet, then maybe an advisor who can talk about all the academic options that exist for undergraduates would be available. Along that same line, ask to meet with the academic advisor within the athletic department who handles the women's basketball team. Also within the athletic department you would want to speak to both the strength coach and the trainer. Each of these individuals is important to the student athletes who are a part of a program. They can share with you the facilities, resources and structure that they use to help the players be successful in their particular area of expertise.

Places to see

Here are a few thoughts for the Tour de Campus. Obviously you want the grand tour to get a feel for the size and layout of things. Most schools will include the student union, recreation center, library and maybe some computer facilities on that leg. Personally you'll want to get a look at the dorm that might be home for you if you chose to come their way. Be sure to let the coaches knows in advance so they can tell a few players to clean their rooms!

Athletically, you want to see playing and practice facilities, locker room, strength and conditioning facilities and the training room. Some programs will have players' lounges and video areas to check out as well. Also, if the athletic department has their own academic and computer centers, make sure you see them. The one aspect of the tour that has to be on your own is the local area. The only thing the coaches can take you off campus for is to show you university facilities. They're not even allowed to ride with you in your own car around town. It's worth a look around before you head home. If you choose that school, you're going to live there for four or five years and contrary to popular belief, athletes do have a personal life.

To reiterate, juniors visiting a campus unofficially can have no off-campus contact with the staff or players. That means they can't join you at restaurants or visit with you at your hotel if you're spending the night. That's not an entirely bad thing since it means you'll get to sit down and eat with the staff and players in the dining hall that the athletes eat in on a regular basis. Keep in mind also that you and anyone with you has to pay for your meals under NCAA guidelines. Because you'll be spending a lot of time with the coaches throughout the day, these meals are a great time to talk with the players. Remember, they were where you are just a few years ago. Ask them questions about the staff, the school and even the recruiting process. They can be one of your best resources.

The amount of time and effort that a coaching staff puts into your unofficial visit is always a great indicator of their level of interest. If they do a lot of planning and are involved throughout the day you should feel pretty good. If they have you take the tour with the admissions department by yourself... maybe not. Sometime before you head out you'll want to have some sit-down time with the coaching staff. It's a great opportunity to ask questions about all that you've seen and to get into the recruiting process as well. As a junior they should be able to give you a good idea of where they see you at this point in their recruiting plans. Should they not tell you, step up and ask. If you saw concerns on your visit that have you leaning away from that school, tell them and give them a chance to talk about them. They may clear some things up for you or they might even confirm your concerns and convince you it's not the right choice.

The more, the merrier

Unofficial visits are a great resource for parents and coaches as well. If the folks or your high school or club coach wants to come along, invite them to join the party. The people who are going to offer insight to you in your decision will be in a better position to do so if they've seen a campus and met the coaches that may be a part of your future. Also, if you might be inclined to commit as a junior, they'll feel more comfortable with your decision having experienced your choice firsthand and having had the chance to get some answers for the concerns they might have from their perspective.

This may seem like a lot to squeeze into an unofficial visit, but if you spend a whole day on campus it's pretty easy to fit it all in. Additionally, if you cover a lot of this on an unofficial visit and come back for an official paid visit in your senior year, you can focus more on the coaches, players and basketball aspect of your decision process. We'll talk more about officials another time, but getting on campus in your junior year will help you see firsthand all of the things that coaches are writing and talking with you about. Seeing is believing, and it will be time and money well spent.

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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.
