

# Sweeping reforms to girls' college recruiting

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In the midst of a lot of hand-wringing, politically correct comments and ignoring the problem, a major proposal is emerging as a possible solution to the issue of the recruiting process on the girls' side of youth starting earlier and earlier.

University of Florida(w) head coach Becky Burleigh has drafted the proposal after discussions with some of her

colleagues, and is now working on using it as a platform for continued discussions with more than 300 DI coaches

around the country. Last week's adidas ESP event provided the occasion for further talks, and more meetings will be

held in upcoming events on the coaching calendar including the Texas Shootout at the end of May.

We'll discuss the proposal in detail below, but the main points of it are as follows:

1. Players would not be allowed to have contact with coaches before the summer between junior and senior years of

high school. Emails are permitted but any unofficial visit to a campus cannot include meeting with the coach.

2. Verbal commitments would also not be permitted before then. Offers of scholarships would not be permitted to club

coaches, parents or other parties.

3. Coaches would not be permitted to coach ODP, club teams of UI4 and older or any other select team other than

institutional camps (theirs or another's).

Eventually, Burleigh hopes to see the proposal considered by the appropriate NCAA Committee, but first she must build

consensus among a large group of soccer coaches.

And that consensus is not there yet. The issue is that college recruiting, especially for the top college programs, is now

directed primarily at freshmen and sophomores in high school, with verbal commitments typically secured in the junior

year of a player's high school tenure, even in the early part or before the junior year. Players, parents and coaches seem

to agree that it's too early, but the process continues to start and end earlier.

"The reason it's not ideal for the prospect is the early pressure they have on them. It's much earlier for them than their

peers in terms of picking schools, and they're often not ready to make that decision, but there's pressure to make it

because they feel or their parents feel the money will dry up," Burleigh said. "The reason it's not good for coaches -is that

we are having to make decisions on kids who probably will go through more peaks and valleys before they go to college,

and that's a little scary. Plus we don't really know our needs for kids because we have to project so far in advance."

Burleigh shared one instance where an upperclassmen on her Gators' squad was injured early in the season. Had she

applied for medical hardship to be eligible for another season, Burleigh would have been in a major jam because that

scholarship money was already committed to a future enrollee.

"All I could think was 'Oh my goodness, we've already spent that money. Here she is with an opportunity to come

back. Obviously I want a proven player back but at the same time, one of the commitments is going to lose out. I'm not

sure how we would handle that."

As it turned out, the injured player was able to return to action, but the predicament Burleigh describes is illustrative of the potential problem. She cites several others that arise from the current emphasis on early commitments.

"Right now the system is very economically biased because we're operating on the basis of unofficial visits, which of course are paid for by the prospects. Some players can't afford that. This also makes recruiting more regionally biased based on which recruits can and can't pay for a visit," she said. "Having a lot of upper-middle class families is one reason why we've gone down this road with less trouble than other sports, since our official visits (paid for by school) now are almost all used for kids who have already committed, the financial burden is placed on the prospect." Burleigh's proposal for fixing this is sweeping.

"I would like to see us push recruiting back to the players' senior year, or at worst to late in the junior year. Coaches have to be the responsible party to make changes," she said. "If a prospect calls me I would have to say I'm sorry, but I can't field your call.' If they want to make an unofficial visit, they can do that, but they would meet with the admissions people and tour the campus. They can't have contact with me or my staff. We can't rule out camps, but the camp has to be held during the school's non-traditional season, whether it's in winter or summer. You can't have players in a group of Sundays and call it a camp. I can't meet somewhere with 20 other coaches to train players with the objective to getting in to know kids."

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of the proposal, at least in coaching circles, is that college coaches would not be permitted to take part in ODP or club coaching older than U14.

"The opposition is from schools who don't have full-time assistants and supplement their income with coaching others," Burleigh said. "My answer is that the money for those coaches is still there if they are coaching 14 and under, and what would be better for player development than having good coaches at those ages? Then there is an argument that it takes good coaches away from ODP, but you can't take bits and pieces of this. You can't say I like all of it except for that part.

There will be an advantage for some if you only do some of this. If I can't get the whole thing then I would revoke it.

Others might say that this takes good coaches from ODP, but I would say maybe ODP needs a total overhaul anyway."

Burleigh added that some aspects of the play are flexible, such as the date when contact with coaches might begin. It

could be August 1, July 1 or perhaps last in the student's junior year.

She noted that self interest is too often the determiner of whether a coach or school supports or opposes a certain part of the plan, adding that players coming to red-hot Gainesville in August is not necessarily her program's best foot forward.

She also said that recruiting heavily during the soccer season in fall (the way football programs have to) is a much harder task for coaches than the current setup, but stressed the need to enact her proposal for the sake of the players.

"It can be exhausting. You play Friday and Sundays and then Saturday you spend all with the recruits," she said. "It's freaking hard, but because it's hard we shouldn't vote for it?" Burleigh will continue pushing her plan in coming weeks and months with the hope of building consensus and advancing the ideas to the administrative level for consideration.

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