Intense Pressure of College Sports Begins With Recruiting Process, College Athletes Tell Knight Commission

By SARA LIPKA

College athletes face "huge stress" from the conflicting pressures of academics and sports that begins during the recruiting process and continues throughout their undergraduate careers, said current and former athletes here on Monday at a conference sponsored by the Knight Foundation Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics.

The commission assembled the athletes and other speakers in response to what it described as public concern over the increasingly commercialized character of college sports.

According to a recent poll by the Knight commission, three in four Americans worry that the big business of collegiate athletics clashes with educational values, negatively affecting the athletes. Fifty-nine percent of the people surveyed said they believe that corporate advertisers exploit college athletes, and 65 percent said colleges, not television networks, should determine the dates of basketball and football games.

A college-football schedule with weeknight games set by television networks, for example, "is a huge stress on you as far as academics go," said Tye Gunn, a former starting quarterback at Texas Christian University. Offering a hypothetical example, he said a weeknight game out of state might prevent him from returning to his own campus until 4 a.m. on a day that he has class -- and a test -- at 8 a.m.

"When you go on a football road trip," he said, "there isn't much time for studying."

Other students said the pressures of the recruiting process thoroughly overwhelm highly sought-after athletes. Myron Rolle, a high-school senior recruited as a defensive back, said he had received multiple text messages per day on his cellphone from coaches and as many as seven calls each night from recruiting analysts working for Web sites like Scout.com and Rivals.com.

On a recruiting visit to Florida State University, Mr. Rolle saw a message that the governor of Florida, Jeb Bush, had sent to the university's president, T.K. Wetherell, encouraging Mr. Rolle's interest in the institution. (A spokeswoman for the governor later told The Miami Herald that Mr. Bush had thought Florida State was the only Sunshine State college the player was considering.)

The student's father also received a barrage of text messages from coaches. Committing last September to attend Florida State University let Mr. Rolle catch his breath, he said.
"It relieved a lot of pressure and allowed me to focus on my senior year," he said.

While a high-school player's recruiting visits to a campus are regulated by the National Collegiate Athletic Association, communication from coaches in the form of text messages is not, and Mr. Rolle's father said coaches abuse the lack of rules.

Much of Monday's criticism of recruiting focused on men's basketball, and Mr. Rolle, once a standout in that sport as well, confirmed that, in his experience, basketball put more pressure on students than did football.

Without any formal introduction to the NCAA's recruiting regulations, a high-school athlete might not know when a college is violating those rules, said Scottie Reynolds, a high-school senior who has committed to play basketball for the University of Oklahoma. Some of his fellow recruits, he said, worried that accusing an institution of a possible violation would jeopardize their chances of admission.

Peter P. Roby, director of Northeastern University's Center for the Study of Sport in Society, suggested that some of the pressure on basketball recruits might be alleviated if coaches of invitational summer travel teams for high-school players were subjected to certification by the NCAA. The travel-team coaches, often blamed for allowing corrupt recruiting practices, now operate without oversight.

Mr. Roby also recommended that the NCAA run its own evaluation camps, as an alternative to corporate-sponsored recruiting camps. He expressed concern over "an erosion of values and a loss of perspective" amid decisions made by adults who claim to have students' best interests in mind. The most flagrant transgressions tend to happen in football and men's basketball because of the money involved, he said.

"Do we have the collective courage and will to change the culture?" he asked.

Leonard J. Elmore, a former player in the National Basketball Association and a member of the Knight commission, said he hoped that the daylong discussion would become "an ongoing dialogue."

Students "are the reason we have the games, but rarely do we actually hear from them," said Mr. Elmore, who also played for the University of Maryland at College Park and now works as a lawyer and sports broadcaster. He called on collegiate athletics officials to heed the suggestions of students and their advocates in setting policies for college sports.

"We definitely need the forum," said Mr. Roby. "It's just a matter of whether the issues get fleshed out."

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