

# -College Recruiting

CELESTINE



Photo by Perry McIntyre Jr.

By Frank Pace

There have been many famous firsts in sports. In 1913 Knute Rockne caught the first forward pass in a college football game (from Gus Dorais) to lead an unheralded Notre Dame team to a stunning victory over a powerful Army squad. In 1947 Jackie Robinson became the first black man to play in a modern era Major League Baseball game. In 1961 Wilt Chamberlain became the first (and only) man to score 100 points in an NBA game.

Well, move over, guys. Make room for Ryan Boatright of Aurora, Ill. This summer, Ryan became the first athlete to commit to a college before he had picked a high school. According to a story in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, word had "leaked out" that University of Southern California basketball head coach Tim Floyd had offered Ryan, an eighth grader, a scholarship after seeing him at an USC weekend camp.

The boy's mother said Floyd was "such a warm, nice man...you couldn't have asked for anything more." The newspaper reported that USC had beaten out Indiana and DePaul universities for

Ryan's commitment. Now that college was out of the way, the teen could concentrate on picking a high school.

As ridiculous as the Boatright story sounds, Division I college soccer is not that far behind. This is especially true in the women's game, where more than 1,000 schools are jockeying for players. As a high school coach, I get very involved in advising our players about selecting a college. It used to be that I would meet with each player and her parents in September of their senior year. Three years ago, I moved those meetings to the spring of the student's junior year. Now I meet them as 10th graders because college coaches are looking for commitments no later than the spring of the player's junior year.

The recruiting process has become so accelerated that players are committing before they've taken their SATs; the official visit has become obsolete, and most high school college advising programs have been taken out of the decision-making process. At Flintridge Sacred Heart Academy in La Canada, Calif., where I coach, our college advis-

ers often call me for updates on what our kids are planning regarding college. Commitments are being made before our high school advising process even begins for seniors.

"It's insane," says Purdue women's coach Rob Klatt. "Coaches are looking for access to players earlier and earlier, in ninth and tenth grades. This past summer I had people asking me what I was seeking for 2009. I told them I hadn't even seen my '08s yet. How could I possibly know what I would need in '09?"

Because NCAA legislation prohibits off-campus contact with players prior to July of their senior year, some college coaches have begun recruiting club coaches to do their bidding for them. The majority of coaches still play within the rules, but in the new recruiting game there is an economic basis to recruit players from families of means. And players now need to recruit college coaches. To do that players attend summer camps (starting as early as ninth grade), produce videos and make unofficial visits nationwide. All these things cost money.

At Flintridge Sacred Heart Academy, we have a system to help players with



the recruiting process. I ask players to compile a list of schools they would like to attend. I provide an evaluation of the prospects of getting into a specific school based on their grades and the college's published academic requirements. Then I provide a subjective assessment of their ability to play college soccer at the schools on the lists.

In most cases we just look for a school where the kid can find the education they are seeking and play soccer. We're shopping for a school, not money. Most the kids at our private school have grade point averages in the 3.3 to 4.0 range with a lot of advanced placement classes, so money often takes care of itself in the form of academic awards. Any money that comes from an athletic grant in aid is gravy.

Then we reduce the list to one school where admission is likely based on the student's academic record, another school where admission is possible and a third where admission is a stretch but where a good word from an impressed coach might sway the decision.

If I think a player may have the skill to play at the selected schools, she is encouraged to attend summer camp at each of the schools so the coach has a three- to four-day look at that player. All that takes lots of money, not to mention time.

And who gets hurt in this process? The players. More and more of them will start falling through cracks. Players who can't afford summer camps or premier club fees will not get the necessary exposure. Or the players who can't afford the increasing number of "unofficial" visits will not meet the coaches. After all, how many summer camps or unofficial visits can one player attend?

"It's all out of control," says Kentucky women's coach Warren Lipka. "We're forcing 15-year-olds into making decisions that they just aren't ready to make. Something has to be done. It's not a healthy environment."

New Mexico's Kit Vella agrees. "We need to slow everything down," she says. "Picking a college should be a major decision in a student's life. Students shouldn't be pressured to decide on a college before they have done all their research. The decision needs to be well thought-out. It should absolutely include a visit to campus. It should not be about money, but too often with too many, that's what it

comes down to. The kids commit for fear of losing money."

What's changed in the past five years? More than ever before, coaches are expected to win. There was a time that all an athletic director asked of a coach in non-revenue-producing sports was to stay around .500, challenge for a conference championship every couple of years, graduate students on time and avoid embarrassing the university. For that you received a subpar salary, had to answer your own phones and drove one of the team vans on road trips. On the plus side, there was job security.

Now, with the introduction of year-round intercollegiate, inter-conference and inter-city all-sports competitions such as Sears Cup or the Lexus-Gauntlet Cup, which pits USC against UCLA, the emphasis is on winning. With rising coaches' salaries and improved facilities, expectations have increased. When a coach doesn't win, someone needs to be made accountable, and it's not going to be the athletics director.

The one who loses in all this, again, is the player. Pat Britz, the NSCAA's Division I Intercollegiate Programs Director and author of the book *Athletic Scholarships for Dummies*, believes the early commitments hurt the student-athlete more than they help.

"Early offers don't really commit the school to anything," says Britz. "Yet, they take the kid off the market."

You're going to see with increasing frequency coaches withdrawing offers that they made to ninth and tenth graders as those kids get older and someone better comes along, or the coach falls out of love with the player. Those kids will be out of luck. As one athletic director admitted, "NCAA legislation doesn't recognize coaches' promises to the students. The only thing that protects kids is the papers signed after the official signing dates." The NCAA must address this.

Recruiting legislation was the topic of a May 2007 meeting in Houston with Britz and 15 or so concerned Division I women's coaches. "The general consensus was that we have to try something," said Britz. "We need to legislate the problem."

"Coaches at our Houston meeting indicated that they would be in favor of prohibiting all in-person contact between a college coach and player before Sept.

1 of the player's junior year," said Britz. This would include all on-campus contact, including but not limited to coaches' camps and unofficial visits. That would be a start."

Limiting roster size would be another positive step. A look at college rosters will show that some state schools are stockpiling 35 to 40 players and hoping to find that one big-time player. It's rare for any player ranked 30th or 40th on a team to make a significant impact later.

Those players would have been better off making a more informed decision that could have led them to a quality Division II, Division III or NAIA school where they might have enjoyed the experience of playing college soccer. No college needs to carry more than 27 players. Most colleges travel with only 18 players.

A third suggestion would mandate that coaches report in writing to both their athletics director and compliance officer all the commitments they have made to high school student-athletes. These commitments still would be non-binding legally, but at least the athletics director would be aware of moral obligations made on behalf of the institution.

Finally, no coach should be allowed to make a commitment to a player until the student has taken the ACT or SAT test at least once, and the results of those tests are verified as being within range of minimum university requirements.

Remember, there was a time that scholarships actually went to scholars. It still should be at least part of the process. It sure works in the Ivy League and at the Division III level.

And think of it this way: With an additional season or two to evaluate a player, the coach also will make a more informed decision on who can and can't play for their respective program. That will make them better coaches.

I'm sure Ryan Boatright is a great kid, but please, let's not follow the path of college basketball and college football. Once we head down that road, there is no turning back. ❁

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