

SUMMER SESSION: COLLEGE COACHES SETTING SIGHTS YOUNGER AND YOUNGER

by Scott Powers - ESPN.com

7/15/08

Wearing the trademark bright orange shirt, Illinois assistant coach Jerrance Howard positioned himself against the basketball post's padding while the Rising Stars' 14-and-under AAU team went through its layup line.

Standing under the rim, Howard got to this spot 15 minutes before the game even began, making sure he'd beat out the 75-plus college coaches in the building to it. It wasn't that Howard wanted the prime location to best evaluate the on-court talent. No, Howard's motive was simply to be seen prominently by a 6-foot-6, 13-year-old.



Once, July was the most important month for a college coach to recruit the talent of the senior class. Offers would be extended during this time; kids would decide sometime in the fall where they were going, and in early November they'd sign their letters of intent. Now, July is a month where the targets have simply expanded. While coaches are still focused on putting the finishing touches on their latest recruiting classes, they're just as concerned with scouting and possibly securing commitments from incoming eighth graders, freshmen, sophomores and juniors.

On this day, Alex Foster is the 13-year-old who Howard, his boss Illinois coach Bruce Weber and another dozen college coaches have made a point to see and be seen by. Foster, an athletic wing, still has another year to decide on which high school to attend—they're recruiting him, too—but that hasn't kept him from banking two college scholarship offers.

"In our case, we've tried to make the effort to see younger and younger players," Weber said. "We want to try and get them on campus, going to our camps."

This is how Illinois and plenty of others have leveled the recruiting field. They've gone from spending most of their time and effort on the older kids to using the same approach on the younger ones. Kentucky coach Billy Gillispie has been the latest to pull off a kiddie commitment as 14-year-old Michael Avery, a 6-4 eighth grader, verbally committed to the Wildcats.

For Weber, this wasn't the initial strategy. But after missing out on nearly every big-time recruit in his own backyard recently—guys like Sherron Collins, Jon Scheyer, Derrick Rose, Julian Wright—despite coaching Illinois to the NCAA championship game, he real-

ized something had to change. So, it did. No longer were the Illini going to wait on players. They were going to go after them young and were going to go after them hard.

"Everything is sped up," said City/Suburban Hoops Report recruiting analyst Joe Henriksen, who has been covering the Chicago area for the past 13 years. "It's to keep up with the Joneses."

The Illini have already put together arguably two of the nation's best recruiting classes for 2009 and 2010, and none of those commitments have come anywhere near the current recruiting period. Jereme Richmond, a top 10 junior, committed as a freshman. Crandall Head, a top 20 junior, verbally as a sophomore. Incoming seniors Joseph Bertrand, Brandon Paul and D.J. Richardson, all top 100 guys, pledged before their junior seasons.

Weber turned his recruiting around just like that. He went from having a true concern for the future security of his job to putting together classes that can return Illini to the Final Four. But don't think he still isn't sweating a bit. Verbally, he has put together two elite classes. On paper, he has nothing. This is common. The greatest trend in college basketball recruiting is early commitments. Heck, 11 of the top 20 players in the Class of 2010 have committed. The second one is early decommitments. Until there's a signature on that Letter of Intent no coach feels safe.

"You can't even call them before the summer of their junior year," Weber said. "A kid who's committed early, you don't know in two or three years what might happen. With AAU and everything, more people can get involved."

Fellow Big Ten coach Thad Matta knows this feeling all too well. Last year, he had Luke Babbitt decommit and opt for Nevada, and 2010 commit DeShaun Thomas has been like a rollercoaster. Thomas originally committed to Ohio State in May of 2007 but quickly backed out. Later that year, he was quoted, "I like Ohio State. That's my school right now, but I want to look at the other schools, but Ohio State is my main school." Now just recently, Thomas came out again and said he was locked into the Buckeyes.

He's just one of many. Brandon Jennings committed to USC in August of 2006, decommitted in April of 2007 and committed to Arizona. Remember, Eric Gordon was an Illini recruit first. Just in the Chicago area, Cully Payne, a 2009 recruit, committed to DePaul as a freshman and after three solid years of holding to that decommitted and verbally to Alabama this summer.

Foster's parents, Tony and Hope, don't plan on their son going down that path. Tony recalled seeing how much pressure on and off the court Ryan Boatright, a fellow Illinois prep player, was put under last season after committing to USC and Tim Floyd as an eighth-grader.

"We're not letting him commit like other kids in eighth grade," Hope said. "It's too early ... He's growing up too fast already."

As for Illinois' recruiting tactics, Tony and Hope did notice Howard under the basket and later acknowledged a smile and a wave by Weber. For Foster, it's something that is still new to him.

"It's a little bit strange to see all the coaches," said Foster, who received his first college letter in sixth grade. "You kind of feel pressure, but you still got to go and play."

Weber didn't extend Foster a 2013 scholarship after seeing him play and he doesn't plan to for some time. Weber plans on following the National Association of Basketball Coaches' recent opposition to offering scholarships or accepting commitments no earlier than June 15 following a player's sophomore season.

Of course, it's not an NCCA rule, so plenty of coaches aren't following it.

"We recently had a ninth-grader on campus, and we didn't offer him because of the NABC mandate or whatever you want to call it," Weber said. "We later got a call that he had been offered by another school and they were thinking about taking it. ... We got to be careful not to over do it. If we can't control ourselves, the NCAA will control us and we already have enough rules."

The question is where the future leads. Will coaches start recruiting sixth graders or younger? Will younger players feel more like pros, and more hungry to be paid, or see Brandon Jennings and wonder if that could be them? Henricksen certainly never expected to be watching someone Foster's age while being joined by Weber and coaches from Colorado, Georgia Tech, Purdue, SIU and Wisconsin among others.

"Was I watching seventh graders play 10 years ago? Hell, no," Henricksen said. "I really think there will eventually be a mandate put in place involving a recruiting age limit—not offering before a certain age. The NCAA is already looking into it. Until then, the issue will continue because recruiting is so cutthroat. And I also think there will be more and more broken engagements before the actual wedding ceremony (signing day). There are still too many variables during that three or now sometimes four-year commitment, such as coaching changes, style of play, the make-up of the roster and talent level at the school, an individual player's development."