Teaching or Recruiting: Unraveling the Roles of the College Coach

David Berri, Southern Utah University
Chris Croft, Southern Mississippi University
Mike Mondello, University of South Florida

Finance/Economics - Economics (College Sport) virtual asynchronous
20-minute oral presentation (including questions) Session: Economics I
Abstract 2020-052

Coaching is obviously an integral part of sport management. But what specifically is the function of a college coach? Obviously, coaches are involved in recruiting. There is a battle among elite intercollegiate basketball programs to draw the most accomplished basketball student-athletes to attend their respective schools. It is commonplace for basketball programs to spend significant sums of money to lure the most high-profile high school basketball players to their school. Ching (2019) noted that Kentucky spent $461,529 on men’s basketball recruiting in 2012-13, which accounted for 39% of the $1,182,992 in total men’s recruiting expenses it reported to the Department of Education that year.

There are clear incentives behind this spending. During the 2017 academic year, the NCAA men’s basketball teams generated $1.1 billion (Berkowitz, 2018). Such revenue is not distributed evenly. On average, the top five programs generated $23 million for their schools (Wiggins, 2018). In addition, college basketball’s top teams have earned their respective conferences millions of dollars from deep tournament runs. Specifically, the ten best recent performers generating a total of $46 million for their conferences, (Smith, 2019).

Certainly recruiting top athletes help teams achieve such success. Then again, the top coaches are also supposed to be able to alter the performance of their athletes. If that is the case, then one might be able to argue that wins we see generated by a team are not entirely about the quality of players a coach recruits. Specifically, some of what we observe is due to the ability of the coach to teach the players to be more productive.

To determine whether coaches are primarily recruiters or teachers we will build upon previous research examining the impact of coaches on performance in the NBA. Berri et al. (2009) found that NBA coaches generally did not have a significant impact on player performance relative to a generic coach. This led the authors to conclude “that most coaches in the NBA are more than the ‘principal clerks’ that Adam Smith claimed managers were more than 200 years ago” (p. 92).

Building on the model developed by Berri et al. (2009), a similar model will be constructed for the NCAA Men’s Basketball data set. The model developed will answer the following question: What is the impact of men's college basketball coaches on the productivity of individual players? To answer this question, we will utilize the data on the performance of NCAA Division I men’s college basketball players from 2002-03 to 2018-19. This data set will allow us to estimate how coaches impact the productivity of individual players in men's college basketball.

This investigation into coaches’ productivity and their impact on player performance allows us to better understand what specifically coaches are doing. Are coaches simply selling young athletes on the qualities of their specific program? Or are coaches truly transforming the productivity of their recruits?