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The Student Athlete and the National Letter of Intent: A Commitment to Leadership or a Leadership Crisis in the Making

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In today's world of college basketball, the incidence of head coaching changes has hampered the experience and expectations for intercollegiate basketball players. The spring of every academic year experiences a ripple effect of hiring's and firings throughout the college basketball landscape. The job changes of one institution caused by unexpected firings and resignations of head coaches affect every school participating as a member of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). These multidimensional scenarios impact between thirty to seventy-five college basketball head coaching positions out of three hundred twenty five throughout the nation annually.

Changes in head coaching positions affect all parties involved in the athletic and academic setting of the university. Major ramifications affect the departing head coach, the incoming head coach, and the university as a whole. However, the needs and concerns associated with the college basketball student-athletes are often overshadowed. One of the major factors associated with college basketball student-athletes choosing a college is the head coach at the specific school. Throughout the recruiting process, a student-athlete usually bases a large part of their decision to attend a given institution on who holds the current head coaching position. As the head coach relinquishes control of the basketball program, by choice or force, the student-athlete's future is directly affected.

The national letter of intent (NLI) is a legally binding document that is administered by the Collegiate Commissioners Association that obligates the student-athlete to the university. However, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) does not administer or control the stipulations of the NLI. "The letter-of-intent program, which was initiated by the former Southwest Conference, is now handled by the Southeastern Conference office," (Carey, 2003). The NLI program was implemented after continuous institutional changes by student athletes during the recruiting process regarding which school that he or she wanted to attend. The NLI binds the student-athlete and the institution to each other.

Currently, the letter of intent binds the college basketball student-athlete to an institution for one full academic year while also requiring the institution to provide an athletic scholarship to the student-athlete if he or she is admitted to the school. "The national letter of intent program is administered by the Collegiate Commissioners Association which represents over five hundred colleges in over fifty NCAA Division I and Division II conferences" (Carey, 2003). Usually head coaching changes forbid a student-athlete that has signed a letter of intent to immediately attend another school and play athletically. The current penalty requires the student-athlete to sit out for one academic year losing one of the five total seasons that he or she is eligible to play.

In college basketball, there are two times during the year when a student-athlete can officially declare his or her intent to attend a given school. There is an early signing period in the second week of November that includes a weeklong phase when student-athletes can officially sign with his or her desired college. Additionally, the late signing period from the beginning of April to the middle of May includes a six-week period when the student-athlete officially makes their college choice.

“The current legislation states that the student-athlete signs the national letter of intent with the institution and not for a particular sport or individual,” (USA Today, 2003). Therefore, if the head coach leaves the program, the newly recruited student-athlete is still bound to that institution. This creates a very convoluted situation for student-athletes as the incumbent head coach plays a vital role in the decision making process of selecting a given academic institution. The head coach dictates the style and pace of basketball that is to be played. Basketball therefore exists differently at every school, even though the goals of the game are conceptually the same. Playing style, historical success, and player development all relate back to the coach rather than the sport. These circumstances often lead to the student-athlete investigating transferring to another institution, and in most cases causing the student-athlete to lose a year of playing eligibility. Alternatively, the student-athlete begrudgingly remains at the institution and strives to make the best out of the new coaching changes.

The college basketball student-athlete thus is directly affected by the coaching change. The head coach is often the primary reason that a college is selected requiring the student athlete to reexamine the importance of their athletic careers as intercollegiate athletes. The student-athlete is required to make it work with the new head coach or sacrifice one year of the possible five years and sit out as a transfer at a similar institution. If one of the five years has previously been used for academic reasons, to red shirt to improve athletically, or for medical reasons, then the student-athlete will be required to lose an additional year of the total five and could end up with three or less total years of playing time. These student-athlete decisions are required within a small framework of time further increasing the stress of the coaching change. If they decide to remain at the school, they are at the mercy of the incoming coach and if they decide to transfer, they must begin shopping around for programs willing to accept transfers that fit their talents. “Jim Livengood, director of athletics at the University of Arizona, states that he thinks that players should have a certain time period so they are allowed to see who the new head coach is going to be. Things could end up being a better situation than before,” (Carey, 2003).

While the impact of head-coaching changes directly affects the student athlete, the indirect effects can reach out into many areas of the university and college basketball world. However, the direct focus is on the college basketball student-athletes since this is his or her time to participate. The college basketball student-athlete is the only group affected by coaching changes that have a time window of participation. The student-athlete has five total years to attend an institution while involved with college athletics and four years of eligibility to participate as an intercollegiate athlete.

There will be head coaching changes in intercollegiate basketball every year. Many head coaches will have an opportunity to improve their overall status, financial standing, or other special incentives that are presumed as too good to pass up. Conversely, there are specific negative situations regarding head coaches that have placed college basketball student-athletes in uncomfortable situations. “There have been recent college basketball head coaching scandals resulting in dismissals with Ohio State University’s Jim O’Brien, St. Bonaventure’s Jan Van Breda Kolff, Georgia’s Jim Harrick, Baylor’s Dave Bliss, and UNLV’s Bill Bayno,” (Bechtel, 2004). “Additionally, there was the recent national attention and negativity of the resignation of the University of Cincinnati’s Bobby Huggins for off-the-court improprieties,” (Saraceno, 2004). Student-athletes at all of these institutions experienced an abrupt change in their head coach at different periods based on multiple factors.

These unexpected events all occurred in the spring except at the University of Cincinnati. The student-athletes were able to evaluate their specific situation and consider transferring or remain at the current

institution; however, the student-athletes at all of the above aforementioned schools except Baylor were required to sit out for one academic year if they transferred to another school. The student-athletes at Baylor were granted reprieve to transfer and play immediately due to extenuating circumstances based on the improprieties of the coaching staff.

The departing head coach is affected in that he or she was a major reason why the student-athlete chose the current institution. Obviously the departing head coach has to make career decisions that are best for him or her. However, it is a very difficult process due to the cohesiveness of the head coach to student-athlete relationship. The NLI acts as a buffer to this relationship to prevent coaches from dragging student athletes from school to school. "One reason that the current rule is in place requiring a student-athlete to sit out one year with a release and two years without a release is to prevent the departing head coach from taking recruits and players with him to his new job" (Carey, 2003).

According to Carey (2003), one example affecting an incoming recruit occurred with J.R. Giddens at the University of Kansas when head Coach Roy Williams departed for the University of North Carolina. Giddens had signed with Kansas during the early November signing period of his senior year in high school. The following spring, Williams left for the head-coaching job at his alma mater. According to J.R. Giddens, "You think he's going to be your coach and you're looking forward to playing for him and that's probably the reason you go to that college...then he up and leaves, and it kind of hurts, I was shocked. I'm still shocked" (Carey, 2003). Giddens honored his commitment and attended Kansas despite the hiring of a new head coach. However, after one season there, he transferred to the University of New Mexico.

The incoming head coach is affected by the situation when they inherit a program where the current student-athletes may have a very close and personal relationship with the departing head coach. The incoming head coach has to recruit the student-athletes in conjunction with selling his new program. This is often a very difficult time for the student-athletes because of his or her comfort and certainty level with the departing head coach. A positive aspect for the incoming head coach is that he or she can sell the idea and everyone has a clean slate and new start. "However, the scholarships are one year renewable by the institution and the head coach by July 1 of each preceding academic year," (NCAA Division I Manual, 2004). The new head coach will have the option to discontinue future scholarships for various reasons to the student-athlete in forthcoming seasons furthering the idea that the athlete signs to play with a coach rather than the institution.

The university in general is affected with the departure of one head coach and the arrival of a new head coach. Many times this brings widespread apprehension because of previous success and positives surrounding the departing head coach. In addition, the incoming head coach is under an intense microscope and has to prove himself as an appropriate successor. Widespread national and regional negative reactions can occur if college basketball players decide to leave school or if recruits decide not to attend the institution. This places the university in a negative perception publicly, and increases the need for immediate success by the incoming coach.

The parents of the student-athletes also feel the ill effects of the coaching change as they to become heavily involved in the recruiting process of their children. Parents often build strong bonds with the coaching staff, especially with athletic teams with small total participants such as basketball. During the recruiting process, the parents entertain coaches for dinners and in-home visits. Coaches get to know the families and lifestyles and the parents grow into a comfort zone releasing their child into the care of

a coach. When a coach vacates his position, intentionally or unintentionally, the bond created with the family of the student athlete is broken. Parents watch their son or daughter deal with the vacancy of a parental figure that was vital in the decision making process of attending a particular school. This void will have to be replaced by the incoming head coach creating an apprehension on both the student athlete and parents that could have negative affects with the student-athlete's academic, athletic, and social experiences at the current institution.

Unfortunately, a coach does not always have the opportunity to coach every student-athlete that he or she recruited for his or her entire four-year playing career. College basketball coaches are going to change jobs due to choice or force in their occupation. However, due to the high influence the head coach has with the student-athlete, we believe that the student-athlete should have the option of exploring options in either continuing at the current school or finding a new school. The organizing parties regarding the NLI and student athlete well-being of the NCAA, affiliated conferences, and individual institutions need to step forward in this process to reevaluate the implications of head coaching changes on the student athlete. When a head coach leaves through either choice or force, there cannot be contact allowed from other school's coaches to visit with players. There would need to be a time period, for example thirty days, after a new head coach is officially hired before a student-athlete could declare his or her intentions to look at other school options. This would give the incoming head coach the opportunity to recruit the current student-athletes as well as get to know them. The student-athlete would also have time to preview the direction of the new program. There also could be a stipulation in which the thirty-day minimum requirement could be reduced immediately to no time constraints if the head coach and the student-athlete agreed to void the time line. Both parties would be required to mutually agree to this decision. This would allow the student-athlete if agreed upon by the incoming head coach to look at other school options sooner. Current procedures for transfer status would be followed as the desiring schools would have to contact the original schools' compliance office and gather official written permission. The total official visits could be reduced from five to two with any additional visits required to be unofficial. This proposal would give athletes additional options other than the current institution and time to make pertinent decisions.

Additionally, an alternative time frame of sixty days could be offered, from the head coach's official hiring for any student-athletes to decide whether he or she was going to transfer to another school. This would allow ample time for the student-athlete to make any necessary personal decisions while not hindering the incoming head coach and basketball program for players considering leaving throughout the spring and summer. After this sixty-day window, all student-athletes would be required to stay at the original institution at least one semester. If the thirty day minimum time of no contact was enforced, this would give the student-athlete an additional thirty days to visit two schools officially as well as unlimited unofficial visits to other schools. We believe that this process would be fair to both parties and allow the program and the student-athlete to make any necessary decisions that were in those parties' best interests. The most important person throughout the entire process is the college basketball student-athlete. Therefore, he or she should be given reasonable options with limited personal stress and optimistic outlooks concerning their intercollegiate basketball career.

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