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Recruiters put a blitz on kids **Process can be confusing**

Editor's note: This is the first in a series on college football recruiting.

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The phone never completely stopped ringing, but Robert Bergman no longer felt oppressed by the volume of calls upon announcing his decision. Just before Christmas 2000, he orally committed to attend the University of Miami.

A month later, Butch Davis was Cleveland-bound and it was as though the recruiting process began anew for Bergman, a touted offensive lineman out of Bakersfield, Calif.

Bergman learned of Davis' departure during his fourth-period class. Hours later, schools were swooping in.

"The trainer walked into the weight room and told Robert there was a phone call and it was USC calling," said Gary Bergman, Robert's father. "It was Pete Carroll himself wanting to come out that night and talk to Robert. It was very stressful."

Whether because of an unforeseen coaching change or having numerous attractive offers, this is when undecided recruits play mental Ping-Pong trying to finalize their decisions.

With National Signing Day 10 days away, second-guessing can be rampant even among athletes who have orally committed to a program as coaches make their final pitches.

Last season, Coral Gables High standout Frank Gore had orally committed to Mississippi. On signing day, his letter of intent landed on Miami coach Larry Coker's desk.

Remember Jonathan Colon? An offensive lineman out of Miami Central, Colon signed letters of intent with Miami and Florida in 2001. Though only the one to the Gators was meant for delivery, both arrived at the respective schools.

"It's always been that way," said Tom Lemming, ESPN recruiting guru and editor of Prep Football Report. "The great players are getting pounded at this time of year so every [school] seems inviting. How do you choose Notre Dame over Florida State or Michigan over Miami?"

It has to be something in their hearts telling them where to go to."

Bergman's heart told him to stay put. Rated as the 19th best offensive line prospect in the nation, Bergman had his parents field all phone calls until Miami resolved its coaching situation. Once Coker was hired, Bergman chose UM, not seeing a need to explore other options.

"There were some coaches that were talking about him starting as a true freshman," Gary Bergman said. "Starting as a freshman is rare enough. We know enough that to start as a true freshman on the line . . . you have to take that with a grain of salt."

Indeed, Bergman did redshirt this past season.

Whether the lure is a starting position or greater coaching stability, recruits are pelted with reasons to re-think their choice. Even second-tier recruits face many factors.

Plantation High fullback Jared Southerland isn't a Parade All-American. Co-MVP of last week's Dade-Broward All-Star Game, Southerland will get a scholarship to play somewhere. The dilemma is does he make his decision on signing day to attend a smaller school such as Northeastern, Columbia or Bucknell, or does he hold out for a Kansas State or Syracuse, two programs that might take Southerland if their first choices fall through.

"It hasn't been bad, but there's been a moment or two where he's said, 'I'll be glad when this is done,'" said Dan Southerland, Jared's father. "It's a roller-coaster ride. Two days ago we were talking to the coach from Purdue. Saturday, we got an e-mail saying he just found out all their scholarships are extended."

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Parents aren't immune from becoming as overwhelmed as their kids during the recruiting process. While providing guidance and support is a must, most parents and recruiting experts say the athlete must make the final call.

"In the end, it's got to be the student's decision," said Dr. Bill Wilkie, a Michigan-based recruiting advisor. "If he makes the wrong decision, you don't want him to be able to blame anybody but himself. Give him information, give him wisdom and [the parents'] last statement to him should be, 'We will trust your final decision.'"

Wilkie and his son, Jason, who played football for Central Michigan from 1988-92, created a website that provides guidance for recruits and their parents. At www.football-recruiting-tips.com, the Wilkies advise recruits to develop screening criteria to narrow their choices.

"The key is doing the work and then knowing when to ignore it," Wilkie said. "These are guides.

These are not overly simplistic things where you can get a clear answer. If you look at that and your highest choice is the lowest ranked, you may want to ask a lot of questions . . ."

Dr. Bill Wilkie is a former university administrator who, along with his son, Jason, developed guidance materials for college-bound student-athletes. Jason Wilkie played football for Central Michigan from 1988-92. The Wilkies are offering Herald readers members access to their website for free. Users can visit www.football-recruiting-tips.com and log in with the username "Florida" and password "Herald." Here are five key factors Wilkie suggests undecided recruits should contemplate:

TIPS FOR RECRUITS

- Consider your learning style and whether it's compatible with the coach's teaching style.
- Consider the quality of the position coach you will play for and if that person can serve as a mentor in your life.
- Look at how much talent the school has at all positions you might play.
- Find out the program's graduation rate and determine whether the university can make you a better student as well as a better player.
- For players with professional aspirations, ask yourself what the program is going to do to make you distinctive.