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Alabama's Saban goes high-tech to lure recruits

By Jack Carey, USA TODAY

The faces showing up on football recruits' computers lately might bear strong resemblance to men seen stalking the sidelines on autumn Saturdays.

But the recruits these days can do more than just watch. Some coaches, including Alabama's Nick Saban, have been using webcams for on-line video chats with recruits. As technology marches on, recruiting innovations keep pace.

A rule enacted this year prohibits head coaches from making on-site visits to high schools during the evaluation period that runs until the end of May. Coaches already had been prohibited from in-person contact with recruits. But when the coach is at the high school to talk with the high school coaches, sometimes short, unintentional encounters with players occurred.

The new rule prohibiting the on-site visits, was pushed by the Southeastern Conference so even unintentional visits with recruits could be curtailed.

"The intent is one of balance, bringing greater balance for the coaches and balance for those individuals who they are recruiting and the disruption that goes on at the high schools," said Kevin Lennon, the NCAA's vice president for membership services. "Anytime you have a highly visible coach entering a high school, there's a potential for disruption. It's disruptive to more than just the student he's recruiting."

Coaches with the star power of Saban or Steve Spurrier or Bobby Bowden can have kids flocking as if they are rock stars, including the prospects. That leads to the outlawed "bump" situations. In fact, the rule has come to be known as the "Saban rule" because of the stir he caused last year in his first year with the Tide.

To avoid that yet be seen by the player, coaches can go to a video conference, or webcast, which is considered the same as a phone call by the NCAA. The recruit can get in contact with the coach when it's convenient for both, and it's much less disruptive.

"If you think about the intent and the balance pieces for both the student and the school and the balance piece for the coach ... the coach is able to do this in his office, and the student is able to do it (where it's convenient)," Lennon said. "That seems to be keeping with the spirit of the rule."

Lennon acknowledged, however, that the NCAA and its membership need to be vigilant as new technologies, which could have a dramatic impact on recruiting, continue to hit the market.

"One of our key roles as NCAA staff is to prepare our membership and make sure they have on their radar what's next," he said. "And in this era of technology, it is a little bit of catch-up. But I think it's safe to say that not just the NCAA is playing catch-up in this area."

Lennon speculated that in the future, the NCAA could be looking at how people are able to store their messages or store what they view in terms of handheld devices.

"Whether the coach's face appears on your phone ... I don't know," he said. "You go into any store and see what kind of application (some

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items) can have for recruiting."

Not every coach is going the high-tech route, but that doesn't mean they can't be creative when it comes to selling their programs and dealing with the new rule. Illinois coach Ron Zook this spring has been attending coaching clinics around the country, where he can at least be in contact with high school coaches if not their players.

"(Clinics are) something that have been going on in the past," Lennon said. "The key distinction is that the coaching clinic is conveying information with colleagues about the sport you love. We have not governed (the clinics)."

The SEC has an existing policy that prohibits coaches from participating in off-campus clinics.

Neither Saban nor Zook could be reached for comment, but Zook recently told *The (Springfield, Ill.) State Journal-Register* he doesn't like the new restrictions because they limit "the ability to get to know the people and learn a little more about the kid."

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