

First Impression

By Amy Bryant

As a college tennis coach, recruiting is a crucial component of my job. Through this process I not only evaluate talent but I also examine a player's personality to find the perfect fit for my program. There is a lot to be learned about a player's maturity and work ethic even in the first meeting. Whether that introduction is by phone, email, snail mail or in-person, the old adage, "you never get a second chance to make a first impression" applies. When you begin contacting coaches, heed these tips to avoid some of the most common mistakes:

Don't wait for coaches to contact you: If you are interested in playing college tennis you should plan to contact all the programs in which you have interest. Don't wait for coaches to call you. I make this suggestion because coaches tend to reach high when they cold-call and may initially disregard recruits who do not meet their ranking cutoff. By taking the initiative to call coaches, you avoid the possibility of being overlooked based on ranking alone. After making contact, if you feel like you are being put off, you should stay reservedly persistent. A simple email every so often reaffirming your interest in the program will suffice. If a coach knows you remain a possibility, he or she may turn to you should a blue-chip recruit fall through and a spot becomes available. It is also important to stay persistent if you don't receive a prompt response from a coach. Human error causes recruits to slip through the cracks all the time. For example, emails could go missing and phone numbers can be recorded incorrectly. Take the initiative to make that first impression and be persistent in capturing the coach's attention.

Do your research before contacting a coach: Just as one does research before going into a job interview, players should do their research before contacting a coach. When you already know basic information about the program, it shows a coach that your interest is sincere. Coaches want to feel that their time is being well spent when they talk to you. I am always impressed when a recruit throws in a comment about a current season event. For example, try saying something like, "I noticed you guys had a tough match last week against X College. You'll get it next time."

Alternatively, it is irritating when a recruit expresses interest but clearly knows nothing about the program. I get emails all the time from recruits wanting scholarships to play for Emory. Unfortunately, Emory has no athletic scholarships because it is a Division III school. This information is easily accessible online. Recruits come across as lazy and ill-informed when they don't do some of their own recruiting before contacting a coach.

Showing a coach that you did your research makes a good first impression. One can learn a lot by taking the time to read the information on a team website. Other good resources are: The Intercollegiate Tennis Association (www.itatennis.com), Tennis recruiting.net (www.tennisrecruiting.net) and College Tennis Online (www.collegetennisonline.com).

Don't let your parents contact the coach first: I am automatically leery of a recruit whose parents make the first contact, even when the parents are gracious and kind. The biggest red flag raised is the question of whether the recruit is actually interested in my program, or the parent is. The last thing I want to do is spend time recruiting a player if she never intended to commit in the first place.

I also find it humorous when parents preface their phone call with: "I am calling because my daughter is at school and can't call during normal business hours." With the prevalence of cell phones today, this is no longer a legitimate excuse for parents to be their child's secretaries! Every high school student has a break during school hours when a quick phone call is possible. In extreme cases of time constraint or school cell phone restrictions, an email is preferred over hearing from a parent. Email is also a perfectly appropriate contact method for a shy or nervous recruit.

It is acceptable and understandable for parents to communicate with the coach later in the recruiting process. But, my recommendation is for parents to step back at the beginning. Make your own first impression; don't let your parents do it for you.

Don't let a recruiting service make the first contact for you: I understand the comfort recruiting services can provide during a somewhat daunting process. However, if you decide to hire a service, my biggest recommendation is to take the time to make your own introduction to coaches. Mass emails from recruiting services frequently go straight into my junk folder. Additionally, these emails tend to include a list of players interested in my program. You stand a chance of being overlooked when presented with other candidates. Lastly, the recruiting service can depersonalize you by focusing on your ranking over other attributes. Get involved in the process so coaches will recruit you based on their interest in you as a person (not just a player). Even if you are paying a service, take the time to add your personal touch – especially when making your first impression.

Don't send a mass email to express your interest: Every year, I receive a handful of emails from recruits expressing heartfelt, undying interest in my program. "Coach, I have always wanted to play for your school!" Then, I will look up at the "To:" heading and see that I am one of 20 coaches who received this very same email. Many red flags are raised: the recruit is lazy, likes to cut corners and is not genuine. None of these attributes are ones that I want in a player on my team. So, if you're going to send a mass email, at least remember to BCC everyone!

I also get a chuckle when I receive an email entitled "Dear Coach Bryant" and the body of the email includes, "I am very interested in Vanderbilt University." That sounds great, but I am the coach at Emory! So, just as you would proofread a resume or cover letter, review your emails before sending them! Even mail-merge wizards make mistakes. Make a good first impression by giving each coach his/her own time.

Your first impression with a coach is a lasting one. The tips I provided should help to build a solid foundation for a four-year long relationship with a coach. In my next article I will go beyond the first contact and discuss appropriate communication during the entire recruiting process.