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THE JOURNAL REPORT: NCAA BASKETBALL TOURNAMENT

The BMOG Strategy

The secret to winning the NCAA championship: pin your hopes on the star

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Lebron James. Amare Stoudemire. Tyson Chandler. Eddy Curry. Dwight Howard. Sebastian Telfair. These are just a few of the players who won't be playing in this year's NCAA Final Four, because they're busy banging bodies with Shaquille O'Neal, Tim Duncan and Jason Kidd in the NBA.

Since Kevin Garnett made the jump in 1995, no fewer than 29 top high-school seniors have skipped college altogether and headed straight to the pros. That list includes eight players taken in the first 20 picks of last year's NBA draft.



¹ See the full **NCAA Basketball Tournament**² report. Plus, download **men's**³ and **women's**⁴ brackets.

And if you want to assemble an All-Skipped-College team, you need go no further than the NBA All-Star Game, where Kobe Bryant, Tracy McGrady, Jermaine O'Neal, and Rashard Lewis joined Messrs. James, Stoudemire and Garnett.

So how are the top college programs compensating for this draining of the talent pool? One option might be to recruit players who may not have NBA-level talent, but make up for it by sticking around for four years, learning the fundamentals of solid team play.

It's a nice theory, but not necessarily the road to a championship. Indeed, a look at the college title winners since the exodus to the NBA began shows teams with weaker stats in the areas long associated with such solid fundamentals and team-oriented play: The three-point shooting percentage has slipped to 37.2% from 39.4%, the free-throw percentage to 69.2% from 71.8%, and assists to 16.9 per game from 19.9.




AP Photo/Bob Child
 Emeka Okafor in college days

Counting on One

What does seem to work is another approach -- simply get the Big Man on Campus, the best player who's actually willing to sign a letter of commitment to attend the school, and let the chips fall where they may. That has been a more successful strategy by far. Since the Garnett Factor became a force to be reckoned with in 1997, championship college teams have become more, not less, dependent on one or two top players. From 1989 to 1996, title winners got 38.5% of their points from their top two scorers. Since 1997, that number has increased to 41.4%.

And four of the five last NCAA champions have seen their BMOG go on to become the top college player chosen in the NBA draft. The 2000 Michigan State Spartans sported Jason Richardson, who would be the first collegiate player chosen in the 2001 draft. The 2001 Duke Blue Devils were led by Jay Williams, who would be the second overall pick in the 2002 draft. The 2003 Syracuse Orangemen won it all largely thanks to Carmelo Anthony, the third pick in the 2003 draft. And last year's University of Connecticut Huskies were led by Emeka Okafor, who was the second player to greet NBA Commissioner David Stern on draft day last spring. The BMOG trend is increasingly strong: From 1980 to 2000, only five of the NBA's top collegiate draft picks had won an NCAA title before joining the pros, while Messrs. Richardson,

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Williams, Anthony and Okafor represent four in a row who did.

Domination and Opportunity

Why is a BMOG so important to a school's championship run? Basketball is the sport in which one individual can make the most difference. The great player makes up 20% of the lineup, he can play almost the entire game, every game, and can take as many shots as the coach will allow. When the defense uses a double-team to try to stop him, it simply creates opportunities for his teammates.

And for the strong high-school players who aren't quite ready for the NBA, college now provides an even better opportunity to show they've got game. With many top high-school peers moving directly to the pros, it gives the later-blooming player an even greater chance to dominate in college. In short, today's answer to Hakeem Olajuwon may no longer need to worry about being outplayed by a post-millennial Patrick Ewing.

The other thing to remember is that college basketball recruiting is like free agency in professional sports: Schools have to impress the player rather than the other way around. Top players can all but write their own tickets, and they've become increasingly savvy. They're choosing programs where they have a chance to win a championship.

Indeed, the top programs are sporting more than one big man on campus. Almost all of those recent top picks were paired with remarkable supporting players, which confounded those aforementioned double-teams.

Connecticut's Mr. Okafor played alongside guard Ben Gordon, who was chosen right after him with the third pick in the draft. Syracuse's Mr. Anthony was paired with Hakim Warrick, who could be a top-10 pick in this year's NBA draft. And during his three years at Duke, Mr. Williams shared the court with two other top-six NBA draft picks -- Shane Battier and Mike Dunleavy Jr.

And players surely understand that playing on a championship team can be a smart career move. Mr. Okafor and Mr. Anthony clearly solidified their already lofty draft status with their standout Final Four performances.

Early Prospects

So which BMOG will make an impact in this year's Final Four?

An early look at the NBA scouting suggests that there's no consensus top collegian. Wake Forest point guard Chris Paul, Utah center Andrew Bogut, forward Rudy Gay of Connecticut, Illinois guard Deron Williams and Pittsburgh forward Chris Taft have earned some early support, while the University of North Carolina is replete with potential pros -- guards Raymond Felton and Rashad McCants and freshman forward Marvin Williams.

But history strongly suggests that whichever team emerges from St. Louis with the championship is likely to do so because of a future multimillionaire on its roster.

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Stellar Impact

With many top high-school prospects skipping college altogether, snagging that rare collegiate superstar can propel a team to a national title. Four of the past five Final Four winners included a player who would be the first collegian chosen in the NBA draft.

FINAL FOUR YEAR	TEAM	PLAYER	PCT. OF TEAM POINTS ¹	NBA DRAFT POSITION ²
2004	UConn	Emeka Okafor	21%	1
2003	Syracuse	Carmelo Anthony	28	1
2002	Maryland	Chris Wilcox	14	5
2001	Duke	Jay Williams	24	1
2000	Mich. St.	Jason Richardson	7	1
1999	UConn	Richard Hamilton	26	6

¹For the season. ²Among collegiate players. Draft year is not necessarily the same as Final Four year.
Source: WSJ reporting

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