

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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How Do You Make a Basketball Star?

Fifty miles apart in Indiana, Thomas Bryant and Myles Turner are similar developing stars on completely different paths.



Indiana's Thomas Bryant celebrates during the second half of an NCAA college basketball game against Wisconsin. PHOTO: DARRON CUMMINGS/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By **CRAIG FEHRMAN**

Updated Nov. 7, 2016 7:25 p.m. ET

Bloomington, Ind.

Last summer, Thomas Bryant, the star sophomore for Indiana University's men's basketball team, spent a lot of time by himself.

In the mornings, he studied English with a tutor in the lavish study hall built under his campus's football stadium in Bloomington, Ind. "It was a hard class," Bryant says.

Afterward, he moved to IU's even more lavish basketball practice facility, Cook Hall, for a different kind of learning. Alone or with a student-manager, he practiced his post-up footwork or his three-point shot.

About 50 miles north, another young big man—Myles Turner, the second-year center for the Indiana Pacers—had his own summer routine. He would wake around 10 a.m.; eat under the guidance of a personal chef; and then work with a rotating cast of Pacers' coaches.

Bryant and Turner have come up with different answers to a core question facing NBA front offices, college sports junkies, and above all talented young basketball players: Where's the best place to get better at basketball—in college or in the NBA?

Bryant and Turner strike similar profiles. Both are just under 7 feet tall, with freakish wingspans. Both can score inside and out, a valuable skill for modern basketball bigs. Turner was born in 1996, Bryant in 1997.



Myles Turner of the Indiana Pacers dunks the ball in overtime during the game against the Dallas Mavericks on Oct. 26.
PHOTO: ANDY LYONS/GETTY IMAGES

But while Bryant returned to IU for his sophomore season, Turner went pro after only one year at the University of Texas.

The NBA's age limit means that most players go to college for at least one year. But after that they must weigh many factors. Another college season might guarantee crunchtime minutes and hands-on coaching. But a jump to the NBA will create more time for basketball and certainly more money—not just in the initial paycheck, but in the quicker path to a second, larger contract.

Turner admits that he struggled under Texas's strict system, with its rigid plays and established upperclassmen. It didn't help that he came in as the country's second-ranked recruit. "Guys were saying you're the next this or the next that," he says. "It gets to your head." Turner fit in better as his single collegiate season went along, but he didn't feel like it was making him a better player. "I had a hard time adjusting," he says.

Things have gone smoother with the Pacers, where Turner enjoys more freedom on the court and in his off-season regimen. He has emerged as a young star thanks to his last-to-leave-practice drive. "He spent the entire summer here," head coach Nate McMillan says.

Turner remains skinny, in part because of a late growth spurt. He does not enjoy lifting weights and jokes that once he retires he'll never set foot in a weight room again. But for now he works hard. "He's gotten stronger in every area," says Shawn Windle, the Pacers' strength and conditioning coach.

The other place Turner works is on the court. Rookies often ride the bench, and many of them hire their own basketball-focused coaches to drill with outside of games. "Especially the one-and-done guys get their own trainer," Turner says.

Turner has been lucky—he already starts. But he's also lucky in that his team is paying more attention to player development. The Pacers recently hired David McClure from the Spurs to focus on this area.

This summer, McClure and Popeye Jones, the team's big man specialist, worked hours each day with Turner, refining his individual post moves and his outside shot.

Jones often showed Turner video clips to illustrate not just what to do but why to do it. ("He's a millennial," Jones says.) But Turner's efforts are paying off. "He doesn't want to be good," Jones says. "He wants to be great."

‘This program is based on now and later. We want to win now but we want you to win later.’

—Indiana strength coach Lyonel Anderson

While Bryant shares the same desire, he decided a second year of college was the best way for him to achieve it. “I knew halfway through last season I was coming back,” he says. “I knew there were key things I needed to work on.”

The NCAA has made it somewhat easier for players to stay in school. A 2014 tweak to its “meals incidental to participation” rule has allowed schools to provide more food to their student-athletes. At Cook Hall, players can find Greek yogurt and fresh green smoothies.

Most important, it allows coaches to actually work with players over the summer, which they were banned by the NCAA from doing before 2012.



Indiana center Thomas Bryant, center, warms up with teammates during a practice prior to the team's first-round NCAA Tournament on March 16. PHOTO: CHARLIE NEIBERGALL/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Now coaches get eight weeks of interaction, with a maximum of eight hours per week, two of which can be “skill-related instruction.” Even incoming freshmen can participate so long as they’re enrolled in summer classes.

IU head coach Tom Crean uses his eight weeks in June and July. His program prioritizes developing NBA talent; the court in Cook Hall includes both the college and NBA three-point lines.

During this summer’s “skill-related instruction,” Crean frequently put Bryant with the guards and not the big men, to improve his quickness. In the players’ downtime in May and August, the program still guides them. IU’s strength coach, Lyonel Anderson, sent each player home with a detailed packet of voluntary exercises. One was titled “Grind or Get Ate,” and for each day it specified the movements and reps—even the type of surface he wanted the players to run on.

Anderson says that IU’s coaches always think about the next level. “This program is based on now and later,” he says. “We want to win now but we want you to win later.”

He points to their emphasis on three-minute runs, a drill where players sprint up and down the floor as many times as possible in three minutes—and a drill NBA teams often

use to measure prospects. Yogi Ferrell, a recent (and speedy) IU star, made it 27 3/4 court lengths during a workout with the Phoenix Suns.

When Bryant first came to IU, he could manage only 22 1/2 lengths. Now, after his second summer of hard work, he's up to 26 1/2 lengths. That endurance will help him score fast-break points for the Hoosiers, but it will also impress future NBA evaluators.

Turner, who enrolled early at Texas and experienced part of a summer there, remembers his college workouts acutely. "You definitely work a lot harder in the off-season in college than in the NBA," he says. "They're trying to kill you. They're trying to prove a point."

But for an NBA-minded coach like Crean, the point, at least in part, is that good summer habits should last. "I've rarely coached a player who went on to the next level who didn't have the desire to be in the gym," he says. "I think that starts in college."

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