

**Successfully Recruiting Today's Athlete**

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### **Successfully Recruiting Today's Athlete**

Over 400 NCAA Division III softball programs recruit student athletes to play at the next level. My coaching staff and I at Texas Lutheran University are just one of those 400 universities competing to find the best student athletes for our program. Although recruiting continues to change each year, I constantly reflect on what we can do to improve and stand out from other programs. This is especially true right now during a nationwide pandemic when the rules have completely changed. Student athletes choose what university they want to attend based on a variety of factors. How can we make Texas Lutheran University the most attractive place? Saunders (2015) states that, "It's important to remember that just like any other investor, a professional athlete looking to invest in your franchise trusts your business mode" (PG 67.) When we bring athletes on our campus, with their families, our goal is to sell the program and make TLU seem like the best and obvious choice. However, during this pandemic, we are unable to have in person tours. Now the issue becomes, what can we do as coaches to give athletes and their families that feeling of what Texas Lutheran University is like without actually being physically on campus?

Coaches spend countless weekends away from their family in the summer traveling to games to watch athletes play. It then goes even further when coaches form a personal connection with the athletes. The recruiting process initially starts out with emails from prospective student athletes telling our coaching staff that they are interested in playing softball and getting their education at Texas Lutheran University. Once I receive an email, I begin researching the prospective athlete by looking for skills videos or contacting their current coach. This will initiate communicating with recruits through text messages and phone calls. Even though I prefer to speak on the phone, I understand that most kids these days feel more comfortable texting. A

study was done that showed smaller schools are actually able to compete with the bigger universities through their ability to form and keep meaningful personal relationships with student athletes. Having those text message conversations as Maher (2007) tells us, “creates bonds between coaches and prospects” (PG 131.) Sending a simple, “thinking about you, or good luck tonight,” means a lot to those student athletes and typically will result in a rapid response. Most universities also used social media to advertise their successes. After games, I like to highlight key plays that happened during the game to post. When recruits see the success of our team, they are more attracted to the idea of being part of a winning program. Even something as small as posting a team picture at the movies on an off day can convey that we reward our team when good things happen.

The biggest thing we put out is the fact that we won a National Championship in 2019. If a recruit is on campus, you can guarantee that I'm wearing my championship ring. It's a great tool to have as a visual and tell student athletes that they have the potential to earn a ring if they commit to a winning program like TLU. Even letting them try on the ring adds a sense of belonging. When recruits arrive on campus, I make it a point to show them all around the university while giving them the ultimate tour. Years past, the athletes would take tours through the admission department, but I felt we missed out on that interaction with the families. By me giving the tour, it allows time to better those relationships so that the athletes feel comfortable with me. Though recruiting may seem like just conversations, there is more behind the scenes work to make it all happen. Our coaching staff must set out steps to take to ensure that we are doing everything in a thought-out plan. Without that plan, there would be no structure of how to recruit prospective student athletes.

In order to recruit successfully, a Professional Learning Community must be in place. PLC’s implement strategies for challenges of student’s academic performance and improving educator’s skills. These PLC’s help transform schools, universities, and athletic programs into specific structures for better success. While PLC’s are more common in education, they can also apply to college athletics. For example, a recruiting PLC should have a committee of coaches, the athletic director, a compliance director, and our university’s admission department representative. Working closely together would help ensure that we are all on the same page in creating the best experience for prospective student athletes. My head coach and I have created PLC’s in the past to successfully recruit student athletes, but most recently how to recruit during a pandemic. Recruiting now during the pandemic isn’t ideal, but we have to be creative with the changes. Understanding that we are not alone in this process puts our mind at ease. For example, the table below illustrates what our PLC for recruiting at TLU involves.

<b>YEAR LONG RECRUITING TIMELINE – TLU SOFTBALL</b>			
<b>MONTH</b>	<b>RECRUITING STRATEGY</b>	<b>STAFF</b>	<b>EVIDENCE</b>
JANUARY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• TLU SOFTBALL WILL HOST A PROSPECTIVE ATHLETE CAMP TO EVALUATE RECRUITS.</li> </ul>	COACH WILSON COACH VAN HOOK TLU SOFTBALL TEAM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PLAYER EVALUATIONS</li> <li>• UPDATE RECRUITING BOARD</li> </ul>
FEBRUARY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• COMMUNICATION BETWEEN COACHES AND RECRUITS.</li> <li>• COACHES WILL ATTEND HIGH SCHOOL GAMES/TOURNAMENT WHEN AVAILABLE.</li> </ul>	COACH WILSON COACH VAN HOOK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PHONE CALLS</li> <li>• COACH WILSON – DRIPPING SPRINGS TOURNAMENT</li> <li>• COACH VAN HOOK – COLLEGE STATION TOURNAMENT</li> </ul>
MARCH	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• COMMUNICATION BETWEEN COACHES AND RECRUITS.</li> <li>• COACHES WILL ATTEND HIGH SCHOOL GAMES/TOURNAMENTS WHEN AVAILABLE.</li> </ul>	COACH WILSON COACH VAN HOOK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PHONE CALLS</li> <li>• COACH WILSON – FREDERICKSBURG TOURNAMENT</li> <li>• COACH VAN HOOK – BRENHAM TOURNAMENT</li> </ul>
APRIL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• COMMUNICATION BETWEEN COACHES AND RECRUITS.</li> <li>• INVITATIONS WILL BE SENT TO RECRUITS AND FAMILIES TO ATTEND CRAWFISH BOIL.</li> </ul>	COACH WILSON COACH VAN HOOK MARKETING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PHONE CALLS</li> <li>• MARKETING DEPARTMENT CREATE CRAWFISH BOIL INVITATION</li> <li>• SEND INVITATION TO RECRUITS</li> </ul>

<p>MAY</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• COACHES WILL TRAVEL TO DIFFERENT LOCATIONS TO WATCH RECRUITS AT TOURNAMENTS.</li> </ul>	<p>COACH WILSON COACH VAN HOOK</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• COACH WILSON             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SUMMER CUP TOURNAMENT</li> </ul> </li> <li>• COACH VAN HOOK             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 5 TOOL TOURNAMENT</li> <li>• HUBER RANCH CAMP</li> <li>• ASA TOURNAMENT</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p>JUNE</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• COACHES WILL TRAVEL TO DIFFERENT LOCATIONS TO WATCH RECRUITS AT TOURNAMENTS.</li> </ul>	<p>COACH WILSON COACH VAN HOOK</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• COACH WILSON             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• RONALD MCDONALD</li> </ul> </li> <li>• COACH VAN HOOK             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• TRIPLE CROWN TOURNAMENT</li> <li>• GLORY CAMP/TOURNAMENT</li> <li>• PLANO TOURNAMENT</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p>JULY</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• COACHES WILL TRAVEL TO DIFFERENT LOCATIONS TO WATCH RECRUITS AT TOURNAMENTS.</li> </ul>	<p>COACH WILSON COACH VAN HOOK</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• COACH WILSON             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• BOMBERS EXPOSURE TOURNAMENT</li> </ul> </li> <li>• COACH VAN HOOK             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SPARKLER TOURNAMENT</li> <li>• PGF NATIONAL TOURNAMENT</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p>AUGUST</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PROSPECTIVE STUDENT ATHLETES WILL ATTEND VISIT.</li> <li>• ATHLETES AND FAMILIES WILL TAKE CAMPUS TOUR WITH COACH VAN HOOK.</li> <li>• AFTER TOUR IS COMPLETED, ADMISSIONS MEETING WILL TAKE PLACE.</li> <li>• RECRUITS AND FAMILY WILL MEET WITH COACHES.</li> <li>• OVERNIGHT STAY WILL TAKE PLACE WITH CURRENT TLU PLAYERS.</li> </ul>	<p>COACH WILSON COACH VAN HOOK ADMISSIONS</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SEND VISIT ITINERARY             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• KADIA TOMLINSON (AUGUST 7/8)</li> <li>• REANNA NEIMANN (AUGUST 14/15)</li> <li>• KATHLEEN BARTON (AUGUST 21/22)</li> <li>• KATIE MCIRVIN (AUGUST 28/29)</li> </ul> </li> <li>• SCHEDULE ADMISSIONS MEETING</li> <li>• RESERVE CONFERENCE ROOM</li> </ul>
<p>SEPTEMBER</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PROSPECTIVE STUDENT ATHLETES WILL ATTEND VISIT.</li> <li>• ATHLETES AND FAMILIES WILL TAKE CAMPUS TOUR WITH COACH VAN HOOK.</li> <li>• AFTER TOUR IS COMPLETED, ADMISSIONS MEETING WILL TAKE PLACE.</li> <li>• RECRUITS AND FAMILY WILL MEET WITH COACHES.</li> </ul>	<p>COACH WILSON COACH VAN HOOK ADMISSIONS</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SEND VISIT ITINERARY             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• HARLEY STATON (SEPTEMBER 5/6)</li> <li>• MADI VELA (SEPTEMBER 12/13)</li> <li>• AMANDA TERZICH (SEPTEMBER 19/20)</li> <li>• LINDSEY GONZALES (SEPTEMBER 26/27)</li> <li>• LILY MORON (SEPTEMBER 26/27)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>OVERNIGHT STAY WILL TAKE PLACE WITH CURRENT TLU PLAYERS.</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>SCHEDULE ADMISSIONS MEETING</li> <li>RESERVE CONFERENCE ROOM</li> </ul>
OCTOBER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PROSPECTIVE STUDENT ATHLETES WILL ATTEND VISIT.</li> <li>ATHLETES AND FAMILIES WILL TAKE CAMPUS TOUR WITH COACH VAN HOOK.</li> <li>AFTER TOUR IS COMPLETED, ADMISSIONS MEETING WILL TAKE PLACE.</li> <li>RECRUITS AND FAMILY WILL MEET WITH COACHES.</li> <li>OVERNIGHT STAY WILL TAKE PLACE WITH CURRENT TLU PLAYERS.</li> </ul>	<p>COACH WILSON COACH VAN HOOK ADMISSIONS</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>SEND VISIT ITINERARY                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>CHRISTIAN HAYGOOD (OCTOBER 3/4)</li> <li>REBECCA MACKEY (OCTOBER 3/4)</li> <li>CLAIRE STREETER (OCTOBER 3/4)</li> <li>BLAKE HOLTORF (OCTOBER 10/11)</li> <li>ADDI GREAK (OCTOBER 10/11)</li> <li>OLIVIA PRINZ (OCTOBER 24/25)</li> </ul> </li> <li>SCHEDULE ADMISSIONS MEETING</li> <li>RESERVE CONFERENCE ROOM</li> </ul>
NOVEMBER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>COMMITMENT DEADLINE WILL BE NOVEMBER 1.</li> </ul>	<p>COACH WILSON COACH VAN HOOK</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PHONE CALLS WITH RECRUITS ABOUT THEIR DECISION</li> <li>UPDATE RECRUITING BOARD</li> </ul>
DECEMBER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>TLU SOFTBALL CHRISTMAS CARDS WILL BE SENT TO RECRUITS AND COMMITS.</li> </ul>	<p>COACH WILSON COACH VAN HOOK MARKETING</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>SCHEDULE TEAM PICTURE</li> <li>MARKETING DEPARTMENT CREATE CHRISTMAS CARD</li> <li>MAIL CHRISTMAS CARDS TO RECRUITS AND COMMITS</li> </ul>

During the school year, we meet daily as a coaching staff to work on what we want to accomplish for recruiting. This involves what recruits we need to reach out to and have conversations with. If we will be having a recruit on campus that week, we create itineraries for the visit and set up meetings with admissions. January is the month that we start fresh with recruiting each year. At the beginning of the month, before our season starts, we will host a prospect camp. The camp will be posted on all social media, the TLU athletics website, and sent to any recruits we are interested in. Having the camp allows us to work up close with the athletes and see their skills. During the camp, run by our current TLU players, the coaching staff will evaluate each individual athlete. While evaluating, it's important that we also start to develop

personal relationships. Talking with the recruits shows that we value their time and commitment being at the camp. Once the camp is over, our coaching staff will meet in the offices to go over which recruits we are interested in and will continue to recruit. To keep track of each player, we will write their names on the board sorted by position. Names will also be written in different colors to distinguish what grad year they are. Being able to put recruits into different categories helps determine which position we need the most based off who graduated or will graduate on our current team. February starts the beginning of the TLU softball season.

While season is going on, being able to go watch games becomes difficult due to the conflict. However, there are some days that we are able to take the day off from work to recruit local tournaments. Usually just one coach will recruit during the day, while the other coach stays at practice. Showing face at high school tournaments lets the recruits know that we are highly interested in them to take time away from practice to watch their games. It's all about the connection. March is when it gets difficult to watch high school tournaments. Even though we have listed tournaments to attend, we may skip those tournaments to have both coaches at a practice. This is the month where our current season gets hectic. Typically, if we miss those high school tournaments, we invite those recruits to attend a home TLU game. It becomes almost impossible to get out and recruit during the month of April. This is the heart of our season when we are finishing up conference series.

We will also host our annual crawfish boil fundraiser on an off weekend. Before the crawfish boil happens, I will meet with the marketing department to design our invitations. They do an amazing job of ensuring that the invitation is appealing and has all the information needed. Once the invitation is created, it will then be posted on social media to get the word out. We even go a step further and personally invite each recruit on our board along with their families. Having

them at the crawfish boil gives us another opportunity to build those relationships and let the recruits hang around our current team, “the support athletes can provide within the franchise” (Saunders, 2015, PG 67.) The atmosphere of the fundraiser is welcoming which helps sell Texas Lutheran University even more.

May, June, and July are when we are able to go out to tournaments almost every single weekend. My head coach and I split the tournaments in the summer to see as many recruits as possible. As we get schedules from recruits, spreadsheets are made to determine what game we will watch at a certain time. Not only are we watching the recruits that we are interested in, but also writing down the names of other players that impress us. We then add them to our board and reach out to express interest. The next three months are the most crucial aspect of the recruiting process. This is when we are able to bring recruits and their families on campus for visits. I will reach out to each recruit with a list of dates that they can choose from to attend on their visit. Once a date is confirmed, my next step is to contact our admissions department to get a meeting scheduled with an advisor and the recruit. In this meeting advisors will go over what academic scholarship they would receive if they choose TLU. Once that is scheduled, I will also have to reserve the conference room for our meeting with the recruits. As the date gets closer, an itinerary will be sent to each recruit.

The day of the visit, my job is to give the campus tour. My head coach stays in the back to talk with the parents as I show them the important buildings on campus. Typically, I take them to the most popular spots they will be spending most time at. In the locker room, our National Championship trophy is displayed front and center to highlight the success of our program. After the tour is complete, their admissions meeting will be the next thing they do. When that meeting is finished, it's time for the more intimate conversations in the conference room. Now is the time



for the recruits and their families to ask questions about our coaching style, the goal of our program, and just engage in conversation. During that time, it is important to make the families feel safe if their daughter chose TLU. Then our current players will pick up the recruits for overnight stays. It is important for the recruits to be around our players and feel that sense of belonging. I am very confident that the softball team sells our program.

When the visit is completed, our coaching staff will wait about a month to contact the prospective student athletes to let them soak in their time about TLU. This is a big decision they will be making choosing where they go to college for the next four years. Adding pressure only makes recruits not interested. In the past we have never given a deadline to student athletes on their decision to come to Texas Lutheran University or now, however we've learned that giving that deadline of November 1<sup>st</sup>, gives us an idea of the positions we need to recruit more depending on who chooses us or turns us down. December is our downtime after recruiting for eleven months straight. This is the month to take a team Christmas picture and design a Christmas card with the marketing department. Sending out those cards only helps us develop those personal relationships even more.

Then the pandemic happened and completely changed the way we recruit. Due to university rules, our campus was shut down in March and will continue to be closed to campus visits until after Christmas break. Having the campus shut down makes it impossible for prospective student athletes to see Texas Lutheran University in person. Like any other university, school, or organization a new PLC was created. The communication through text messages, phone calls, and emails didn't change, but the visits needed to happen in another way. The entire athletic department met with our athletic director to express concerns of not being able to conduct in person visits. Luckily that's where our marketing department helped. Just like

everybody else, virtual visits became the new method. The marketing department spent days filming every aspect of campus for coaches to be able to send those videos out to recruits.

During this time of no school and no work, recruiting became even more of a priority. I was able to send out those videos to every single recruit that we were interested in. It gave those prospective student athletes an inside look of TLU from their own home. However, they still miss out on seeing the interaction of people on campus, “Rather, having a robust athletics department with a high share of undergraduates engaged in it, is successful advertising” (Willner, 2019, PG 306.) When the videos were sent out, Coach Wilson and I would meet with the recruit via zoom to recreate the meeting we would typically have after the campus tour. Finding ways to recreate the recruiting process has been successful as we’ve had two recruits commit to Texas Lutheran University during this pandemic. After a student athlete has committed, it’s important to reiterate the mission statement and goals of TLU athletics to ensure that we will do everything we can to give them the best athletic experience and academic achievement.

Our mission statement states:

The Texas Lutheran University Intercollegiate Athletics program exists for the sake of the students at Texas Lutheran University-for their growth and development. Intercollegiate athletics, operating under the principles of fair play and amateurism, provides equal opportunity for talented male and female students to participate in a nationally competitive sports program that is values-based and educationally sound. (Texas Lutheran University. N.d. Athletics Mission Statement and Goals. [https://www.tlubulldogs.com/general/2019-20/files/Athletics\\_Mission\\_Statement\\_and\\_Goals](https://www.tlubulldogs.com/general/2019-20/files/Athletics_Mission_Statement_and_Goals))

Within the mission statement there are three goals to support it. Goal number one is that every student athlete that participates in athletics is expected to graduate. We want to recruit the best athletes, but also want to recruit academically successful students. In doing that, we provide our student athletes with academic advisors, counseling, tutors, and time to study.

Goal number two states that each sport should desire to compete at the national level. Not only has the softball program won the 2019 DIII National Championship but have ambitions to win another championship. To have a national quality program, retaining quality coaches is important. Players will sometimes choose a university based on the coaching staff. If those coaches leave, there now becomes uncertainty if those athletes will continue to play at TLU. Coaches also need to provide information about financial aid to families to ensure that they can get academic scholarships to help pay for the tuition. Scheduling games against top programs helps attract and retain the student athletes. Our support system should be accessible for athletes. The athletic training staff is there to help with the health and safety of each individual player and their welfare.

Lastly, recognizing the individual athletes' accomplishments and offering positivity is key. Maintaining a resourceful and cost-effective maintenance structure for the action of all existing athletic programs is goal number three. Coaches need the support of the athletic director, university president, and the university in general to meet common goals. The university should provide resources and office space for coaches to successfully run their programs. During home games, personnel need to be present in order for the game day operations. Facilities need to be updated to ensure fan attendance. In updating facilities, this helps the recruiting process for prospective student athletes, as well as potential donors. Our business department also needs to

be compliant in providing expenditure of funds. These goals help support the mission, but also work closely with the mission and vision of Texas Lutheran University.

To successfully recruit today's student athlete, you've got to be creative and sell the program. Taking the time to send a simple text message can show how interested you are in a prospective student athlete. With today's athlete, it's vital to make them feel comfortable and wanted. If you express your interest, chances are you're one step ahead of the other universities. With how popular technology is now, being able to show the inside looks of your team, makes your team more appealing to recruits. Especially during the pandemic going on right now, finding ways to send athletes pictures and videos of the university can get players excited about your school. Chances are you will get those athletes that you really want. So be creative and find ways to make your athletic program stand out above others.

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