

Early Signing Period For or Against?

I have covered college football recruiting since 1992. During that time I have always been on the fence of college football adopting an early signing period in recruiting, like they have in college basketball. Well, I am no longer on the fence.

For many years National Signing Day has always fallen on the first Wednesday in February. It's actually great timing because the first Wednesday of the second month certainly allows for enough time for the blue-chip football prospects to make up their minds on their college football destinations.

More times than not, most college football prospects would play out their senior seasons. Sure some would commit early, maybe in the spring or summer months leading up to their final year of high school. Most would wait, make mainly unofficial visits during the season and make the all important official visits in December and January, before making their verbal commitment.

This is how things were done, leading up to the final ten weeks of the recruiting season.

That was then and this is now. College football recruiting is changing. No longer are most college football prospects waiting to make their verbal commitments in December or January. Now prospects all across the country are pledging to a school earlier and earlier in the process.

My how things have changed, just look at this decade. By June 1, 2003, 61 prospects made commitments to schools from a BCS conference. That same number as of last Friday (June 1) was 323. In five short years the number of commitments just during the spring is up an astounding 500%! By June 1, 2004 the number of early verbals was 118 and on the same date in 2005 and 2006 the numbers were 122 and 196 respectively. The number of commitments between June 1 and the end of July could be equally as startling considering the popularity of the summer camps and summer unofficial visits. There will be a ton of verbal commitments over the next eight weeks to teams everywhere across the country.

Recruiting has trends and this may be biggest trends we have ever seen. Sure text messaging is big and certainly summer camps are popular. But nowadays droves of college football prospects, their coaches and families are getting out to schools (unofficial visits) and making their decisions long before they were just a mere five years ago.

Propelling the recruits' early decisions are college football teams extending scholarship offers earlier in the process. This means from Miami to Washington and all the programs in between teams have to start up their evaluation process earlier. Today, you better be organized, efficient and early in terms of recruiting or you will get left behind.

If there is one school that has certainly been ahead of the curve with the early verbal commitments it has been the University of Texas. It's not even close. Over the past two and a half years (this class included), the Longhorns signed an amazing 50 prospects from recruits that had committed to them by the first day of June prior to the start of the senior seasons. That number would even be higher had Texas not lost a handful of committed prospects to other schools. Now what people don't realize is that Texas won't officially offer a junior prospect until after Signing Day of their junior year. At the same time, because they get so many early commitments, it affords the Texas coaching staff to start the evaluation process on rising sophomores and juniors earlier than anyone. This is an incredible advantage for Mack Brown and company. To make matters even stronger for UT, they are blessed to be the flag ship in the deepest state (Texas) in terms of college football recruiting.

"We would be for an early signing period," said Associate Head Coach and Offensive Line Coach Mac McWhorter. "I guess Texas is kind of getting blamed for all of this (early signing day) talk."

Why are we seeing so many young men pull the trigger and make this early commitment? There is a multitude of reasons but mainly because of the process itself. Sure it's fun for the kids, their families and coaches when it starts. But after a few months it simply becomes overwhelming, especially for the bluest of the blue-chippers. The pressure is enormous and recruiting is taxing. The magnitude is multiplied ten fold by the coverage of recruiting itself and the hard sell by all the college coaches. That's what the beast of college football recruiting has evolved in to.

As with anything else in life there is even evolution in college football recruiting. This can be a good thing for many of the players involved and it doesn't matter what side of the fence you are on. If you are a prospect and you know what college football team you want to play for, then great, make that early decision and enjoy your final year of high school like you should. It only happens once. If you are a coach and you lose a prospect to another school, well then, call it a day with John Doe and move on the next prospect. At least you know where you stand and you can stop wasting your time and money and get on the next recruit.

"I am intrigued and absolutely for an early signing period," said Minnesota Head Coach Tim Brewster. "I am totally open to this idea because that is the direction recruiting is going. Everything is now speeded up in the recruiting process and we are all kidding ourselves that this (early signing period) wouldn't be a positive thing. It's up to us, as coaches, to do our part and utilize all of our resources to make this happen and make it work. An early signing period would allow the kids to relax. At the same time, schools wouldn't have to spend an over excessive amount of time, energy and money recruiting players that are already committed to us."

The numbers are there. It's happening right before our eyes. Pretty soon, the vast majority of college football prospects will be committed and done before the first kickoff of the fall season. It may not be that way this year or even next. But the huge trend is for the early commitment, and sooner rather than later the numbers will be staggering. The numbers will be too great to ignore. To compensate, the NCAA, the AFCA and the powers that be must incorporate an early signing period some time in the very near future. If not, and if things continue on this path college football recruiting will become even more chaotic than what it has already become.

Last week at the SEC meetings in Destin, Florida, the SEC coaches voted down an early signing period (December) by a vote of 9-3. For the record the coaches that were in favor of it were Les Miles (LSU), Bobby Johnson (Vanderbilt) and Rich Brooks (Kentucky). Meanwhile, a recent vote by the

Big 12 coaches was unanimous in favor of an early signing period.

What would it take for an early signing period to be a successful signing period for all involved? First the timing has to be right. In my opinion a December signing day is too late in the process. If you had an early signing period on the first Wednesday of December it's only a mere eight to nine weeks before the current National Signing Day and smack dab in the middle of the bowl season. Sure there are some positives that would bring. It would save coaches some time and money with the in-home visits and perhaps it would save some recruits and their families the pains and pressures of the late recruiting process. Prospects that committed early to a school and if that school had a coaching change; they would then have time to decide if they wanted to stay with their original decision. More or less, the recruiting calendar would not have to be altered.

I am against an early signing period as the way things stand right now, said Ole Miss Head Coach Ed Orgeron. We (SEC) are kicking around the idea of potentially having one in December. It's the wrong time and schools just don't have the man power. If you have an early signing period in December it would take away from all the college football teams that are preparing for bowl games. To make matters worse it would put more pressure on teams and prospects to make official visits during the season. Either leave it the way it is, where we have two months in December and January to really concentrate and finish off recruiting, or make an early signing period in the summer. But if that happened they would have to change the recruiting calendar. That is something I would be open to.

To be most effective, an early signing period would have to be before the season. Sometime in August would be fine but I honestly believe the best time would be the last Wednesday in July. First, the numbers of commitments are there and growing by an enormous amount every year. Having an early signing period in late July allows for the prospects that want to make an early decision time to make unofficial visits during the summer. A decision to sign or not to sign is up to the prospect. But if they decided to sign early it would be before the start of two-a-day practices in August at the high school and college level. With the decision behind them they could now concentrate on their senior year with no distractions of recruiting.

But there are two potential problems with a July or August signing day. First, there are many prospects that don't have the means to make unofficial visits or attend summer camps. In addition, many schools don't have the luxury to get that far ahead in the recruiting process to extend scholarship offers without a proper and thorough evaluation. So in turn the NCAA would need to alter the current recruiting calendar so it would be possible for official visits to be made at some time during the months of May, June and or July. Colleges could host prospects for official visits on any day of the week in the summer. Therefore, prospects could have ample time to visit the schools they are seriously considering.

I am not in favor for an early signing period, said South Florida Head Coach Jim Leavitt. I might be if they changed rules. The bottom line is that you have to interact with young people (recruits) and with the rules right now you can't do that. You would have to see them in the summer, face to face. If not, absolutely not. Right now, with the way things are going so fast, it's not fair to the players. We (South Florida) are not pushing for early commitments because we have to be thorough.

Second, what would happen to a recruit that signed early with a school that eventually made a coaching change later on that fall or winter? Under the current Letter of Intent (LOI), a school is not obligated to release a prospect from his LOI once it is signed. In fact, there is even a clause in the LOI that says a prospect signs with a school because of the school and not because of the coach.

In basketball this happens a lot, where a player will sign with a school during the early signing period (November) only to see that school go through a coaching change. They are obligated to still attend that school unless the school gives that prospect a full release. More and more prospects are being released from their LOI and free to sign with anyone during the second signing period (April). What would happen in football? This is something that would have to be addressed.

Think of what an early signing period, at the right time of year, would bring to college football recruiting. Most importantly, prospects that know where they want to attend college can get the process out of the way. In turn, college football coaches and teams would know where they stand because of the early signing period. In other words, if a player is committed to your school and they sign, you got them wrapped up. If a player is committed to your school and they waiver and don't sign then you know you have one on the fence. Put up or shut up. This will certainly curb the prospects that commit to a school and waiver or commit to a school and decide to make more official or unofficial visits to different colleges. That's still going to happen but schools will know who is serious and who is not.

It will also curtail the prospect that commits to a school just to commit for security. There are many prospects out there that do just that but continue to tell other coaches to continue to recruit them. This still will happen but at least everyone would know where a player stands by that early signing period. The same olds true for the college football teams. They would be held accountable for the scholarship offers they extend. It works both ways. There are certain teams that offer dozens and dozens of prospects very early (a year before they are set to sign their National Letters of Intent). With an early signing period this could slow down some of that.

I am against an early signing period, said Florida Head Coach Urban Meyer. People are speeding up the process now and we are seeing so many commitments. It's not good for recruiting because kids can't explore all of their options. It's like marrying the first girl you date. Things are happening to quickly and schools are offering earlier and putting a lot of pressure on these prospects to make a decision.

Say you are a team that has 22 scholarships to give and you sign 10 prospects during that early signing period on that last Wednesday in July. You are completely done with ten prospects and only have a dozen spots left. You know that going into the fall. Therefore, this will save you time, energy, and money. You can now focus your recruiting efforts on a smaller pool of players making things easier for you as well as all the prospects still left out there on the board.

So why has this not happened already? Why there isn't an early signing period in football like there is in basketball? First of all the numbers

(commitments) were just not there before but they are now. Secondly, will there really be enough time for recruits to make an informed decision with an early signing period. Thirdly, the schools that wield the power like the idea of how things are now because they can fall back and take advantage of the smaller, less powerful programs. For instance, a college football power can lose a recruiting battle to another school. More times than not they don't hold that scholarship until next season. They use it and offer a prospect that could have been committed to another school. So many times a school can do a great job of evaluating early, offer a player, commit a player, only to lose him at the end. It happens all the time, every year, to just about every school that's not considered a power. Even survival of the fittest applies to college football.

"We (Troy) are all for it (an early signing period)," said Troy Offensive Coordinator Tony Franklin. "There are guys that we will offer and get only to lose to a bigger school late in the process. The bigger schools will slow play them and they can get them in the end. The bottom line is that it should be about the kids and to have a signing day in July would take so much pressure off of them."

It should be about the kids. It should also be about control because right now recruiting is out of control. An early signing period in July or even August, coupled with some alterations to the recruiting calendar and to the LOI (in terms of a potential coaching change), make sense. The numbers don't lie and they are only climbing. Every year over the past six recruiting seasons the number of verbal commitments by June 1 has increased. Those numbers six years ago compared to today are amazing. What will those commitment numbers be in 2010? What will they be in 2015?

The recruiting industry has drastically changed and evolved since 1992, when I first began in this business. The recruiting game has changed and has changed quickly before our very eyes. It's time for the NCAA and all the powers that be to make some changes as well.

I am off the fence and finally in favor of an early signing period for college football recruiting.

About the Author

From story.scout.com:

By constructing the chain of events that answer the question of how Pecola Breedlove is caste as a pariah in her community, Toni Morrison.

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Full summary and analysis of Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison written by Harvard students. Includes a biography, and background information.

Every night Pecola, unlovely and unloved, prays for blue eyes like those of her white schoolfellows. She becomes the focus of the mingled.

In the book, The Bluest Eye, Toni Morrison gets across a very powerful idea that is found in every society today. Although the book is written.

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The Bluest Eye provides an extended depiction of the ways in which internalized white beauty standards deform the lives of black girls and women.

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