

COMMITTING DURING COVID

COVID-19 has increased competition for scholarships and limited recruitment opportunities for high school athletes looking to pursue their sport in college.

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During the 2021 college recruitment season for high school sports, student-athletes across the country are facing various COVID-19 restrictions throughout the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) recruitment process.

During recent Clarke Central High School sports seasons, athletes have navigated restrictions on in-person recruitment opportunities after shortened sports seasons while colleges increase opportunities for athletes already competing at the collegiate level.

"We've been averaging about seven, eight people (getting recruited to a college for football) every year in the last five years, and it was about the same (this year)," varsity football coach David Perno said. "But having said that, we also had more seniors than we've had (in years past). So in essence, there was a couple (athletes) that probably in other years would have (gotten) opportunities that probably didn't this year because of COVID."

Many high school sports teams in the U.S. were unable to play full seasons due to the pandemic. Locally, the CCHS track team missed the second half of their spring 2020 season. According to head track and field coach and physical education department teacher Justin Jones, this had a notable impact on the Class of 2021 in particular.

"As a junior, there's a lot of recruiting trips that you take, you try to build relationships with coaches, things of that nature, and they want you to be on their campus so they can see what (you're) doing," Jones said. "A lot of our athletes, especially here at Clarke Central, did not get the chance to perform in their junior year, which is a critical year."

CCHS track and field runner Lashanti Williams, a senior, was a junior when the season was cut short but feels that she has since made up for her losses.

"I feel like (missing part of the 2020 season) pushed me back more because I wasn't able to compete or train, so it messed my training up a little and my times -- (they are not) where I want them to be at this time," Williams said. "But other than that, it's good because now I'm able to run again, train again and do everything else, so now I just had to make up for all the lost time and everything."

In order for a student to get recruited for football, sufficient experience is important as athletes must send college coaches a highlight film of some of their best plays throughout their athletic career.

"All their games are recorded so they go into something called 'Hudl'. Every play from every game is recorded, and that's how (college coaches) go view their film," CCHS football recruitment coordinator Brian Allen said. "You can basically go through every game you played in, every play you can, and the idea



Featured: COMMITTING TO LIMESTONE: Clarke Central High School varsity football defensive back Scotty Randolph, a senior, signs his letter of intent to Limestone University at CCHS' college signing day on Feb. 3. This school year, the Class of 2021 Gladiators faced changes to the recruitment process, but according to head varsity football coach David Perno, skilli has remained the ultimate indicator for scholarships. "The recruiting, and the social media, and I think it's much more of a distraction for these kids," Perno said. "They just need to realize that they're a really good player, if they're a solid student and a really good player, they don't need to do all that stuff. It's gonna take care of itself." Photo by Luna Reichert





Above: FACE OFF: Clarke Central High School varsity football wide receiver Jairus 'Nono' Mack, a senior, takes a hit from a defensive player on the Cedar Shoals High School varsity football team in the Waters-Wilkins Stadium. Mack experiences difficulties in the recruitment process due to the lack of in-person opportunities. "I think it was harder (to get recruited) because you couldn't go see (the college coaches), (they're) pretty much relying on your film from the previous year like your highlights and stuff." "You got to pass your eye test, the eye test is how you look and stuff, and they couldn't really see me -- the only way they see me is what they see on film." Photo by Luna Reichert

is to put together about a four-to-five-minute long highlight film."

While seniors on the football team played their full fall season in 2020, the class was not able to play half of their spring football season or get experience at summer football camps in 2020. According to Allen, these camps in particular are important improvement opportunities for athletes.

"If a person becomes a four or five star type of athlete, they've been going to these camps since eighth grade," Allen said. "(Some athletes) never got the opportunity to go and compete outside a normal football schedule. (Last summer), they (couldn't) go to a camp and compete against some of these four or five-star kids out of the metro-Atlanta area, South Georgia and other states."

Conversely, with another year on the team ahead of him, varsity football safety Renardo Faust, a junior, does not see his lack of on-field time in 2020 impacting his college plans.

"I don't think (less experience) will have that much of an impact because (7-on-7 football) season is starting back up and football camps, and also we'll be able to play spring football, so there (will be) more film," Faust said. "Also, college coaches are taking (into) consideration that kids didn't get to play (in some parts of 2020), so they go off of either what they did their sophomore year, or a lot of kids went to showcase football games where they got film there."

Student-athletes have also faced restrictions on connecting with college coaches -- a central part of the recruitment process. According to ESPN, the

Division I Council has remained in a dead period since March 2020, banning in-person contact between college coaches and high school athletes for all sports.

"(Without in-person recruiting), you essentially have (college coaches) making what we call a blind offer, basically they're offering (a spot to) a young man they've never actually seen in person because they haven't been able to come to the school," Allen said. "(Coaches would usually want to) get an idea of (the athlete's) size, they want to make sure that the student-athlete is the height and weight you're looking for, and maybe the speed."

As a result, varsity football wide receiver Jairus "Nono" Mack, a senior, was unable to officially tour his chosen Division I college in person.

"I went to (the University of North Carolina at Charlotte) for a football camp a few years ago, (but) I didn't get (to see) the whole school. I only got to see the football facility and stuff like that. So I didn't get to see dorms, the classes and all that," Mack said.

Prospective athletes in Division I have instead turned to online recruiting opportunities to find their next team. For example, while Twitter also played a key role in recruitment prior to COVID-19, the social media platform has allowed high school athletes to market themselves more easily amid the lack of in-person opportunities by reaching out to coaches directly and showing college recruiters the work they do year-round.

-- BRIAN ALLEN,

CCHS football recruitment coordinator

"Twitter is everything for recruitment. You gotta set your page right, you gotta follow the coaches you want to go to, you gotta make sure you don't do nothing stupid on there. Twitter is everything, like you, gotta have it," Mack said. "That's pretty much the only way you can send your highlights to the coaches."

Some recent changes within the NCAA have given certain opportunities to college athletes during the pandemic. According to a Sports Illustrated article about a recent change to the college transfer portal system, a tool that helps student-athletes switch colleges, the NCAA decided that college athletes transferring to Division I schools can join their college sports team immediately as of Dec. 16, 2020, instead of waiting a year before competing.

"With the emergence of the (immediate) transfer portal, high school kids, unfortunately, suffer more than (anyone) else. Because you got so many student-athletes transferring from one school to another, the colleges are often going to the transfer portal to pull recruits where they would normally go straight to the high school," Allen said.

Additionally, the NCAA granted college seniors extended eligibility which will allow them to continue competing on their team for one extra year, according to the Next College Student Athlete (NCSA) website. This will apply regardless of whether the team played their season in 2020 and extend through the spring of 2020-21 at most, dependent on the division.

"So many colleges didn't play this fall, therefore, all their seniors or other people that were maybe exiting the program are now granted another year on aid, so a lot of scholarships that usually were available were not. So, the turnover wasn't there," Perno said.

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For some prospective college athletes, this lack of turnover has forced them to seek placement in a different division.

"What you really saw was people (who) typically might be a Division I prospect, sometimes they may drop down to a Division II player because the colleges are getting the transfer portals or junior college players," Allen said.


According to Faust, one result of the many changes to college sports recruitment involves high school athletes choosing a different post-high school athletic route.

"The NCAA made a rule where they're gonna give all the kids (extended eligibility), but for high school there was like nothing to go on, so a lot of kids are going to prep school now," Faust said. "So a lot of D1 schools already got in mind who they want, so a lot of them are going to

-- **JAIRUS 'NONO' MACK,**
varsity football wide receiver, a senior

prep school to try to get an extra year, get more experience and more film."

Considering the online tools colleges and athletes have adjusted to this year, Jones suggests there may be a more positive long-term effect.

"I think (COVID-19) is going to make a way for innovation in recruitment because now, you don't have to necessarily come on campus anymore," Jones said. "We can do it one way, and we can also do it the traditional way. So with challenges, there are new opportunities, and I think that's what this pandemic has done for a lot of people." 

Above: MOVING UP: Members of the Clarke Central High School varsity football team that were recruited to various colleges stand in the Competition Gym on CCHS' college signing day on Feb. 3 with varsity football defensive coordinator Justin Jones (far left) and head varsity football coach David Perno (far right). In total, nine CCHS football players signed to a college at the event. " (A coach) offered me a scholarship to go (to the University of North Carolina at Charlotte), and from then on he kept talking to me, making me feel welcome and stuff, making me feel wanted," varsity football wide receiver Jairus "Nono" Mack, a senior (second from right), said. Photo by Luna Reichert

