

Between the Lines: Overbearing parents can scare off college recruiters

By Kevin Hoffman

Parents have a tendency to meddle in their children's high school teams, lobbying for playing time and preferential treatment. It's typically part of a campaign to earn a college scholarship for their young athletes, but their efforts may be counterproductive.

While college recruiters are interested in talent, size and grade point averages, it turns out they're also mindful of a prospective athlete's parents. A parent's reputation among the varsity coaches and school provides some insight about the type of person college coaches are recruiting into their program and the potential headaches that might come with it.

Northwestern University football coach Pat Fitzgerald is among those who evaluates parents during the recruiting process. If his assessment raises red flags, he won't hesitate to move on from a talented player. "An increasingly large part of the evaluation process for us is evaluating the parents," he said. "When we talk about our fit we evaluate parents too, and if parents don't fit, we might punt on the player and not offer him a scholarship. And that has changed over a decade. Ten years ago I'm not sure that was as big of a role, but now that's a big part of it."

Fitzgerald isn't alone. Over the past couple of years, I've spoken with college coaches about their experiences with parents and each had varying degrees of concerns. Some might completely move on from a player whose parents carry a bad reputation, while others might go out of their way to limit the contact parents have with the coaching staff. What helps college coaches is they're not as accessible as their high school counterparts, so they don't worry about parents showing up to practices or cornering them after games.

But it's not all about direct conflicts with parents. College recruiters fear that the personalities and actions of parents could offer a glimpse into what they can expect from their children. A mom who has the tendency berate officials from the stands could influence her son or daughter to do the same, and that creates a problem for coaches.

Recruiters want parents who *help* their children with homework, but not those who do it for them or complain to teachers about grades. Recruiters want parents who cheer from the stands, but not those who constantly yell obscenities and hound referees after every missed call. Most importantly, recruiters want parents who trust the coach and don't leave angry voicemails or send emails when their child isn't getting enough playing time. Parents must embody what recruiters want in student-athletes.