



Recruiting Realities: Spring of Junior Year

Lee McDonald

By the spring of junior year, many kickers, punters and long snappers are getting mail from both local and national college programs. While it feels good to get a letter from Miami or Michigan, do not think that you are being “recruited” by these schools. This simply means your name has wound up on a school’s database that usually includes thousands of prospects. These databases can come from many sources including newspapers, recruiting magazines, prep football web sites, your state’s high school football coaches association etc. Most experts will tell you that being “recruited” does not occur until you are offered an official visit, a scholarship or preferred walk-on spot.

Once a database of players has been established, schools will begin the evaluation process by identifying their biggest needs by position. Most schools, especially at the Division I level, will only recruit a kicker, punter or long snapper every two to three years. This means your dream college might not even be looking for your position the year you finish high school or junior college. This also means that if your goal is to play at the NCAA Division IA or Division I-AA level, it is important to realize how few scholarships and preferred walk on spots are available each year. The competition for these spots is fierce. After a school identifies a certain position as a “need,” a small pool of candidates is put on the recruiting board from the initial database. These prospects are then ranked. Who is in this “pool” at each school depends on input from many sources such as high school coaches, recruiting services (such as rivals.com), kicking camp directors or standout prospects that have attended a college’s summer football camp.

As coach’s evaluations are made by film or in person, prospects will be added and dropped from the recruiting board right up to national signing date. Do not expect to get a memo when this occurs. Why a certain prospect rises or falls on a recruiting board is different at each school but usually has to do with a college’s criteria or expectations for each position. For instance, some schools may only recruit a punter that is at least 6 feet tall or a kicker who can consistently put the ball through the end zone on a kickoff. Other expectations may include non-athletic criteria such as a certain GPA and test scores. While the top Division I schools can usually work with any prospect who meets minimum *NCAA Clearinghouse* standards, schools will often look to boost the academic profile of their recruiting class by recruiting the “better” student among two prospects with similar talent. Recruiting the better student is one less “special admit” or “chip” the coaching staff has to use with admissions. Another tough reality for kickers is that schools usually offer one prospect at a time or they may offer two kids and whoever commits first gets the only available scholarship. This is usually not the case for other positions where schools will take multiple good linebacker or running back prospects.

Starting April 15th and running through May, college coaches will hit the road to visit high schools during the spring evaluation period for juniors. During this time, coaches will talk with high school coaches, counselors and others involved in a prospects

development (i.e. kicking coach). They are not allowed to have direct face-to-face contact with junior prospects. Each school gets to make two evaluations per prospect, one of which has to occur on the high school campus. Make sure you have communicated to your head coach your desire to play college football and have furnished him a highlight film and/or a tape of your best complete game. Keep your options open by telling your coach to give your tape to any college coach looking for a kicker. If you are relatively new to kicking and have only begun training with an instructor or are not looking to play major college football, it is best to wait and send film immediately after your senior season. This is because specialists tend to make huge strides between junior and senior year. More than 90% of schools at all levels will not be making final decisions regarding the recruitment of specialist until December-February of the senior year so you want to make sure you are showing a coach your absolute best game footage.

Academically, finish your junior year strong and make sure you take either the SAT's or ACT's this spring. This will give you a better idea of where you stand academically with the *NCAA Clearinghouse* sliding scale. If you are a borderline qualifier, you may wish to take summer school to boost your core GPA, enroll in a Test-Prep course or take addition core classes during your senior year. At the conclusion of your junior year, you must register with the *NCAA Clearinghouse* and notify your high school counselor to send your transcript. Remember, academics must be a priority, as you cannot play college football without them!

Make your summer camp plans now by researching your top college choices and enrolling in their football camps for direct exposure to that school's coaching staff. However, be realistic about where to go. Ask your high school or kicking coach where he thinks your best chance is to play and be recruited. Just like other positions, very few kickers have the physical ability to play Division I-A football! Do not overlook the hundreds of excellent Division I-AA, II and III colleges. Call your top five schools and ask if you can enroll in their summer football camp for one day. Many schools will let you do so to get a chance to kick in front of their coaches and be evaluated. You do not need to be there or pay for the entire camp unless the camp has a coach specifically for kickers and punters or is labeled as a "kicking camp." If you attend these camps, be ready to kick field goals off the ground and use a 1" inch kickoff tee as college kickers do. If you are not ready to do this, don't ruin your chances with that school by attending the camp! Summer football camps are the best direct exposure to your dream schools! Another great option for exposure this summer is the National Kicking Combine Series (www.combineseries.com) hosted in more than 25 cities across the country. Results and referrals are sent by the Combine Series to college coaches nationwide.

Finally, make this your best summer yet in terms of training and preparation. Continue to work with a kicking coach and on your own to prepare for the fall season. Create a weekly kicking, stretching, lifting and running plan and stick to it. If you do not know how to do this, I recommend getting a copy of the *STS Kicking Specialist Training Program*. Attend as many summer kicking camps as possible and learn from as many knowledgeable kicking coaches as you can. Take the knowledge you gain and use it to create and mold your own personal kicking style. Make sure you also get plenty of repetitions with your long-snapper and holder this summer. They will be a major part of whatever success you have on the field this fall and will go a long way in determining where you can ultimately play college football!

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www.ncaaclearinghouse.net

Academic governing body for all prospective Division I and II student athletes.

www.ncaa.org

Recruiting terms, calendars, and college football links.

www.ncaasports.com

Teams, divisions, news, polls, history.

www.ncaafootball.net

News, polls, schedules, history.

www.afca.org

American Football Coaches Association.

About the Author

A 1st team All-State and Blue Chip Illustrated All-American kicker out of DeMatha Catholic High School (MD), Lee McDonald signed a full scholarship to Rutgers University from where he earned a BA in 1999 and a Master's in Psychology in 2002. The former Scarlet Knight is known for his booming kickoffs and 1999 game winning overtime field goal that upset the Syracuse Orangemen 24-21 in front of a national TV audience. A four-year kickoff specialist and two year starter, McDonald also garnered Special Teams Player of the Week honors twice during his career and was named to the Big East Conference All-Academic Team in 1998 and 1999.

McDonald then kicked for the Buffalo Destroyers of the Arena Football League and the Norfolk Nighthawks where he set several Arena 2 football kicking records including most field goals in one game (6) that earned him AF2 Player of the Week honors. After serious injuries cut short his playing career, McDonald spent three years as an athletic academic advisor with the Rutgers University football program where he voluntarily coached kickers and punters. He is now a certified NJ school counselor and assistant football coach. McDonald is a member of both the New Jersey and American Football Coaches Association and provides private training for many high school and college level players. His yearly speaking engagements include the Nike Football Coach of the Year Clinic and Rivals.com Recruiting Junior Day.

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