

Despite reservations, college lacrosse coaches recruit younger and younger players

Sophomores look to secure spots at top programs even as US Lacrosse decries recruiting climate



Loyola sophomore Ryan Conrad has already accepted a scholarship to Virginia. He's part of a growing trend of lacrosse players committing to colleges when they're just freshmen and sophomores in high school. (Gene Sweeney Jr., Baltimore Sun)

By **Childs Walker** The Baltimore Sun
November 17, 2012

As you watch Ryan Conrad zip around the lacrosse field, dodging defenders and pounding the net with an endless variety of shots, it's easy to forget his age.

Talk to him on the phone, however, and the Loyola High sophomore sounds like, well, a high school sophomore. A great many things in his life are summed up by the catchall adjective "amazing!"

Young players such as Conrad — equal parts precocious and normal teenager — stand at the center of a debate raging across the lacrosse landscape. Many who love the sport say it has gotten as bad as basketball and football in ramping up recruiting pressure on younger and younger athletes.

As a 15-year-old having completed one season of high school lacrosse, Conrad learned that coaches from the universities where he'd always dreamed of playing — Duke, North Carolina, Johns Hopkins and most of all, Virginia — wanted him. So his parents packed the family car last summer for the kind of college tour that usually takes place before a student's senior year.

At each stop, coaches told Conrad they wished the recruiting process would slow down, that he should wait if he didn't feel sure. But come July, with three years of high school still ahead of him, Conrad committed to play college lacrosse at Virginia.

Everyone from top college coaches to the sport's governing officials to Conrad's own high school coach, Jack Crawford, will tell you this is absurd — that coaches have no business evaluating players this young and that kids such as Conrad shouldn't feel pressure to make major life decisions when they're barely old enough to date.

But the reality in boys and girls lacrosse is that elite prep players are now more likely than not to commit before or during their sophomore years. The trend is accelerating — about 70 sophomore boys made verbal commitments all

of last year while about 50 had already made commitments heading into November of this year, according to "Inside Lacrosse." Many say they're thrilled to put the recruiting process behind them so early in high school.

"It's a dream come true," says Conrad of his commitment to Virginia. "The best part is that there's definitely a little pressure off of my shoulders. I can focus on playing soccer and basketball in addition to lacrosse and just on being a normal student at Loyola."

"It's been nothing but a positive experience for us," adds his father, Bob Conrad, who played lacrosse at the University of Delaware in an era when few committed before their senior year. "Honestly, we couldn't make a bad choice."

Alarmed by the growing prevalence of fall recreational league tournaments and the increasing recruitment of high school sophomores, US Lacrosse, the sport's governing body, recently called on college coaches to push for a contracted recruiting calendar.

"No 14-year-old is positioned to make a wise choice about where to get a college education," says US Lacrosse President Steve Stenersen. "What we're trying to do is raise awareness of this issue. But I believe the people best positioned to lead a positive change are the college coaches. Right now, it's the Wild West out there."

The organization, headquartered in Baltimore, is largely preaching to the choir. College coaches say they dislike pursuing sophomores, some of whom have yet to play a varsity game in high school. They also decry year-round lacrosse players, saying they prefer athletes who compete in multiple sports and who take time off to let their bodies heal.

But the same coaches admit to hypocrisy on the issue. They pursue commitment from sophomores, fearing that if they don't, they'll lose the best players to competitors. They also attend the growing glut of summer and fall tournaments, looking for any hidden gem.

"There's no question I'm talking out both sides of my mouth on this," says Johns Hopkins coach Dave Pietramala. "I'd love to see the recruiting calendar pushed back, but at the same time, I'm sitting here talking to my staff about which [high school freshmen] we're going to go see in the fall. Until we all agree to stop, it's going to get worse."

Given the rise of club teams, the year-round, nationwide schedule of showcase tournaments and the emphasis on courting younger and younger players, lacrosse's recruiting climate has come to resemble those in basketball and football.

"We're on a very slippery slope," Pietramala says. "While we're not totally there, we're headed down the same road as basketball and football."

Rising anxiety

Baltimore-area high school coaches say they're disturbed by the ripple effects. Calvert Hall coach Bryan Kelly, who has watched two nephews commit to North Carolina as sophomores, says he regularly encounters parents of seventh- and eighth-graders who are frazzled about getting their children on the right path to a college scholarship.

"The anxiety I feel and see with parents is the greatest it's ever been," Kelly says. "I don't think colleges understand how much this has affected lacrosse at the lower levels. It's pretty overwhelming."

Kelly says sophomores feel pressured to make decisions before they're ready, and juniors get depressed if they haven't already secured a college spot.

"Deep down, they feel like if they don't make the decision, they're giving the opportunity to someone else," he says.

Despite the similarities, lacrosse is not perfectly comparable to basketball and football in its recruiting culture. Lucrative professional contracts are not the ultimate goal. Instead, parents hope lacrosse can provide a rare college

scholarship or, failing that, admission to an elite school such as Johns Hopkins, Princeton or Virginia. The idea of securing such a guarantee a year or two into high school is alluring.

With such prizes on the line and parents willing to spend thousands of dollars a year to reach them, entrepreneurs have flooded the market with apparel companies, summer training camps and club teams, all designed to profit from the recruiting frenzy.

"Unfortunately, there are some people in the lacrosse world with a vested interest in having these kids play all the time and obsess over recruiting," says Crawford, who coaches Conrad at Loyola.

Crawford says there are "far more pitfalls than benefits" to the current climate and adds that he finds it "thoroughly ridiculous" when high school juniors are made to feel discouraged because they haven't already secured college commitments.

Bob Conrad says he has seen the flip side of the process with some of Ryan's high school and club teammates.

"What's tough is when kids see someone like Ryan commit, they go out and say, 'Oh, I have to play in this tournament or that tournament to get noticed,' " he says. "It would be tough if we were on the other side."

For example, he says that if his son hadn't committed in the summer, he might have felt torn between playing for Loyola's highly ranked soccer team and appearing in fall lacrosse showcases. Such conflicts are exactly what college coaches say they don't want.

Worse still, says [Charley Toomey](#), coach of defending NCAA champion Loyola, most families are chasing fool's gold.

"This is not football or basketball, where everybody gets a scholarship," says Toomey, a sharp critic of the current climate. "With the rise of club lacrosse, so many kids are playing with that vision of a scholarship, but there aren't that many spots."

Some of the rush is an inevitable product of the sport's growth and expansion into states such as Colorado, Florida and California, Stenersen says. But he's disturbed by the more aggressive manifestations of the new culture.

This year, for instance, two youth training companies, FLG Lacrosse of Massapequa, N.Y., and 3d Lacrosse of Denver, announced a Nov. 8-9 showcase for top players in Bel Air. Those dates fell on a Thursday and Friday in the middle of the school year and thus seemed to encourage players to miss class for a recruiting event.

Stenersen says it was no coincidence that US Lacrosse made its statement about recruiting in the wake of the announcement of such tournaments.

Maryland has seen a flood of showcases in November, which has become the sport's key recruiting month of the fall. Hundreds of players auditioned for college coaches at events such as the Fall Lax Invitational in Edgewater, run by former Maryland and Loyola University coach Dave Cottle, or the Fall Terrapin Classic at Anne Arundel Community College.

The events are considered particularly important for high school juniors who might have failed to attract offers from top college programs as sophomores. By the time you're a senior these days, you're a dinosaur in the recruiting world.

College coaches say they dislike the accelerated calendar because they're forced to make decisions about players who haven't matured physically or established a record of academic success. Some sophomores haven't even played varsity lacrosse.

"It's awfully difficult to evaluate what a kid's going to be like seven years from now," Pietramala says. "I'm in there saying: 'How big is mom? How big is dad? How tall is grandpa?'"

In an ideal world, he'd like to see college coaches banned from any contact with freshmen and sophomores, with recruiting beginning Sept. 1 of a player's junior year. That would be a little more like the world Pietramala played in. Though he became an All-America defenseman at Hopkins in the late 1980s, he didn't think much about recruiting as a high school junior and didn't commit until November of his senior year.

Toomey says Loyola, which doesn't have a sophomore commitment this year, has benefited by recruiting on a slower timeline. Other coaches offer their spots to young players, he says, and that leaves a healthy pool of late-bloomers for Loyola to fish. Toomey's national championship team was full of players who had been overlooked by Hopkins, Duke and Virginia.

"Ideally, I want to see a kid play his sophomore year and then get him on campus the fall of his junior year," he says.

What the future holds

College coaches' associations have discussed asking the NCAA to restrict recruiting of younger players (coaches can't contact sophomores directly now, but the rule is easily worked around). Several coaches floated specific plans last spring, such as pushing the start of recruiting until after a player's sophomore year.

But the NCAA has shown little inclination to change the calendar and in fact, has deregulated rules about recruiting contact in other sports such as basketball. NCAA spokesman Cameron Schuh said the men's lacrosse committee is always reviewing issues confronting the sport but said "no formal proposals for changing the recruiting calendar have been brought before the members."

Toomey doesn't put the onus on the NCAA any more than the coaches. "It's going to take a lot of people sitting in a room, deciding what's right," he says. "But you look at basketball. Have they been able to figure it out?"

Pietramala and others say the acceleration is driven as much by parents as anyone else.

Ryan McClernan, who has coached many top players in the Baltimore Crabs club program, says he has seen a growing intensity among parents as their children compete for limited college spots with an expanding pool of high school players from around the country.

"They see it as an opportunity to attend a university because of lacrosse that the kid might not get into otherwise," he says. "That's people seeing this from the standpoint of a business."

But McClernan is among the coaches who agree with the Conrads that accelerated recruiting isn't all bad.

"If a boy is trying to decide at 15 between Duke, UNC and Virginia, can he really go wrong?" asks McClernan. "Is that bad?"

"There are advantages to it," says Kelly, who has watched the early recruitment of several of his Calvert Hall players, including his nephews Patrick, Stephen and Tim. "These guys who've committed don't have to play all summer. There's less pressure. If you know where you want to go and you have the opportunity, it's not a bad decision."

Ryan Conrad is pretty sure he won't waver in his commitment to Virginia. He says he's eager to spend the rest of high school proving that the opportunity was well-deserved. And he has the perfect word to describe the whole situation: "amazing."

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