

The One-and-Done Dilemma

Story by Rachel Stark-Mason
Illustrations by Arnel Reynon

As a 17-year-old in 2005, while his Lawrence North High School classmates were deciding whom to ask to prom and where to go with their freshly minted driver's licenses, Greg Oden weighed a different kind of decision — one that was outside the realm of possibility for his Indianapolis peers, and nearly everyone else in the world.

Should the teenage basketball phenom go to college as one of his class' most highly recruited big men? Or, upon graduation, would he leap straight to the NBA, where the 7-foot, 250-pound center was already drawing comparisons to four-time NBA champion Shaquille O'Neal?

It's a choice countless young people every year dreamed of, but only a rare few faced. And yet, so many spectators seemed to have the "right answer," happily back-seat driving along each superstar's route to the basket.

The opportunity to make millions in the NBA at the ripe age of 18 might seem like a no-brainer. But Oden had been open to reporters about his interest in college. The NBA wasn't going anywhere, and perhaps the college experience would prepare him for the next level. He saw value in both options.

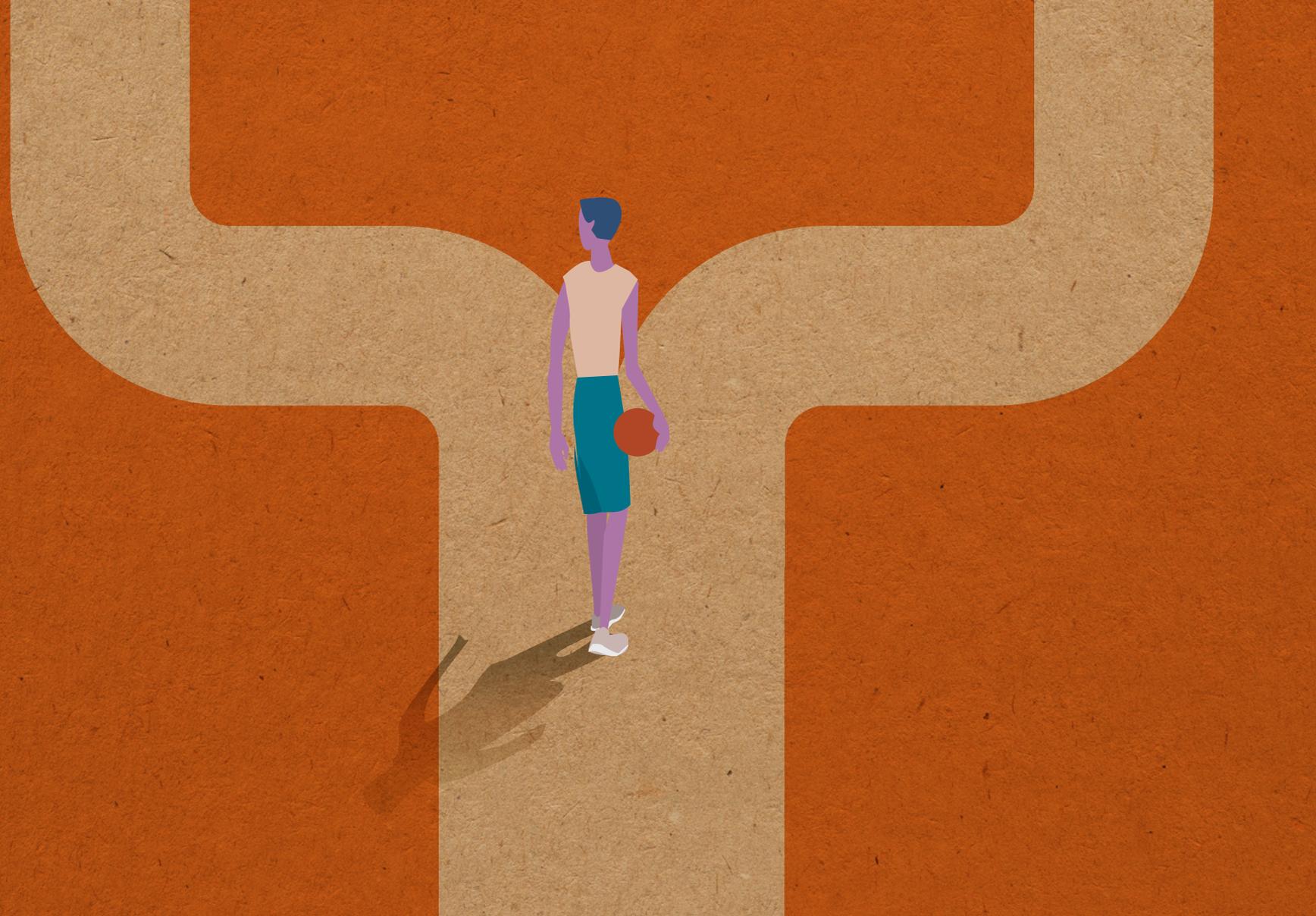
But before his senior season even started, the NBA and the National Basketball Players Association essentially made Oden's decision for him. The league and its players union announced a new rule that prevented players from entering the NBA draft straight out of high school. Moving forward, draft entrants needed to be at least 19 years old during the calendar year of the draft and one year removed from the graduation date of their high school class before entering the league.

Oden enrolled at Ohio State and went on to lead the Buckeyes to a runner-up finish in the NCAA Division I Men's Basketball Championship. Another basketball prodigy, Kevin Durant, joined the Texas Longhorns and won multiple national player of the year awards that same year. After remarkable freshman debuts, both Oden and Durant left for the NBA, where they were drafted first and second, respectively, in 2007 and signed multimillion-dollar contracts.

With that, the one-and-done era was born.

More than a decade later, the age minimum set by the NBA to benefit its game has influenced the college game, too. Leaders in the NBA are now grappling with a decision of their own: Does something need to be done about one-and-done?

A 13-year-old decision to keep elite prep players from entering the NBA draft is under scrutiny. What could changes to this rule mean for college basketball?



Is basketball — both the college and pro games — better off without the 19-year-old age requirement for the NBA draft?

Even for one of the sport's most polarizing issues, the considerations are nuanced for those closest to the questions.

The NBA age minimum has been controversial since its inception, with critics arguing that elite 18-year-old basketball players should have the freedom to choose between making millions as a pro or attending school as a student-athlete. But the stakes rose in September 2017 when the FBI announced it was investigating potentially corruptive practices in college basketball. In response, the NCAA formed an independent Commission on College Basketball, led by former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, and tasked the group with examining critical issues in Division I men's basketball and proposing solutions.

One of that group's recommendations was more of a plea to the NBA and the players union: Pull back the age limit to make players eligible after high school. Help us eliminate the one-and-done trend in college basketball.

At a media address last summer, NBA Commissioner Adam Silver hinted that modifications may be in the making. "My personal view is that we're ready to make that change," Silver said, before adding: "It won't come immediately."

As those discussions continue, basketball fans, players and coaches around the country watch, wait and wonder if a rule that has fueled debates in the basketball community for more than a decade might soon end, and what that might mean for the game's future.

Almost as soon as the two brightest stars in the 2007 NBA draft signed their contracts, their professional careers veered in opposite directions.

Shortly after the draft, Oden underwent the first of several major knee surgeries, then racked up more time on the Portland Trail Blazers' sideline than on the court over the next five years. Oden was waived by the Blazers in 2012, and his once-promising basketball career sputtered to a disappointing halt soon

after. Desperate to find an alternative route forward, Oden returned to his college roots, taking advantage of Ohio State's degree-completion program by re-enrolling in school as a 28-year-old sophomore.

Durant, of course, flourished in the league, becoming the poster child for all that one-and-done players could hope to be. NBA Rookie of the Year. NBA Most Valuable Player. Two NBA championships. Two Olympic gold medals.

All it takes is one success story to boost the dreams and expectations of younger players. In 2018, NBA teams drafted 18 college freshmen — nearly 1 of every 3 players taken and tied with 2017 for the largest class of one-and-done players. Eight of the top 10 draft picks were freshmen. And this was no anomalous influx of young talent: A freshman has been the top pick in every draft since 2010.



After one season at Ohio State, Greg Oden moved on to the pros but struggled with injuries during his 105-game NBA career. RICK BOWMER / AP IMAGES

Meanwhile, the number of elite players who remain in college through graduation and then enter the draft ticks lower each year. In 2018, 11 seniors were drafted, down from 19 a decade earlier. The trend is clear: Of the 1.2 percent of men's basketball student-athletes who are drafted by the NBA, more are taking the leap as early as possible.

"There are more players that are better prepared physically — stronger, bigger, faster, better skills — and seem to have been developed over their young lives to be a little bit more prepared emotionally and mentally to be a professional athlete and to deal with what comes with that," says Dan Gavitt, NCAA

senior vice president of basketball. "They're not finished products by any means, but 20 to 25 years ago, you could name the guys who were prepared on one hand."

Gavitt credits USA Basketball's Junior National Team program and select other youth development programs with preparing the most elite young players for the highest stages of competition. Additionally, the astronomical compensations that beckon in the professional league ups the ante for families and other third parties from the earliest spark of talent.

The NBA nearly tripled the value of its broadcasting agreement with ESPN and Turner before the 2016-17 season, pouring millions more dollars into its coffers. With up to 51 percent of the NBA's basketball-related income going to players, the deal sent teams' salary caps soaring. For the 2018-19 season, the league set each team's salary cap at nearly \$101.87 million. Every first-round NBA draft pick was guaranteed a million-dollar salary with his first contract. No. 1 pick DeAndre Ayton, who starred as a freshman at Arizona, is set to earn more than \$8 million this season with the Phoenix Suns.

"The salaries, even entry-level salaries and certainly long-term earning potential, is so life-changing that it's a tough thing to resolve for a prospect and his family," Gavitt says. "Many, many years ago, the difference in value in playing in college and playing in the NBA was different, but not dramatically different. Now, it's dramatically different."

There are professional options, such as European leagues, for elite players withheld from making the jump to the NBA after high school. But most of the country's top basketball players choose college, where they can display their skills on a national stage and build their personal brand while getting a taste of higher education. Some critics of the one-and-done era question the credibility of one year of college, but Duke basketball coach Mike Krzyzewski says that year has been "unbelievably beneficial" for the players who have come through his program. The NBA's age limit has worked out well for the NBA and for the NCAA, he says.

"Jayson Tatum coming out of St. Louis

Continued on page 60

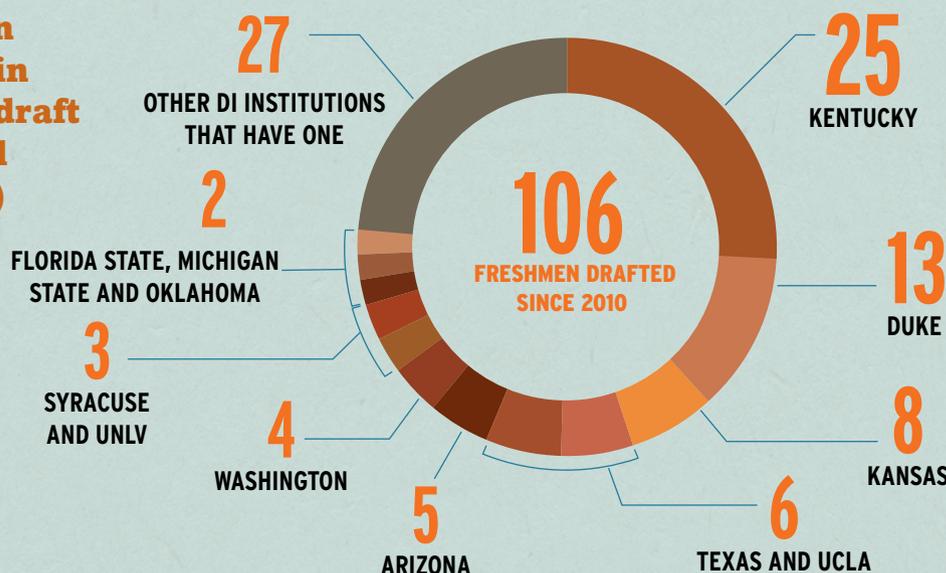
One-and-Done By the Numbers



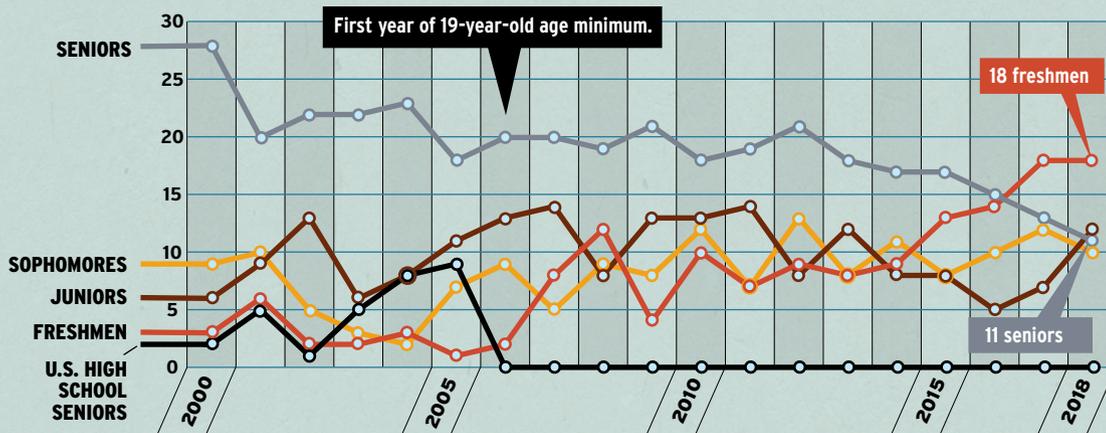
Number of one-and-done freshmen drafted to the NBA



Freshmen selected in the NBA draft by school (2010-18)



NBA draftees by class (2000-18)



Academic performance (2013-17)

Academic data for men's basketball players who were drafted after one year in college:

2.91

AVERAGE CORE HIGH SCHOOL GPA

2.68

CUMULATIVE GPA AT THE TIME OF DEPARTURE

79%

EARN THEIR ACADEMIC PROGRESS RATE ELIGIBILITY POINT IN THEIR FINAL TERM OF ENROLLMENT

29%

(18 of 62)

DEPART WITH A CUMULATIVE GPA BELOW 2.50

24%

(15 of 62)

DEPART WITH A GPA ABOVE 3.00

SOURCES: NBAdraft.net and NCAA

Chaminade right out of high school would not be the same Jayson Tatum that was there after a year," Krzyzewski says about his 2016-17 freshman star. "That maturity, the growth as a player, but also his exposure, the marketing aspect that a high-level program gives a youngster. To be quite frank with you, I don't see why the NBA would ever change the age limit. But whatever they do, we'll react."

Krzyzewski remains skeptical that the one-and-done trend has anything to do with the broader challenges facing college basketball. But others point out the immense allure this small yet distinguished group has on agents, apparel companies, investment advisors and others seeking to profit off players' talents. With so much money on the line and only a year to wait, these third parties may be swarming by the time an elite student-athlete steps onto campus. The Commission on College Basketball noted the problems this dynamic causes in its report.

"One-and-done has played a significant role in corrupting and destabilizing college basketball, restricting the freedom of choice of players, and undermining the relationship of college basketball to the mission of higher education," the commission report stated. "Elite high school players with NBA prospects and no interest in a college degree should not be 'forced' to attend college, often for less than a year."

The commission highlighted the improper payments the FBI alleged some third parties made to players and others with influence over them in hopes it would lead to personal financial gain later. The commission's report noted the corruptive impact spans beyond the limited number of probable one-and-done players to include a "small additional group who agents are willing to bet on." With rookies guaranteed a fortune, cheating is a gamble some third-party influencers are willing to take.

The commission predicted that pressure on college basketball would be reduced if elite players were allowed to go pro out of high school once again.

"I think the general feeling is that some of the challenges that come with the current one-and-done rule ... together with the reality that, academically, those prospects are only attending school and making progress toward



The NBA's original age minimum was more strict than today's until Spencer Haywood (above) sued the league in 1971 so he could join the Seattle SuperSonics, owned by Sam Schulman (right, center). The move opened the door for student-athletes to consider a pro career before finishing college. AP IMAGES

their degree for one year, is not consistent with everything else college athletics is about," Gavitt says. "I think the feeling is, it's just time for that progression to happen."

Ask Spencer Haywood about the colloquially called "one-and-done rule," and the 69-year-old will be quick to correct you.

You mean, "The Spencer Haywood rule?"

Of course, no one has heard the NBA's age restriction referred to by Haywood's name. And that is precisely what pains the NBA veteran most. His fight 50 years ago that originally opened the doors for college players to leave for the NBA seems to have been forgotten.

But to fully understand how the NBA's current rule came to be in 2005, you must turn

back the pages of history to when the league's rule required players to wait not one, but four years after their high school graduation date before turning professional.

In the 1960s, Haywood was ahead of his time in more ways than one. At 18, with his chiseled 6-foot-8 frame, broad shoulders and thick legs, he was already a "fully developed man," he says. He attributes his matured hand-eye coordination and strength to years spent picking cotton as a child with his family members, sharecroppers who made \$2 a day working the fields around Silver City, Mississippi. College coaches had been eyeing the budding basketball star, who learned to play with a ball his mom crafted from cotton and a croker sack.

In 1968, the 19-year-old Haywood became the youngest player to make a U.S. Olympic



basketball team, leading the Americans to a gold medal in Mexico City and setting a scoring record that stood for 44 years (broken by — who else? — Durant). A student at a junior college at the time, Haywood transferred to the University of Detroit and led the NCAA in rebounding while scoring 32 points per game as a sophomore during the 1968-69 season.

Then the American Basketball Association, the NBA's rival league with more lenient entry rules, came knocking. Haywood signed with the Denver Rockets, the promise of earning immediate money for his mom, still laboring in the cotton fields, impossible to pass up.

But when Haywood grew disgruntled during an ABA contract dispute, an NBA owner swooped in. Ignoring the NBA's four-year rule, Sam Schulman signed an underaged Haywood to his Seattle SuperSonics, setting the stage for a legal fight.

Inspired by athletes who were taking stands of their own — including fellow 1968 Olympians John Carlos and Tommie Smith — the 21-year-old Haywood greeted the challenge. Haywood v. National Basketball Association volleyed through the courts during a tumultuous season filled with injunctions and appeals. It ultimately landed with the Supreme Court, which voted 7-2 in Haywood's favor.

Haywood was legally a SuperSonic. Soon after, the NBA instituted a rule that players had

Kevin Garnett ignited the prep-to-pro trend in 1995 when he was drafted by the Minnesota Timberwolves. ANN HEISENFELT / AP IMAGES

“To be quite frank with you, I don’t see why the NBA would ever change the age limit. But whatever they do, we’ll react.”

Mike Krzyzewski | Duke men's basketball coach

to show “hardship” in order to join the league early, though the rule was difficult to administer and was abolished in 1976. For the next 30 years, the NBA doors were open for college students and 18-year-old high school stars to walk through.

Some of the best players in history would take advantage of the early entry rule, typically leaving college after two or three years. But players skipping college altogether and jumping straight to the NBA? It wasn't until McDonald's All-American Kevin Garnett tested the waters and was drafted fifth by the Minnesota Timberwolves that the prep-to-pro era truly began.

“I think there had sort of been an assumption that it was really too hard for a player to do, until Kevin Garnett tried it,” says Russ Granik, a sports executive who served as the NBA's deputy commissioner for 22 years. “He was almost instantly a productive player and very soon a star.”

After Garnett came Kobe Bryant and Jermaine O'Neal in 1996, then Tracy McGrady in '97. Each went on to an All-Star career. Owners began clamoring for the next young star as NBA scouts filed into high school gymnasiums. No owner wanted to miss out on the next Garnett or Bryant, and every elite player hoped to be them.

“When you're projected to be a top-10, possibly top-five (pick), you don't want to sacrifice (it by) going to college at that point, or going anywhere else, because you could get injured or anything else could happen,” says Jonathan Bender, who was picked fifth in the 1999 draft out of high school. “So you want to take that opportunity when it's presented.”

But the landing to any leap is unpredictable, no matter your talent level, and Bender became one of the early examples. He had a strong NBA

debut, becoming the first prep-to-pro player to score in double figures in his first pro game for the Indiana Pacers before that potential dissipated. Persistent knee trouble caused him to step away from basketball at age 25, making him one of several highly anticipated high school draftees to underachieve in the league, including 2001's No. 1 overall pick Kwame Brown. Owners began reconsidering whether 18-year-olds were truly ready for the rigors of the NBA. They wanted more intel to keep them from betting big on the next bust.

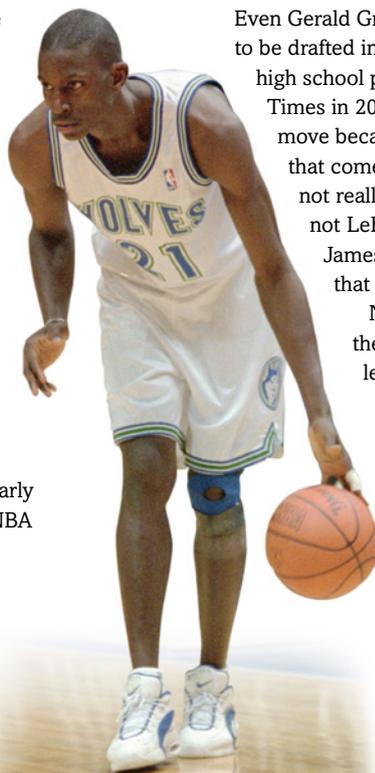
“A draft pick in the NBA is extremely valuable,” Granik says. “If I'm a general manager and I have to make that pick, I'd like to be able to see the player play in more than only high school games and some AAU games. You wanted to give teams a chance to at least see them play in college at a high level, or the European leagues, or a minor league — somewhere where they weren't playing just against kids.”

So, in a hotly contested negotiation over a new collective bargaining agreement, the NBA and the players association agreed in 2005 to add in that one-year buffer. In theory, requiring players to wait a year after high school before entering the draft would give them time to prepare for the NBA, and help NBA teams make better decisions. As a business move, it made sense.

Even Gerald Green, the first prep player to be drafted in the last draft that allowed high school players, told the New York Times in 2005: “I guess it was a smart move because there's a lot of players that come out of high school that are not really prepared. Everybody's not LeBron James. I'm not LeBron James. ... There's a lot of players that have to get developed.”

No one predicted the impact the rule would have on the college game.

In the 13 years that have passed, the NCAA has seen a wealth of future NBA stars funnel



Continued on page 62

through its ranks for one year. Anthony Davis. Kyrie Irving. Derrick Rose. John Wall. Durant.

Many fans enjoy the opportunity to see potential All-Stars develop in the college game, led by legendary coaches, even if just for one year. Others question how their obvious basketball focus jibes with the education-centric model of college sports. If they are only using college as a pit stop on their route to a professional basketball career, are they taking their college coursework seriously? What can they gain from just one year in school?

Then there are those who fall somewhere in the middle of the polarizing debate, those who don't see the one-and-done era as all good or all bad. They believe in giving 18-year-olds the opportunity to choose whether they want to go to the NBA, and they believe in the importance of a college education.

Kentucky coach John Calipari falls into this group. Since 2010, nearly a quarter of all one-and-done players (25) have come through Kentucky, by far the most of any other coach. To Calipari, that stat is simply a byproduct of going after the best of the best, whether they stay for one or four years. It's no secret when he's recruiting an Anthony Davis what the teenager's end goal is, and Calipari says his staff is upfront with the player from the beginning.

"We don't promise them playing time, shots or how long they will be in school," Calipari said via email. "Everyone is on their own timetable, and we tell that to each and every kid and family. For some kids, that means one year; for others, that means two, three or four. But our focus is on putting our kids in the best position to succeed at that next level, whether that's in the NBA or some other field, when the time comes for that."

Still, NCAA research shows men's college basketball players harbor elevated expectations of playing professionally: Just under three-quarters of Division I men's basketball student-athletes think they will play professionally in the

NBA, the G League or overseas, not to mention half of Division II and 27 percent of Division III. The truth is, just under 48 percent in Division I and fewer than 1 in 5 overall will do it.

Those individual goals, particularly among players eyeing a short stay, can at times be at odds with the overall team focus, says Jim Haney, executive director of the National Association of Basketball Coaches. "I think for the vast majority of kids coming in, they really have not learned in high school or nonscholastic basketball how to play hard within the team concept because they're just better than the other kids," Haney says. "A lot of times, kids, their idea of playing hard is, 'I'm going to shoot more, or I'm going to drive to the basket more.' When in fact, that's an individual focus and not a team focus.

"It takes five men on the court working together to be really a productive team."

Even if their goal is a pro career, the perception that it's coming at the expense of their academics doesn't appear accurate. In fact, NCAA data for men's basketball student-athletes from 2013 to 2017 show that, on average, one-and-done players had a cumulative GPA of 2.68 at the time of their departure from college. Nearly 80 percent earned their Academic Progress Rate eligibility point in their final term of enrollment.

Michael Stone, the director of academic services and an academic counselor for Kentucky men's basketball, says that if a student-athlete only becomes a better basketball player during his time at Kentucky, then Kentucky has failed as an institution. The Wildcats' APR score has placed them in the top 10 percent of Division I men's basketball teams for the past three seasons.

"Too many people want to simplify and say, 'They're a one-and-done athlete,' which means they must lack in the educational realm, which is totally untrue," Stone said via email. "Look at someone like Karl-Anthony Towns or John Wall, who is coming back to school to get his degree. I would put those two guys against anyone."

Haney adds that one positive unintended effect of the NBA's age minimum is the way academics in high school has become a bigger focus for the most elite basketball players, who now see college as a part of their journeys. In their minds, Haney says, to follow in Durant's footsteps, you first need to meet the NCAA academic eligibility requirements and get into college.

As it turns out, one year can make a strong impression. Plenty of one-and-done players have publicly stated the benefits they've



Kevin Durant's mother, Wanda Durant, has cheered his success on his way to two NBA titles and nine NBA All-Star teams. Durant turned pro after his freshman season at Texas. JACK PLUNKETT / AP IMAGES

gained during their short time in college, from time management to emotional maturity to an appreciation for education. Calipari points to Willie Cauley-Stein, who upon arriving on campus told his coach, "I hate school." But by the time he left Kentucky, the Hall of Fame coach and the student-athlete were engaged in a book club. Cauley-Stein stayed three years in college before turning pro, and the rapid rate in which he grew to love learning remains an example of what's possible.

"We've had one-year players that have returned to their campus on a regular basis, that have donated to their institutions, that have stayed in close contact with their coaches and former teammates and have really embraced being a part of the community there," the NCAA's Gavitt says. "Even if they're not a graduate of the institution, it's still a large part of their lives."

Despite the value they see in even a short stint in college, Calipari and many of his peers have been outspoken about their belief that the NBA should reopen its doors to 18-year-olds.

"My biggest thing is, are we doing right by the kids?" Calipari said via email. "I'm not worried about this notion of, 'Let's do what's best for the game!' Come on. Let's make it about these kids and everything else will take care of itself."

In June, the NBA sent a memo to teams indicating that a change to the age minimum would not come earlier than the 2021 draft. Silver has noted in public statements that the next step is to "sit down with the players association." Any change to the rule would need to be collectively bargained.

In August, the NBA, the NCAA and the NBPA announced an agreement that will increase support of USA Basketball and expand the number of elite youth players on its Junior National Team to more than 80. The collaboration strengthens an existing developmental program by adding life skills and health and wellness components led by doctors, athletic trainers and other experts. It also allows NBA officials and teams to evaluate young players against elite competition well before they enter the draft. The first class to complete the entire Junior National Team program will graduate high school in 2022.

"We've been looking to get more involved in elite youth basketball for several years,"

Kathy Behrens, the NBA's president for social responsibility and player programs, told ESPN. "We really have a sense of urgency around it. This is exactly what we've been saying we need to do."

Is this the first step in ending the NBA's age restriction? And if so, what might that mean for the one-and-done era?

Maybe it would yield a cleaner game by removing third-party influences and re-emphasizing education in the NCAA's premier sport. Maybe fans would miss seeing the best of the best on the college stage, but would enjoy seeing talented players develop over the course of their college careers. The change would likely not have a significant impact on March Madness, experts say, because traditionally teams that have excelled in the NCAA men's basketball tournament have been known more

Jordan, Larry Bird, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Oscar Robinson."

Players like LeBron James won't have a tie to college, and "that's unfortunate on some level," Gavitt adds. "But that's OK on another level because that's just how the game has evolved."

Though momentum seems to be building toward the NBA reversing its age minimum, there is still no clear "right answer" that fits every player. No standardized playbook nor surefire route to guarantee every young star's success.

Even the man who opened the door to early entry in the NBA holds an unexpected stance on the issue. In 2014, Haywood wrote an op-ed for the New York Daily News with the headline: "NCAA players are not ready for

"I'm not worried about this notion of, 'Let's do what's best for the game!' Come on. Let's make it about these kids and everything else will take care of itself."

John Calipari | Kentucky men's basketball coach

for their teamwork and experience than their one-year freshman star. Last year's Final Four did not feature a single one-and-done player.

Or maybe, even if the NBA bumps down its age limit, one-and-done will never be done. "There will still be kids coming to college who will leave after one year," Krzyzewski says. "So everyone who says the one-and-done will be done, they're completely wrong."

Whatever happens, perspective is important: While one-and-done players garner national attention, they make up a tiny sliver of college basketball. Each year, there are about 5,500 other Division I men's basketball players who could fill the void.

"Look, in a perfect world, I would love to see the best basketball players play college basketball," Gavitt says. "Ideally for four years. If not, for as many as they can be a part of it. But that's very idealistic in 2019. The reality is, the game has changed."

If a prep-to-pro trend emerges in the future, Gavitt believes it will inevitably alter the narrative of the college game. "The greatest players in the history of the game to this point have been a part of (college)," he says. "Michael

NBA after just one season."

The Hall of Famer believes his basketball career benefited from his time in college, that he would not have been ready for the challenges of the NBA after only his freshman year. He thinks the path he took would work well for others hoping to follow in his professional basketball shoes. "I know it's weird," Haywood says, recognizing his view catches people by surprise.

But of course, perspectives can evolve just like the game.

While advocates for a change focus on the importance of free choice for 18-year-olds talented enough to make it in the big league, concern will remain for those who bank on making it — and miss. Will some teens lose their focus academically in high school, expecting to bypass college and go pro? Will they float through high school without a backup plan? Haney, with the basketball coaches association, worries about the ones who could fall through the cracks.

Any change to the rule would trigger a new set of positives and negatives, he predicts. "I'm not sure there is a 'right thing,'" Haney says. "Every action has a reaction." 