

The Limits of Fandom: Recruiting and NCAA Compliance



By Keith J. Hamel, WPAOG staff

Recently, five high school athletes were thinking about playing football for the United States Military Academy. They even posted their potential ambitions on Twitter. A USMA graduate who read about the athletic potential of these athletes in his local newspaper saw their posts and responded to each prospect, raving about the Academy and the Army and encouraging each one of them to start an application. Nice gesture, right? Not as far as the NCAA, the governing body of all Division-I sports at USMA, is concerned.

“If someone contacts a prospect and there is an athletic component to that contact, then it falls under the rules of recruiting,” says Ron Salvatore, Assistant Athletic Director for Compliance and Academics with the Department of Intercollegiate Athletics (ODIA). According to rule 13.1.2.1 of the 2013-14 NCAA Division-I Manual, “All recruiting contacts with a prospective student-athlete shall be made only by authorized institution staff members.” When Salvatore learned what the graduate was doing, he asked him to stop. This graduate, obviously a fan of Army athletics, did not think he

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was doing anything wrong and refused ODIA’s request. ODIA, knowing the NCAA’s “Scope of Responsibility” clause (making it responsible for this graduate’s actions), then had to declare the five athletes ineligible for recruiting purposes, lest Army would be guilty of an infraction. It has since started the tedious paperwork to reinstate the prospects, who originally wanted to come to and play for West Point, but the damage has been done. A fan who thought he was helping his team was in fact hurting it by not following NCAA compliance in matters of recruiting.

The bottom line is that only coaches can contact athletes. These coaches must be declared as such to the NCAA and must pass an annual recruiting exam before they can contact athletes about coming to play for Army. There is one exception. Admissions personnel, namely Field Force members and Military Academy Liaison Officers who have been trained by ODIA, can make contact as well, but their contact cannot be athletic in nature. Gene McIntyre, Assistant Athletic Director for Recruiting and Admissions Support, says that Admissions

personnel must provide the same counsel and support to a prospective athlete as any other candidate. “This is the key to staying out of trouble and keeping ODIA compliant,” he says.

These Admissions personnel must also negotiate a compliance “gray area” unique to service academy schools. USMA’s admissions requirements include a physical component that measures a candidate’s athletic ability—think “Every cadet an athlete.” This means that Admissions personnel must always consider, “Might this candidate be a good athlete?” However, they cross the line if they start to ponder, “Might this candidate be a good baseball player?” In other words, in contacting prospective athletes for Army sports, they can ask general questions such as, “In what sport did you earn a varsity letter?” but they must avoid specific questions such as, “How fast can you run a 40-yard dash?” Again, the guideline ODIA gives to Field Force and MALO personnel is that if a topic or question is applicable to any candidate, then it is ok to pursue it with a recruit as far as NCAA compliance is concerned.

To educate Army boosters (i.e., basically any fan of Army sports) in compliance matters, Salvatore puts out a quarterly newsletter, “The Black Knight Bulletin.” In addition to the rules and regulations concerning contact with a prospect, the newsletter covers other compliance topics such as pre-existing relationships and initial eligibility. It also features a section describing compliance infractions at other schools. Salvatore also routinely takes calls from inquiring graduates and members of parents clubs who have questions about contacting a recruit. “My common response to most calls is to let ODIA and Army coaches make the contact,” says Salvatore.

But some Army fans are extremely passionate and want to help in any way they can to bring quality athletes to Army teams. For these fans, McIntyre offers the following guideline: “Boosters are not allowed to seek out any potential student athletes, but they can pass along any information they received from a candidate to Army coaches, if the candidate contacted the booster; they may also forward to ODIA information learned about a candidate from the local media.” After this, McIntyre says, “Trust the Army coaches.” Army coaches follow strict criteria to ensure that they are bringing in the best recruits as cadets. For each recruit, an Army coach must answer “yes” to three questions: 1) Can this prospect make the team better? 2) Can this prospect become a good cadet? 3) Can this prospect develop into a successful Army officer who might have to lead troops into combat? Only with three affirmative responses will that prospect have the right to don black and gold and play as a student-athlete on an Army sports team. ★