

College recruiting process is changing

by *Tod Leonard*

It used to be that official recruiting visits were a memorable rite of passage for prospective college athletes. For a weekend, a kid was fawned over like a star, taken to dinner, hosted at a football game and treated to a night out with possible future teammates.

SIGNED SENIOR - Daniel Miernicki, entering his senior year of high school in San Diego, has already signed with Oregon. CNS photo by Daryl Peveto. But in college golf, as well as many other sports, the tradition is beginning to look somewhat quaint and unnecessary as the trend continues toward earlier and earlier oral commitments.

"It's kind of sad, because the official college visit has gone away," said Conrad Ray, the 2007 NCAA Coach of the Year who guided Stanford's men's golf team to a national title in June.

Ray is only 10 years removed from playing for the Cardinal, where he contributed to Stanford's last previous championship, playing alongside Tiger Woods, in 1994. He can remember his own official visit to the campus in Palo Alto and the emotions it stirred in him.

But now he's in a position of asking kids as young as 16 to consider making a commitment to him long before the time that official visit arrives.

"Most of the coaches you talk to say this is speeding up way too fast," Ray said last week while scouting the Callaway Junior World Championships at Torrey Pines. "But at the end of the day, every year the kids we talk to are getting younger and younger."

There are more young golfers shooting consistently better scores than ever before, Ray said. And with the rise in prominence of national junior circuits such as the American Junior Golf Association, there are more

opportunities for coaches in a sport that doesn't have game films to get out on the road and see many of the top players in one weekend.

At events such as the Junior World, where there were more than 50 coaches registered, it's not uncommon to see three or four coaches, wearing their school garb, following one kid.

Their presence has made a significant impact. Among the boys who will enter college in the fall of 2008, five of the top six juniors in the Golfweek national rankings have already orally committed to a school. Among them is No. 4-ranked David Chung, of Fayetteville, N.C., who has told Ray he wants to play for Stanford.

College coaches can't begin to contact teenagers by phone until July 1 before their senior year. But they can send players letters beginning Sept. 1 of their junior year, and even before that kids can make "unofficial" visits to campus to speak to a coach.

During those early meetings, some coaches might imply an ultimatum to a top player: Commit early, or another willing star might get the roster spot.

The coaches have to weigh the benefits and risks of getting and giving an early commitment.

"It does make things a lot easier," said USC coach Chris Zambri.

"Inevitably, what happens out here is that you end up following someone around a lot, even though you know they're great, because you want them to understand how interested you are. If you can get an early commitment, you can go out and assess other talent rather than just showing interest."

The downside for coaches: A lot can happen in a teen golfer's life in two years, and if his game falls apart because he's more interested in his car or a new girlfriend, you're stuck.

"You might hear about three kids from Pakistan who can flat-out bring it," Zambri said, "and all of a sudden you're locked into Johnny from North Dakota who is shooting 73s.

"Players can back out (of their oral commitment), but coaches can't really back out," Zambri added. "They could, but you start doing that and you're going to get a reputation for it."

On the golfers' side, they benefit from early commitments by getting coaches out of their hair, but without an official visit they may not have a well-rounded understanding of the school, its environment or the personalities of their future teammates.

"That's my only concern about these kids," said San Diego State men's coach Ryan Donovan. "I feel bad for them. They get a lot of pressure put on. It's like, 'You need to commit now or we're not interested.' They commit and get to wherever and it might not be what they expected."

Donovan said he has yet to get a commitment for 2008, but added, "I'm not panicking about it because there are so many kids. I'd like to be more patient and make sure we get the right kid."

Donovan also knows that an unsigned commitment is only that.

"You hate to say it, but it doesn't mean anything," he said. "If you hear a kid's made a verbal commitment, you respect that. But you never stop recruiting. That's where it gets a little bit hairy."

In the most high-profile case in recent years, national junior standouts Rickie Fowler of Murrieta, Calif., and Philip Francis of Scottsdale, Ariz., orally committed to UCLA before their junior years in high school. They were blockbuster finds for the Bruins. But Fowler, the state high school champion this year, reneged last summer and announced he was opting for Oklahoma State.

"It's a trust issue, really," Donovan said. "It's a handshake, is what it is."

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