

College recruiting in U.S. colleges a gamble

By Jamie Trecker

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It occurred to me the other day that while the subject of recruiting is well covered with regard to other American sports, it's hardly ever discussed in soccer.

So how do parents and players find out about the process? What are the questions that should be asked? Are those "recruiting services" that fill your mailboxes worth your time and money?

The answers I got from two experienced coaches at college women's Division One programs — about combines, video tapes, the aforementioned services — might surprise you. The biggest surprise however was discovering that more of the onus falls on the players than they know.

"Soccer will enhance the process and in some cases provide financial aid, but we're not looking to win a national championship or develop pro athletes," says Quinnipiac College's Dave Clarke, a former pro who today runs the school's women's soccer program.

"Look, there's about 600 college teams, but only 40 champions — the majority of teams are almost also-rans if you're honest about it. So our job is to make sure the kids enjoy soccer, enjoy school and that they graduate."

The truth is that the vast majority of athletes who play college ball are in the same boat — they're there for school, not to become a professional. The coaches I talked to were blunt: potential players have to pay attention to the academic opportunities first, and the programs second.

"The professional opportunities for soccer players are very limited in America," says Florida State's Mark Krikorian. "There isn't a pro league here for women, and MLS is still pretty small, so you have to make sure a school is a good fit academically. If you want to be a physical therapist, and a school doesn't offer the courses you need to become certified, is it worth it to go there? It's a question of compatibility first and foremost."

"It sounds like a cliché," says Clarke, "but the bottom line really is to have the kids graduate. **I think kids have to draw up a list of the skills they have and the schools they're interested in attending,**" says Clarke. **"Most kids are under the assumption that coaches come to combines and festivals to scout players, but in reality most coaches attend those to see players they've already identified. So players actually need to contact the coaches and visit the schools."**

Krikorian notes that these days, information on programs, a team's philosophy and school course offerings is readily available.

"Some people will look at the conference the college plays in," says Krikorian. "Is it a goal of yours to play in the ACC? Do you want to be in a location in the Northeast or in a warm climate? How far away from home do you want to be? Have you ever had an opportunity to work with someone on that team in another setting? Do you agree with the philosophy of the team? Have you been able to go watch them play?"

"All of those things are part of a process in making sure that you've identified the things that will make you happy as a student, and that's got to be your major focus."

The scale of the program is a factor as well. The gap between a Florida State and a Quinnipiac is wide, but both programs — as all good programs should — have the same goals in mind.

"We want the players to come as close to reaching their potential as possible," says Krikorian. "We have kids with the senior U.S. national team, one that just played in CONCACAF U-20 qualifying so she'll be at the [Youth World] Cup in August; we have a Japanese player heading home right now for the Asian qualifiers; we have German and Australian players, incoming kids, returning kids, and the view on all of them is the same. We want to help these kids to fulfill their dreams. If it is realistic for them to think about having a career with a national team, we'll help them meet it."

"Players also need to ask some questions of the coaches," says Clarke. "And a lot of players don't do that, probably because they're afraid of hearing an answer they won't like. But you have to. You have to ask the coach, 'Are you interested in me? Have you seen me play?' and, 'Are you interested in seeing me play?'"

Some people are making a tidy profit out of one-stop recruiting services, and a number of readers have written in asking about them. The truth is, that just about everything those services offer for a fee, players can do by themselves. And, in fact, a couple of coaches I chatted with who did not wish to be quoted on the subject, told me that most of the mailings they get from those services get swiftly chucked in the trash.

With the emergence of easy video-editing on home computers, a lot of players are tempted to send out DVDs of themselves to coaches. Both Krikorian and Clarke told me that they'd never signed anyone on the basis of a tape, but had eliminated them.

"The truth is, it's pretty hard to gauge the level of a player from a video unless you know the setting," says Clarke. "If it's a tape of Freddy Adu playing Holland at the Youth Championships, okay, I know the level. But if it's a high school team from somewhere and we're not familiar with the league or the opponent, it really isn't a help. So, it's not always to a player's advantage to send a tape."

If you are going to send a disc, do it right, adds Clarke. "I get discs where no one's noted which color uniform that player's wearing, or what the player's number is, or they show players making mistakes or it's a bad game in bad conditions. Worse is getting a bad quality tape itself. You're just not going to watch it. My best advice is if you're going to do it, do it right or not at all."

Players also have to be aware that coaches are going to ask questions of them.

"After the initial identification of the player, we follow up with regional and club coaches and see if what we think is there is really there," says Krikorian. "Maybe we go to see the player in half a game or at a tournament. But the club coaches have a better handle on the players than we do. The question we're really asking is whether or not the club coaches have a handle on what our level is."

Players also have to be realistic: "There's three components in the college program — academics, athletics and financial," says Clarke. "And the truth is that unless you're an elite player, you're going to have to think about and possibly make a compromise on one of those three.

"The problem is that not every player is willing to do that. Part of that is their coaching — I think too many youth coaches sugarcoat everything," says Clarke. "And that's a disservice to a player. They never tell people they're not good enough for ODP, or the national teams or college and they don't have a realistic view of what they can or cannot do. There's an accepted standard to play in college football or the NBA and NFL and I think people know that.

Soccer, on the other hand, is always away from that — there are people from a certain socio-economic class that don't take kindly to criticism." And players also have to have a handle on a factor that is often outside their control.

"When you recruit, the truth is that you're not just getting a player, you're getting a whole family," says Clarke. "And I'll be honest: if a player's parents are micromanaging or aggressive or aren't diplomatic, a coach is going to ask themselves if they want to have a headache for four years. I try not to involve the parents at all until it comes time to really put an offer on the table — I think a lot of coaches are the same way — and I think to be honest, a coach is looking also to see how kids handle that. In a few months, the player is going to be in adult situations — they're just going to have to become adults."

The bottom line for players who hope to play college soccer is that they have to make themselves seen, and do the leg work to make informed decisions about a university. They also cannot forget about academics and have to make sensible choices about programs.

"I want good students and good people, not just a good player," says Krikorian. "There is a reason they're called student athletes."