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HIGHLY RATED RECRUITING CLASS COULD BOOST HARVARD BASKETBALL

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CAMBRIDGE, Mass. (AP) -- No one asks the high school valedictorian why she chose to go to Harvard. Or the concert cellist, or the science wiz.

But when suburban Atlanta high school basketball star Chris Lewis picked the Ivy League school over offers from more traditional Southeastern Conference and Atlantic Coast Conference powers, he felt like he had to justify his decision.



AP Photo/John Raoux

"People who know a little less about my personality and what I consider important, I found myself explaining to them a lot," said Lewis, a 6-foot-8 power forward who is No. 58 on ESPN's ranking of high school prospects.

"They don't understand how good of a situation Harvard has placed in front of me," Lewis, the son of former NFL linebacker Mo Lewis, said after he was accepted into Harvard's Class of 2020. "They gave me an opportunity I just couldn't refuse."

The alma mater of five U.S. presidents, dozens of Nobel Laureates and a handful of foreign royalty, Harvard is the oldest university in the country and one of the most prestigious academic institutions in the world.

And, since basketball coach Tommy Amaker arrived on campus in 2007, the school has been moving up in a different kind of ranking.

Lewis leads an incoming class that is rated No. 12 by ESPN's Recruiting Nation website - that's 12th among all of the basketball programs in the nation, ahead of scholarship-granting, NCAA championship-winning schools like Indiana, Syracuse and UNLV. While recruiting success doesn't always translate to victories on the court, the Crimson appear poised for more than just a sixth straight Ivy League title.

"Anything can happen here," Amaker said. "That doesn't exclude basketball, or just include engineering or finance. We just feel like that's something that absolutely reverberates through our whole campus."

Though it is known more for its academics than sports teams, Harvard in fact has the largest athletic department in the nation, with 42 varsity teams split evenly among men's and women's. The school has won 141 national championships - many were in the 19th Century, and almost all in non-revenue sports like squash, crew and fencing.

Still, the Crimson had never won a conference title in men's basketball before hanging their first banner in 2011. They have now won five in a row, and twice they have advanced in the NCAA Tournament by beating a higher-seeded first-round opponent.

"Harvard as a basketball name is not what it was when I first got there," said Charlotte Hornets point guard Jeremy Lin, the most successful NBA player to graduate from the school. "It's much bigger in the college basketball world. People understand that now."

Coupled with the school's academic cachet, the recent success has allowed Amaker to recruit not just smart kids who play basketball, but supremely talented players who can also get top grades. Instead of recruiting against the other Ivies, Harvard is competing against some of the top basketball programs in the nation.



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"A lot of times you are recruiting within that box. We've tried to look outside of that and present this option to kids that maybe wouldn't have thought about it," said Amaker, a former Duke star who has also coached at Michigan and Seton Hall.



"The brand of Harvard, as we all know, is incredibly powerful. Their families realize, 'You mean he has a chance to go to Harvard?' It's a powerful force that people get behind in communities that would ordinarily have thought that this would have been off-limits."

PHOTO GALLERY

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Men's College Basketball

Joining Lewis in the Class of 2020 is Robert Baker Jr., a 6-foot-9 forward from Woodstock, Georgia, who is 93rd in the ESPN top 100. A third recruit given four out of five stars by the recruiting website, Bryce Aikin, is a point guard from Randolph, New Jersey.

Seth Towns, a 6-7 forward from Columbus, Ohio, picked Harvard over his hometown Ohio State Buckeyes and Michigan. Justin Bassey, a 6-5 forward, is from Denver. Henry Welsh, a 6-9 center, and 6-2 point guard Christian Juzang, are from the Los Angeles area.

Bassey was one of the first to commit, and he followed the news as others - most of whom he met on their official campus visit - fell into line. He knew where the recruiting class was ranked and that, combined with Harvard's recent success, convinced him he could reach his athletic goals there.

"With that tradition, I felt like I wasn't really missing out on any basketball," Bassey said.

Bassey also considered Gonzaga and Vanderbilt, as well as Ivy rival Cornell. Academics were always the top priority, something he picked up from parents who have a half-dozen post-graduate degrees between them.

"For basketball, he could have gone to any (top) school to play," his father, Morgan Bassey, said after Justin was accepted into Harvard earlier this month. "Education was everything for us. ... When Harvard comes, you can't go wrong with education."

Lewis' father, former New York Jets linebacker Mo Lewis, is best known in these parts for knocking Patriots quarterback Drew Bledsoe out of action and commencing the Tom Brady era in New England. Chris Lewis is averaging 18 points, 10 rebounds and four assists for his high school team this year.

He also has a 4.0 grade point average - straight A's - and a desire to be an engineer, so Amaker had to lure him away from not just Georgia Tech and Notre Dame but also M.I.T. During the recruiting process, Lewis asked coaches not just about the basketball program but how much the team's game and practice schedules would interfere with classes, lab work and internships.

"How easy is it for players to be successful academically?" said Lewis, who learned that Ivy League teams play most of their games on weekends. "That was very important to me."

It's also very important to Harvard.

The team's success has revitalized a basketball program that had never had much, drawing professors and school president Drew Gilpin Faust to the games and even spawning plans to upgrade the intimate but barebones Lavietes Pavilion where they are played.

But Harvard will always be Harvard, and Amaker knows the basketball team will always have to bend to the school's academic mission - and not the other way around. In 2008, the school was accused of recruiting violations; it acknowledged one secondary violation and self-imposed limits for one recruiting cycle.

"There is no question that there hasn't been any back door," Amaker said. "There is no compromising; there is no lowering of standards. That's not what we do here, in any form or fashion, for any sport or any other part of our community.

"That's the beauty of being here at Harvard. Everyone who's here deserves to be here."

AP news researcher Barbara Sambriski and freelancer Clay Bailey contributed to this report.

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