

NCAA Puts the Clamps On Recruiting by Boosters— So When in Doubt, Don't!

The University of Oklahoma is normally in the business of seeking assistance from its alumni and other backers, whether it be in the form of financial aid, professional expertise or moral support. In one area, however, the Sooner faithful are being asked to cease and desist. The National Collegiate Athletic Association has taken the booster out of personal athletic recruiting, and they mean business.

In January 1983, on the recommendation of a committee composed of football and basketball coaches representing all major conferences and some independents, the NCAA Annual Convention voted to prohibit in-person, off-campus contact between recruits and alumni and other boosters.

The rule, which went into effect in August, states that "all contact in person with a prospective student-athlete or the prospect's relatives or legal guardian off campus for purposes of recruitment shall be made by institutional staff members. Such in-person, off-campus contact by representatives of an institution's athletic interests is prohibited."

Dan Gibbens, OU professor of law and faculty athletics representative, describes the new rule as an attempt to improve fairness in athletic competition.

"It's been said for a long time that the least controllable part of cheating is alumni off campus, that athletic department personnel really cannot be expected to keep up with what their alumni are doing. If we can get rid of that uncontrollable part of the process, maybe we can do a better job of insuring that the schools and their athletic department people adhere to the rules of fair competition.

"In many instances cheating in intercollegiate athletics does not involve real fraud or people with evil motives," Gibbens contends. "Cheating in this context is simply not adhering to the rules of fair competition. It is a case of trying, in good faith, to do everything possible to be supportive of athletics and being too energetic about it."



According to Gibbens, the coaches who suggested this rule are "concerned about having fair rules of competition that are effectively monitored, and Barry Switzer is one of those people. He doesn't want anybody else to do anything that he can't do, and he feels very strongly about that."

Gibbens explains that a school like the University of Oklahoma, with a strong tradition of winning programs, doesn't need to cheat or "fudge" on the rules in order to attract recruits.

"To my knowledge, and I've said it many times, we run a program very much in conformance to the rules and to a higher degree than most places," Gibbens says. However, if a violation were to occur at OU, the NCAA likely would not be tolerant. Even one illegal off-campus visit to a recruit by an alumnus would be a violation by the school, and OU could forfeit the opportunity to have that athlete on its team.

"We're in a fishbowl," Gibbens says, "and we recognize that if we are found to be in violation in any serious way, we'll be dealt with severely. We want to avoid that."

The new rule applies to transporting the recruits, Gibbens notes, meaning that Sooner boosters can no longer bring the athletes to campus. In Nebraska and Oklahoma, for instance, where recruiting covers wide areas of the country, the universities' "air forces" (boosters who transport recruits to their campuses in their private planes) will have to change their methods. The booster can no longer accompany the prospect, and the University will compensate the booster for the use of the plane at standard charter rates.

As important as what the alumni cannot do is what they still can do, Gibbens offers, and some things have not changed.

"The alumni are not restricted in communicating by telephone or by the mail, and they can freely be in contact with the prospect when the prospect is on campus." And the rules don't restrict relationships between genuine family friends or neighbors of a recruit.

Administering the new rule may be difficult, Gibbens concedes, and adjustments may be necessary. Recruiting rules continually are being adjusted to fit changing needs. Such changes make it important for Sooner supporters to understand new rules and be careful to adhere to them.

Gibbens suggests that for alumni and friends who are unsure of the new rule, or who think they could be in violation of it, clarification is just a phone call away, and he offers a helpful piece of advice.

"If you're in doubt, don't do it. Call us. I don't mind being called. Anyone who takes the time to ask gives us the opportunity to save a lot of grief that would take more of our time. Alumni should know that we have specific people here who would like to work with them in being helpful to the athletic program."

Questions may be directed to OU Athletic Director Wade Walker or the head coach of any sport by calling (405) 325-6511 or Dan Gibbens at the OU Law Center, (405) 329-8800.

— MARGARET FRENCH