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# *The Rhetoric behind College Football Recruiting*

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KYLE COLTRAIN

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## **Introduction**

College football is one of America's most popular sports today. Revenue brought in from television deals and jersey sales is almost on par with the National Football League. How the players get to the vast stage of big-time college football has become of great interest to the general public, and every year this interest continues to grow (May 49). These athletes get to this stage because college coaches initiate searches to recruit the players out of high school. Recruiting, at its core, is like sales; a coach is trying to sell his school to a player. The sales industry is full of rhetoric, which can be defined as the art of effective or persuasive speaking or writing. Therefore, good recruiting relies on rhetoric. There are many questions that arise about the rhetoric of college football recruiting: How does a college coach recruit? Why is it so important to recruit? What brings in the players?

There has been quite a bit of research done on why college coaches recruit and the results have all lead to same answer: the better a team recruits, the more the team wins (Caro; Grant, Leadley, and Zygmont; Langelett; Maxcy; Pitts and Rezek; Trent; Yanity and Edmondson). Even with a wide variety of research done, the conclusions all agree that there is a direct correlation between good recruiting and good football teams (Caro; Langelett; Trent; Yanity and Edmondson). When studies have been done to determine what the greatest attribute is in a college football coach and why some coaches get hired over others, successful recruiting was almost as important as a winning record on a coach's résumé (Grant, Leadly, and Zygmont; Maxcy; Pitts and Rezek).

How a college football coach recruits is one of the most significant determinants in why a prospect selects a particular school (Bateman; Dumond, Lynch, and Platania; Klenosky and Troutman; May; Sigelman; Sulentic). However, there are many different styles as to how this recruiting is done (Dumond, Lynch, and Platania; Klenosky and Troutman; Sigelman; Sulentic). Some say that college coaches recruit in an extremely deceiving, dishonest manner (Bateman; Sulentic). Coaches have been known to give high school athletes false promises of playing time, money, and other benefits that never end up being given (Sulentic). Fortunately, this is not the only way college coaches do their job (Dumond, Lynch, and Platania; Klenosky and Troutman; May; Sigelman). Coaches spend a lot of time and effort calling, texting, emailing, and going to visit high school recruits in order to sell them on the particular university they are representing (Dumond, Lynch, and Platania; Klenosky and Troutman; May; Sigelman).

While previous research has established the importance of recruiting for college football programs, there has been relatively little research into the specific factors coaches use to promote their schools and the rhetoric that informs their pitches to student athletes. Researchers that have studied college football recruiting have pointed out that this is an area that needs much more attention (Klenosky and Troutman). My research is dedicated to adding a significant contribution to this discussion through the questioning of college football players that were top recruits, and

determining why they picked the school they did. After surveying a substantial number of players, I hoped to find a direct correlation between why they picked these schools and how they were recruited. This information is not only interesting to the college football fan, but can also be very useful information to a college football coach.

## Methods

To answer the question “What works in the college recruiting process?” I determined the best solution would be to talk to a sample of college football players who have gone through the recruiting process. No one would know what works in recruiting better than players who have gone through the entire experience firsthand. Since I am a part of the University of Central Florida (UCF) football team, I had direct access to these athletes, and selected them for my analysis. I created a survey with six of what I believe to be the most essential factors a student-athlete considers when deciding between schools. The six factors were recent success of the program, proximity to home, relationship with recruiting coach, facilities, early playing time, and academic prestige. I asked twenty players on the team to rank these categories on a scale of one to six, one being the most important, six being the least. I knew that by doing this, I would receive a good understanding of the most important factors in the recruiting process.

Though the surveys would give a good idea of what worked in the world of college football recruiting, I did not want to end my research there. I believe this answer would have been too broad and left questions. After discovering what was most important, I wanted to privately interview three players from the sample to get a more detailed analysis about why they picked the school they did, based on the category I discovered to be most important through the surveys. For example, if the athletic facilities had turned out to be the most important factor after analyzing the surveys, I wanted to learn what it was about the athletic facilities that made them so important. I wanted to dig deeper than the simple response; I wanted to know why the greatest factor was so important that it determined where a high school athlete was going to spend his next four to five years playing the sport he loves. Therefore, after the survey responses were collected and analyzed, three separate interviews were conducted to get more detailed information on the topic. The questions were very open-ended; I was not looking for concrete facts, but rather a general idea of how the recruiting process went for these individuals.

There are some weaknesses to how I approached my research, though I tried to eliminate as many issues as possible. I believe my research would be more accurate if I had an opportunity to survey and interview more players than I did as well as players that attended different universities and played at different levels of college football. There is a possibility that all UCF football players share similar preferences that would be entirely different from another schools’ players. Unfortunately, I did not have access to players at other schools and could only interview UCF players. Nevertheless, I believe I did take full advantage of the resources I had at hand, which made my methods extremely successful for the purpose of this paper.

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## Results and Discussion

### Surveys

The results of the survey can be found in Figure 1. The leftmost column shows what factor is being tallied and the top row shows its ranking. The numbers in the chart are the number of votes

the particular category received for the particular level of importance. For instance, RC received fourteen votes as number one in importance.

	One	Two	Three	Four	Five	Six
<b>Relationship with Coach</b>	14	5	1	0	0	0
<b>Recent Success of the Program</b>	0	2	6	5	5	2
<b>Proximity to Home</b>	4	2	5	4	3	2
<b>Facilities</b>	0	0	5	5	4	6
<b>Academics</b>	0	5	1	0	6	8
<b>Early Playing Time</b>	2	6	2	6	2	2

Figure 1: Players Preferences

The results show that most of the categories are subjective based on preferences of the individual player. Some players are interested in the academics of a school, while others care more about how close it is to home. The results were fairly scattered for every category except for one: the relationship between the player and the coach recruiting him. This, above everything else, got more first importance votes by a significant number; moreover, it received five second-place votes. This was a significant finding in my research. One factor stood “head and shoulders” above the others, proving that the relationship between the player and the coach was the most important determinant in the recruiting process for the players in my sample.

Though the question of “What works?” may have been answered at this point, the details were still unclear and more research needed to be done. Although it is apparent that the relationship between the player and the coach is the most important element of the recruiting process, how a coach builds these relationships and wins the hearts of players is a whole different story: this is where the rhetoric starts to play a larger role in the college recruiting game. How can a coach get a player to trust and believe in him, and then use this to his advantage to persuade the athlete to choose his particular university? This is where my private interviews became important.

## Interviews

The first player I interviewed just finished his senior season as a UCF Golden Knight. His name is Andrew\* and he is actually from Orlando, Florida. Coaches from schools all over the country initially recruited Andrew. From Indiana to Texas to Florida, he had a wide range of colleges to pick from. When I first asked him what was most important to him in the recruiting process, he was quick to tell me that it was the coach who recruited him from UCF that made him to fall in love with this school. Andrew never knew his father, and when the coach recruiting him from UCF learned this, he started to call Andrew every night, really becoming a father-type figure in Andrew’s life. No other coach seemed to put in the effort to do this. The coaches from other schools maintained a strictly business-like relationship with Andrew. Andrew said,

The coach from UCF stood out the most to me because he treated me differently than all the other coaches. He would ask me how my day was, how my girlfriend was. He just really seemed to care about me more than anyone else. It wasn’t just about football with him; it was a strong bond. With that grew a great respect for him and I trusted him, so when he told me he thought UCF would be the perfect fit for me and that I would like it here more than anywhere else, I believed him and signed with UCF.

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\* Pseudonyms were used for all interviewees.

Andrew also told me that other coaches would “badmouth” the opposing schools recruiting him, which he found to be distasteful and turned him off those coaches and their schools. The other coaches only had conversations about football, and never asked how Andrew was doing in school or in life. It was all about the sport. They didn’t seem to want a personal relationship. For Andrew, UCF was a no-brainer.

The next player I interviewed, Connor, is going to be a senior this year and is projected to be a high draft pick in next year’s NFL draft. He was one of the top players in the whole 2010 recruiting class, and had an offer from almost every school in the country. Connor explained that it was the persistence of the UCF coaches that made him want to come to school here. He had offers from much bigger, better programs, but that didn’t stop the UCF coaches from trying, and Connor admired that. He said it was like UCF was “a little engine that could” type of program, and he wanted to be a part of it. No other team was as honest with him as UCF. He told me that the UCF staff would say, “We understand we are not the best right now. We’re not trying to sell you on something fake, but we believe that with you, we will get there.” Connor talked about how he loved that the UCF coaches made him feel like he was already a part of the team and would have an impact early on. They weren’t trying to sell him on something that wasn’t there; instead, they were honest and said they were going to get there through time.

Lastly, I conducted an interview with a player named Kevin. Kevin, like Andrew and Connor, had a large selection of schools to choose from. Kevin is not from Florida, though, but Philadelphia, PA. It shocked me that Kevin would travel so far to go to school at UCF when he had received several offers from competitive programs in the Northeast; some even more competitive than UCF. Kevin explained to me that his decision came down to Rutgers and UCF. Rutgers, at the time, was a much more competitive program, had tremendous facilities, and was a lot closer to home for Kevin than UCF. I was intrigued as to what persuaded Kevin to choose UCF over Rutgers. When I asked him, like Andrew, he said it was all about the coaches. When I went on to ask what was the difference in the coaches, and why UCF’s staff was so influential, he stated,

I just felt a really strong bond with, not only the coach that was recruiting me, but all of the UCF coaches. They talked to me more like a friend than an employee. I grew to be extremely comfortable with them and knew that I could see myself playing for them the next four or five years of my life. Rutgers did have the upper hand in facilities, uniforms, proximity to home, competitiveness, and seemed like a cooler school to me, but the coaches were strictly business and I just didn’t like that. At the end of the day, you spend a lot of your time with the coaches, so that was my deciding factor.

Kevin explained that UCF would call him every day, he would receive handwritten letters at least three times per week, and he would receive emails almost every day. Kevin went on to say, “Even though a handwritten letter is something so simple, it really showed they cared. It was more than just an email or a text.” In the end, it was a difficult decision for Kevin, but he explained that it seemed like it would be too much fun to play for the UCF coaches to pass up. He chose UCF and made it very clear that he has not regretted that decision since.

### **Analysis of Research**

Based on the information I found through the surveys, it is evident that recruiting is an extremely difficult task. Every player is a wildcard—each is distinct and has completely different preferences and concerns when selecting the college of their future. Some players take a keen interest in how close the college is to their home, while some care much more about the strength of the academics or how nice the facilities are. At the end of the day, however, the relationship these players develop with the coaches recruiting them is the most important element in the college recruiting process. Of the players surveyed, 98% responded that the relationship with the coaches

was either the first- or second-most important determining factor; none of the other determinants even came close to being that important.

How this relationship is formed and what the coaches do to create these bonds is what I discovered through the interviews. It was apparent after the interviews that players out of high school are not looking for a coach that talks only about winning, or even football for that matter. Players are looking for coaches that they can look up to as a friend or mentor; or even, in some cases, as a father-like figure. Persistence and encouragement from the coaches show the players how much they care. To build these relationships, coaches have to spend a great deal of time calling, writing, and even visiting players. This type of recruiting can become very expensive, which is why more and more money each year is dedicated to recruiting by college athletic departments (Klenosky and Troutman; May; Sigelman). The more money a school has, the better chance they have at landing a recruit because coaches can make frequent visits and personalize their relationships (Sigelman). If they visit

the recruit more often, it will give the coach a chance to build a stronger relationship with the player and then be able to land the recruit. Coaches are also using social media as a huge recruiting tool with the popularity of websites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram (Klenosky and Troutman; May; Sigelman). When coaches do this, it shows that they take an interest in what is current and important to the athletes in an effort to get the players to like and trust them more.

## Conclusion

Although how nice a school is, how close it is to home, even how fancy its jerseys are all play a role in the recruiting process, in the end, it is most often the relationship between the recruit and the coach that determines the player's college decision. The answer to the question, "What works in the recruiting process?" is building a personal relationship with the player. Coaches don't need to lie to players with false promises of early playing time or wins, all they need to do is open up and make an attempt to build a strong bond with that player. Through this, the coaches have the upper hand in persuading the player to come to their particular college because the coach has earned the player's trust, which is the most important factor.

There is room for improvement and expansion with this study. I believe interviewing and analyzing other schools' players would give enhanced results. I do believe, however, that the results I found were tremendously substantial and take a step in the right direction to find out exactly what works in the world of college football recruiting.

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## Kyle Coltrain



Kyle Coltrain wrote this paper during his freshman year at the University of Central Florida. Kyle is a business major from Carmel, Indiana. He is a football player for the Knights, and made the decision to attend UCF to follow in the footsteps of his father, Ted Coltrain, who was also a UCF football player. Along with Kyle's father, his uncle, Mike Dickinson, also played football for UCF. Kyle is currently living out his dream of being a UCF student-athlete and plans to attend graduate school upon graduation. One day he hopes to help run a business with his father.