

# Talent gets you noticed, character gets you recruited

By James Leath

“He is to be shocked we no longer want him.”

“Come again?” I asked the college assistant coach seated across from me at lunch. “You flew across the country to meet him, and now you won’t recruit him anymore?”

The coach had recently stopped for a day in another state to check in on one of their prospects, before arriving at my school in Florida.

“He is a great talent, he certainly has the skills needed to play for us,” said the coach. “Sadly, he just won’t fit in well with our culture. It’s sad how many kids we come across every year that we cannot recruit, and it has nothing to do with their ability.”

As the Head of Leadership at IMG Academy in Bradenton, FL, I have the privilege of having conversations with college recruiters from major universities every week. One of saddest topics we discuss are stories of top high school talent being passed over because of behavior off the field. High talent and low character is a poor combination.

I have heard these stories enough to feel compelled to write this so that it may be passed onto every high school athlete that dreams of playing in college. There are a lot of talented athletes out there, but talent alone will not land you a coveted roster spot. Your talent may get your foot in the door, but it takes a lot more to hit the field at the next level.

The recruiter is not there to see you tackle, throw, bump, spike, pitch, catch, hit, shoot, or pass for the thousandth time. He already knows your stats. He has already watched your highlight film and read all the press clippings. He has likely seen you play. What he is looking for are called *intangibles*, the things that cannot be easily measured, but make all the difference.

Of the countless conversations I have had with college recruiters, here are the most common questions recruiters are searching for answers to decide whether they should recruit you or not.

## What are you doing when you think no one is watching?

Image courtesy Kennesaw St Football. Recruiters are not always wearing their school clothing. That guy in the corner of the weight room talking to your coach? He might be a recruiter on an unscheduled visit. That woman in the stands taking notes? She may be writing down the behavior she sees to report back to her head coach. The more talented you are, the more people are watching you to try and see what flaws you are hiding. How do you treat your teammates, coaches, parents, and officials? Do you make eye contact with your coach when she is talking? What is your body language like when things are not going well? This all matters, a lot!



## Are you one thing in person, and another person online?

**Social media is the microphone of your character**, and whether you agree or not, you will be judged by what you post. Please, pause and think before you post! If you wouldn't want it on a billboard so your grandma could read it, you probably shouldn't post it online.

Colleges put a lot of research into your character, especially the high-profile sports such as football and basketball. Most schools have teams of people who use very creative tactics to comb through your social media feeds.

For example, I heard a story recently about a prospect who used a lot of racial slurs on his Twitter account. This recruit was shocked because **his Twitter account was set to private**. However, a few weeks prior to the recruiter's visit, this prospect accepted a request to allow an account with a profile picture of a pretty girl. That account was actually owned by a guy named Chris. Once accepted as a follower, Chris was given access to that prospect's entire feed. Chris also discovered that the recruit had a habit of ridiculing teammates online. The recruiter thought that prospect had the talent to play at the next level, but talent alone gets you nowhere.

## Who are your biggest influences?

You will become like the people you hang out with the most. This includes who you follow on social media. Take a look at who you are following on social media sites, and in life, and unfollow those you do not wish to be associated with or become like.

Last year, I spoke to a coach about a 5-star baseball recruit being watched by all the major universities. That was until a news story came out about all the accounts this recruit was following on Twitter that promoted sexual assault towards women, drug use, and alcohol consumption. This recruit also had a Twitch account where he would play certain games that glorified abuse towards women and was recorded cheering when an explicit event would happen during the game. Not surprisingly, he ended up going to community college and getting kicked off his team halfway through the year.

Ask yourself, "If I were a coach, and I looked at the list of people influencing me, would I recruit me?" Be honest with yourself, because your potential future coach will be looking very closely at your influencers.

## Are you a great teammate?

I coached varsity football for a number of years and had some decent talent under my supervision. I remember one recruiter visiting from a big school in Southern California to take a look at our star linebacker, maybe the best at his position I ever coached.

When the recruiter arrived, he was wearing boots, jeans, and a t-shirt. Nothing about what he was wearing gave away where he was from or connected him to his university. As I spoke to him in the corner of the weight room, he watched one particular athlete with great intensity. If he were to tell the story, this is how it would go:

"When I arrived at the school, I was taken directly to the weight room where our number one linebacker prospect was lifting with his team. He did not know who I was because I was wearing regular street clothes. I do this during all my visits because I don't want to influence their normal routine just because I'm watching. I am sure the amount of weight he was squatting was impressive, but **watching him squat was not what I flew 400 miles to observe**. One thing I noticed was during every set, he had a spotter standing behind him just in case he needed help. This teammate was yelling encouragement during the prospect's last few reps and helped him rack the bar."

“After all, three sets, sadly, I watched our recruit sit down and pull out his phone instead of returning the favor of spotting his teammate. His coach asked him to put his phone away after his first set. He did. He then pulled it back out after the second set. I stopped his coach from intervening again. **We look for guys who can be trusted to do the things after being told once.** During the third set, he finally put his phone down, but only because he saw his teammate struggling to finish his last few reps. This teammate was there for the prospect every rep. The prospect, however, did not spot him or encourage him, putting himself and those around him in danger. I began to question his ability to be a great teammate, and if he would fit in with our team. Then, when the workout was over, the coach blew the whistle to start cleaning up. The prospect headed straight for his cleats and walked out the door, never even making eye contact with me, and leaving his teammates to clean up and rack the weights. Definitely not a good fit for our culture.”

## **Do you make a good first impression?**

One of the first things I teach all my athletes is the art of the handshake. Firm grip, eye contact, be fully present while you introduce yourself. I had a group of NBA prospects in my leadership class recently. I had been working with this particular group a few weeks so they knew how to enter a room, command presence, shake hands, make eye contact— all things that will set them apart from the hundreds of other NBA draft prospects.

A new guy showed up to campus and was put in my class. When he walked in, he gave me a handshake that could only be described as “a dead fish.” He mumbled his name and never really made eye contact. The class booed him and told him to “try it again,” pointing towards the door. He was confused and shocked that he was booed when he walked into the room. He came back in, did the same thing, and was again booed by his peers. Here was a phenomenal athlete, tall enough to have to duck when he entered the room, and he was getting booed for how he entered. I walked out with him the second time.

“Why are they booing?” he asked.

“Because you suck at entering a room.” I could see the confusion on his face. Then I saw a smile as he realized class had begun.

“How are you going to stand out if you enter a room like everyone else? And what’s with this handshake? Give me your hand,” I said.

I showed him a proper handshake and I encouraged him to walk across the room with purpose, introduce himself clearly, and look me in the eye when he shook my hand. Then I walked back into the classroom, shutting the door behind me.

The large man destined for the NBA walked in, smiled, and walked across the room with purpose. He shook my hand, looked me in the eye, and introduced himself clearly. The room full of other large men erupted in cheer.

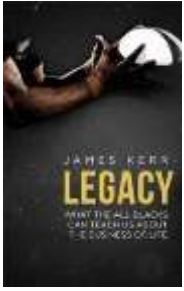
You are always being watched—from the moment you get out of your car to the moment you leave the parking lot. The more talented you are, the more people pay attention. Give them a reason to remember you off the field, court, mat, or pool.

## **Do you “sweep the shed?”**

The most successful sports team in the professional era is not the NY Yankees, or the Boston Celtics, or Real Madrid, but a team from a far less known sport. It is the New Zealand All Blacks in rugby, who have an astonishing 86% winning percentage and numerous championships to their name. In the outstanding book, *Legacy*, written about the

All Blacks (the most winningest professional team in the history of modern sports), author James Kerr discusses one of their core values that epitomizes the selfless attitude.

### It's called "Sweep the Shed."



You see the goal of every All Blacks player is to leave the national team shirt in a better place than when he got it. His goal is to contribute to the legacy by doing his part to grow the game and keep the team progressing every single day.

In order to do so, the players realize that you must remain humble, and that no one is too big or too famous to do the little things required each and every day to get better. You must eat right. You must sleep well. You must take care of yourself on and off the field. You must train hard. You must sacrifice your own goals for the greater good and a higher purpose.

### **You must sweep the shed.**

After each match, played in front of 80,000 plus fans, in front of millions on TV, after the camera crews have left, and the coaches are done speaking, when the eyes of the world have turned elsewhere, there is still a locker room to be cleaned.

...by the players!

If the New Zealand All Blacks are sweeping their locker room, then why aren't you out there **helping younger players, picking up cones, arriving first and leaving last, and setting the example for others?** Are you leaving the uniform in a better place, or counting the days until they retire your jersey?

I once asked a recruiter what he thought of the prospect he came to watch.

"Remember when they were doing pushups?" he asked. "He led the team by counting, but he missed pushup 13 and pushup 18. He just didn't go down, even though he commanded the team to do so. I am not sure about this guy, honestly. **Out of twenty plays, we can't have him taking off two because he is tired.**"

You are always being watched, so sweep the shed.

### **Do you show a sense gratitude?**

How you treat the people who take care of you matters. **The coaches, the trainers, the ball boys—they are there to serve, but they are not your servants.** True leaders serve those around them. When the trainer shows up, don't bark, "I need tape!" Instead, ask for it. Say "please." Say "thank you." Clean up after yourself. When you are grateful, and treat others with the respect they deserve, people take notice. More importantly, it's the right thing to do.

### **Your talent will get you noticed, but your character will get you recruited.**

- Show gratitude.
- Be a positive influence.
- Do the little things.
- Be a great teammate.
- Make a great first impression.
- Sweep the shed.

And always remember, whether you are online, on the field or in the classroom, someone is watching.

**As president Calvin Coolidge once said, “nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent.”**

Your reputation is who people think you are; your character is who you are when you think no one is paying attention. Someone is always paying attention, and every recruiter has countless stories of passing on a talented athlete who failed the character test. You must be the exception. You must be extra-ordinary. That’s how you get recruited.