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Recruiting **U** : The Series

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# Vested in Verbals?

Signing day a respite for recruiting-crazed prospects, whose early verbal commitments may not mean what they once did

By Brian Delaney

High school and college lacrosse coaches openly acknowledge that recruiting practices are evolving almost as rapidly as the sport itself.

Nowhere was this more apparent than in late July at Binghamton University, which played host to the 2008 Empire State Games. On paper, the coaches had about 240 athletes open for evaluation, a number that, until recently, made the games a showcase mecca for New York state lacrosse players.

Not so much anymore.

High-profile coaches still flock to the annual event — Johns Hopkins' Dave Pietramala, Cornell's Jeff Tambroni and Albany's Scott Marr, among others, made appearances — but they coveted a select few: the rising juniors.

Such is the current state of lacrosse, in which high school players are committing earlier and earlier to college programs — most before their senior years. This domino effect has affected all aspects of the game, but maybe none moreso than the increased importance placed on the “verbal commitment.”

“It's a two-way street,” said Tambroni, who has spent 11 years at Cornell in a coaching capacity. “I know some people think we, as college coaches, are pressuring these kids to make a decision, and I would say if you look at it from a recruiting standpoint on the inside, just as many kids are pushing college coaches to make decisions.”

Tambroni called the driving force the “fear factor.” Lacrosse has seen incredible

growth at the youth and scholastic level on a national scale, he said, but that hasn't spawned an equal rise in new Division I men's college programs.

Each year, Division I programs have a larger talent pool to recruit. Wait too long to make your decision, the thinking goes, and you get left out.

“Fear is probably the biggest reason,” Tambroni said. “With 57 programs and so many kids out there, the thinking is, ‘What will be left for me if I wait until tomorrow?’”

High school males and females alike can sign national letters of intent with their chosen university — excluding Ivy League institutions — during two “signing periods” in November and April, effectively bringing closure to the recruiting process.

But final decisions, in many cases, are made long before those signing periods commence, and a verbal commitment doesn't mean the athlete's recruitment necessarily ends.

Although his program won't recruit a prospect who has verbaled elsewhere, Tambroni said he doesn't blame other coaches for continuing their pursuit in those circumstances. He declined, however, to name specific examples.

“If you're going to spend some time recruiting someone who's already committed, then that's your choice to budget your time down a lot of one-way streets that may not give you anything,” he said. “So you may be budgeting a lot of time that may be spinning your

wheels. But sometimes it works out. It happened this summer, a number of times, where some schools recruited kids who were heading to other schools, and got them to change their minds.

"I think all's fair in that sort of recruiting world, when you're not doing anything illegal. None of those guys are doing anything against NCAA guidelines."

Sycamore (Ohio) High School has sent its share of girls to Division I programs. Coach Eddie Clark has interacted with dozens of college coaches during the recruiting process. Most, he said, respect a prospect's verbal commitment and back off, contrary to common practice in football and basketball.

"If a kid is wavering in her commitment, though, they call back," he said. "They'll call me and say, 'If she's wavering, let me know.'"

Last spring, Tambroni didn't have to worry about one of his prized recruits changing his mind. Roy Lang, a 6-foot-3 blue-chip midfielder from St. Ignatius Prep (Calif.), chose the Big Red over Dartmouth and Duke before his senior year. The decision was not made without some anxiety.

Would Lang gain admission to the university? What happens if he didn't? Would another program take him? Lang put his faith in the coaching staff.

"I definitely trusted the coaching staff when they said I met the qualifications," he said.

Lang said the early decision took the weight off his shoulders during his senior year. He added that the other coaches who recruited him didn't pursue him once he broke the news of his decision to them.

"It was great," he said. "Especially since some of my friends had that extra thing to worry about. You could tell they had to spend more of their time on college recommendations and just their overall stress."

Lang said he felt comfortable committing verbally because of the trust built between him, his family and Tambroni.

That trust, players and coaches agree, is critical to the decision-making process. The chain effect of a verbal commitment can be significant. Tambroni said that

## Peer Review: A View to a Verbal

Early in the summer, I had narrowed my recruitment down to two schools: Vermont and Oregon. I took unofficial visits to both and went to their camps. I knew I would have a tough time deciding.

But on July 1, Brown coach Keely McDonald called. We had the best conversation, not only about lacrosse at Brown, but about college in general. So I flew to Providence, R.I., and after 20 minutes on the Brown campus, I could see myself there. I met with Coach McDonald, and that's when I knew I wanted to go to Brown and play lacrosse.

She explained that I would go through the admissions process just like everyone else. I would submit an early application so Brown could afford me a likely letter as soon as Oct. 1. As far as being accepted, Coach McDonald told me that my scores didn't present any problems, but still do the best I could on the application because the class of 2009 is regarded as one of the most academically competitive in years.

Three days after I got home, I called her and simply said, 'I want to go to Brown!'

After I made my decision, I had to call the other schools and let them know that I had decided on Brown. Calling Vermont was definitely one of the harder phone calls I've ever had to make, but I felt responsible to do it because of the personal relationship I had with the coach. No other schools contacted me after I committed because it was almost August, and I guess the recruiting season was coming to a close. One thing I will say, though, is that on July 1, I've never felt so wanted in my life, and I probably never will again!

—Lily Ricci

*Ricci (above, center) is a senior at Sycamore High School in Cincinnati, Ohio.*



when a coach recruits a position with small numbers on a roster, like a goalie, one verbal commitment can stop the continued recruiting of that position. If that player were to then de-commit, the effects can be "devastating." But with decisions coming earlier and earlier, trust can be difficult to build.

Lyn Reitenbach has seen it herself.

A girls' lacrosse coach at Ithaca High School with a strong knowledge of the Upstate New York lacrosse scene, Reitenbach has spent the last year guiding her daughter, Marley Ciferri, through the Division I recruiting process.

Reitenbach said that while Ciferri is close to making a verbal commitment, they both thought it was critical not to make a decision until at least the early

stages of her senior year.

"My real gut and parental view is your 11th-grader is not ready to say where they want to go to college," Reitenbach said. "They need to get on campus ... and just develop another year. It has gotten very accelerated."

The pressure to commit early, she said, can be overwhelming.

"There's very recently been this big push to commit early. And it has created a pressure amongst the kids," she said. "Did you sign? Did you sign? Did you sign? It's pretty hard to deal with that." **LM**

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