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COLLEGE BASKETBALL

The NBA Might Have Ended College Basketball as We Know It

Top high-school prospect Jalen Green is the first player to join the NBA's redesigned 'professional pathway program.' The move could be the start of a talent drain in the college game.



LaMelo Ball joined Illawarra as part of the NBL's Next Stars program.

PHOTO: RICK RYCROFT/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By *Laine Higgins* and *Ben Cohen*

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Jalen Green, one of the best high-school basketball players in the country, always planned to reveal his post-high school plans on social media in dramatic fashion. It wasn't until recently, however, that his plans didn't involve at least one year of college.

Green, the No. 3 player in the 2020 class from Merced, Calif., [announced via Instagram](#) on Thursday that he would skip college and sign a contract that pays him more than \$500,000 to play for a developmental team sponsored by the NBA in California. That makes him the first player to join the league's redesigned "professional pathway program," instead of heading to a school like Memphis for one year before entering the draft.

What this means is that the NBA now appears to be competing with college basketball for elite talent.

It might turn out to be the most significant move for the college game since the league banned players from leaping to the pros from high school, essentially forcing them into freshman dormitories, if the G-League program results in a talent drain on campuses. Kevin Durant, Anthony Davis and Zion Williamson might not have played in the NCAA tournament if they had been allowed to play in the NBA—or if they could make a salary that was much greater than the value of a college scholarship.

In the years since the NBA raised the minimum draft age to 19 in 2006, those kinds of prospects essentially had two paths to becoming pros: play at least one year of college basketball before declaring for the NBA Draft or pack their bags and move to a faraway country for a gap year.

Playing abroad came with the potential of a big payday, but it was not without its downsides, including loneliness, injury risk and the realization that an 18-year-old sensation is not as talented as he believed himself to be.

There were several players who went abroad for one year before returning to the NBA, most notably Brandon Jennings in 2008 and Emmanuel Mudiay in 2014, but most took brief detours at Duke, Kentucky, Kansas and the college basketball blue bloods that became one-and-done factories.

That dynamic started to change with LaMelo Ball, who is expected to be one of the top picks in the 2020 draft. Ball, whose oldest brother, Lonzo, plays for the NBA's New Orleans Pelicans, decamped for Lithuania in 2017 at age 15 with his older brother LiAngelo, then 18, who had been suspended from the UCLA team for a shoplifting incident in China.

LaMelo Ball's foray into foreign basketball coincided with the rollout of a new developmental program from the NBA. In 2018, the league unveiled a "professional pathway program" that offered high-schoolers salaries of up to \$125,000 to spend a year in the developmental G-League before declaring for the draft. The idea was good but the incentives weren't right: only one teenager—Latavious Williams—decided against joining a college roster for the G-League.

Meanwhile, the National Basketball League of Australia began offering precocious players more money and a more direct pipeline to the NBA through a so-called "Next Stars" program, which enticed promising young NBA-bound players to move Down Under by paying them a bonus of \$68,400 annually and covering their living expenses and travel on top of their salaries, which could be as high as mid-six figures. The program lured the younger Ball and R.J. Hampton, another star prospect who is expected to be a top pick in this year's draft. Ball signed with the Illawarra Hawks and was so promising that NBA scouts flew around the world to watch him.

The NBA's league office took notice of this shift in the market. When initial attempts to get rid of the so-called "one-and-done" rule made little progress with the players' union, league executives brainstormed another way for players to improve their draft stock while making enough money to skip college.

What emerged was a one-year developmental program for players to transition from living at home with their parents to earning millions of dollars as hotshot athletes in the country's largest cities—all while training with each other and playing against G-League teams and foreign national teams.

The snag with the old system was that it incentivized NBA teams to develop players for their competitors. Even if Zion Williamson had jumped from high school to the G-League, his G-League team wouldn't have controlled his rights going forward. That meant his coaches would have been making him better for a rival NBA team to benefit.

The league believes this system, in which the players belong to an unaffiliated team, is a solution to that problem of warped incentives.

But the high-school seniors would also be assuming new risks. There is always a chance they suffer a devastating injury that cripples their draft appeal, and now they won't have the fallback plan of a college degree. The pure competition of college basketball will be difficult to replicate in what amounts to a G-League scrimmage. And playing at Duke for six months offered a marketing boost to Williamson that made him the subject of a bidding war among sneaker companies when he turned pro.



R.J. Hampton is expected to be a top pick in this year's draft.

PHOTO: BRANDON DILL/ASSOCIATED PRESS

The recruiting class of 2020 is the first to benefit from the NBA opening its wallet. In addition to Green, the G-League will feature No. 13 prospect Isaiah Todd. The forward had initially made a

verbal commitment to Michigan in October 2019, but announced his intention to play professional basketball instead on Tuesday.

As of Thursday, the beginning of the late signing period in college basketball for the recruiting class of 2020, two more players ranked in the top 100 by 247sports.com announced they would join the NBA's new developmental program. Makur Maker, the 6'11" brother to Detroit Pistons' center Thon, is expected to eschew college as well.

The program got an unexpected boost from the coronavirus outbreak, which has thrown the sports world into disarray and raised questions about whether there will be a college basketball season in 2020-21. Top prospects might not be able to count on playing NCAA basketball next year, but they at least can count on an NBA-funded salary.

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