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## THE JOURNAL REPORT: NCAA BASKETBALL TOURNAMENT

### Way Station

#### Prep schools increasingly prepare players for Division I competition. But do they prepare them for life beyond the game?

By **STEFAN FATSIS**  
 Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL  
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VIRGINIA BEACH, Va. -- Walter Webb, the basketball coach at Coastal Christian Academy, halted practice one day last month to admonish a player for failing to defend his man vigorously. "This isn't high school, son," Mr. Webb said.

Not in the conventional sense it isn't. That's because 12 of the 18 players on Mr. Webb's team at Coastal Christian, a church-operated K-12 school here, already have graduated from high school and don't even have to take classes. The other six are seniors.



1 See the full [NCAA Basketball Tournament](#)<sup>2</sup> report. Plus, download [men's](#)<sup>3</sup> and [women's](#)<sup>4</sup> brackets.

The roster mix is common in a growing sphere of America's sprawling youth basketball machine: private schools that assemble all-star teams of mostly inner-city high-school and, in some cases, postgraduate players. Some of these schools play coast-to-coast schedules of 50 or more games against other private schools, junior colleges and the junior-varsity teams of four-year colleges.

That's three times as many games as public high schools typically play, and twice as many as most colleges. Rosters at nearly every major NCAA Division I men's basketball program -- and at a growing number of women's programs -- are loaded with players who attended private school for at least one year.

At its best, prep basketball, as it is commonly known, is a way for talented but troubled kids to escape bad neighborhoods, correct academic deficiencies and grow more responsible. But critics say some schools function as little more than hoops repositories, placing little if any emphasis on educating their basketball stars, especially postgraduates. Certain preps often show up on transcripts of players who hopscotch from school to school playing high-level basketball despite academic shortcomings.




Stefan Fatsis

**Work Ethic:** Walter Webb says almost all of his players have gone on to college.

"What it's telling kids is, 'I don't have to do anything. I can just go over here and play,'" says Lonnie Blow, the coach at Granby High School, a public school in Norfolk, Va. Instead of being a solution to young athletes' problems, coaches say, such schools are another step in a chain of denial and avoidance. "It's giving them another crutch to lean on," Mr. Blow says.

At the same time, many private schools with sterling academic reputations have had, or recently have added, top-notch basketball programs. The 157-year-old Blair Academy in Blairstown, N.J., sent Luol Deng to Duke University, where he stayed one year before entering the National Basketball Association this season. In 35 years at the no-nonsense Fork Union Military Academy in Fork Union, Va., Fletcher Arritt has coached a dozen future NBA players. The Oak Hill Academy in Mouth of Wilson, Va., is renowned for packing its lineup with All-America high schoolers and funneling them to top college programs.

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## Educational Mission

"Our mission is that [basketball players] get better educated before they step out the door to do anything," says Raphael Chillous, head coach at the South Kent School, a boarding school in South Kent, Conn., which sent a player straight to the NBA last year and is about to send another one.

Blair coach Joe Mantegna worries about the taint from less academically inclined schools. "The college coaches know which places those are," he says. "I'm not sure the public always does."

There are no data on how many Division I basketball players arrive from prep schools, or how many high-school players are attending prep schools as postgraduates. But coaches say more and more established prep schools are recruiting inner-city talent, and more schools that hadn't been well known are luring Division I-caliber players with postgraduate programs.

Part of the reason prep schools have become more attractive for players is a toughening over the past two decades of the National Collegiate Athletic Association's minimum academic requirements for participation in intercollegiate sports. In 1983, the NCAA passed Proposition 48, which required high-school athletes to graduate with a grade-point average of at least 2.0 in 11 core courses and earn a minimum score on the SAT or ACT standardized tests. In 1992, the NCAA increased the number of core courses to 13 and adopted a sliding scale for grades and test scores -- the higher the GPA, the lower the minimum test score.

This fall, the NCAA will increase the number of core courses to 14, and in 2008 it will raise the number to 16. The likely effect: even more students transferring to prep schools because they need extra time and attention to meet the NCAA requirements.

College coaches won't necessarily complain. An additional season of basketball and life experience can make players better bets for lucrative scholarships. "I love it," says Steve DeMeo, an assistant coach at Providence College in Rhode Island. "A year of maturity, they get their academics more in order, they're away from their families. And their basketball is on a higher level."

## 'We Will Win'

Coastal Christian is a prototype of the emerging prep powers. When Mr. Webb was hired in 2000 as coach and athletic director from a private school in Maryland, Coastal Christian was hoping to grow. It had just taken a new name and opened admission beyond members of the nondenominational Rock Church, established in 1968 by a onetime heroin addict and his traveling-evangelist wife. The school occupies two former church buildings across from Rock Church's sprawling, octagonal headquarters, which has pews for 5,200.

Mr. Webb, 34 years old, played professionally in China before turning to coaching. He knew about the changes at Coastal Christian because his former team, Riverdale Baptist School in Upper Marlboro, Md., had played the old Rock Church Academy. (Also, at the time he was dating the school's athletic director, now his wife.) After Mr. Webb was introduced in church, he recalls, he stood up and said, "We will win national championships, we will travel and everyone will know what Coastal Christian is."

Coastal Christian's size and facilities belie Mr. Webb's ambitions. The school has a total of 72 students, just 11 in high school. It no longer has a girls' basketball team or any other sports. The gym is small and dimly lit, the basketball floor uneven. A tiny weight room is crammed with rudimentary equipment. Mr. Webb uses a space heater in his cinder-block office.

The absence of a sports infrastructure or tradition has helped give Mr. Webb a degree of freedom he couldn't have at a traditional school. He has full control over admitting players to his program. He operates summer camps and tournaments at Coastal Christian under the name of his basketball business, Slam City, which also is printed on the school team's uniforms.

## A PREP PLAYER'S JOURNEY TO PROS

Do prep basketball programs help straighten out struggling athletes? Or do they just rent talented players?

The case of Jackie Butler -- a highly recruited, 6-foot-10, 255-pound center from McComb, Miss. -- offers arguments for both conclusions.

While in high school, a probe by the National Collegiate Athletic Association concluded, Mr. Butler received cash, electronics equipment and free travel from a local coach acting as a representative of Auburn University. (Auburn denied a connection, but was put on probation for two years.) In the summer of 2002, before his senior year, Mr. Butler committed to play at Mississippi State University. But he failed to qualify academically under NCAA rules.

In June 2003, Mr. Butler played in the prestigious McDonald's All-America Game for high-school players. That November, he committed to play for the University of Tennessee, pending eligibility, and arrived at Coastal Christian Academy in Virginia Beach, Va. It was his second prep school of the fall.

Coastal Christian's business administrator, Robin Blanchard, the daughter of Rock Church's founders, says the church supported Mr. Webb's plan to bring in postgraduate players because it believed it could help young people. "There wasn't a lot of incentive for us to have a big team," she says. "It's not like you're going to grow a student body off a team."

But the exposure the school has received -- among high-school, college and summer-league coaches, in online prep rankings and scouting sites -- hasn't hurt. This season, Coastal Christian has played in New York, North Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Washington, D.C. The team would be racking up more miles, but bad weather and cancellations have reduced a 58-game schedule to around 40 games.

"Colleges don't get a chance to see you if you play a 20-game season," Mr. Webb says. "The more you play, the better your chances are" of getting noticed by college coaches. In Mr. Webb's first four seasons at Coastal Christian, the team won 162 games and lost 32. This season -- which will extend into May, well after almost all high school teams are done -- the team was 26-6 through Wednesday.

### 'Apples and Oranges'

Initially, Mr. Webb attracted players from coastal Virginia and Maryland. Local schools, public and private, canceled games against the team because of his use of postgraduate players. "You're talking apples and oranges," says Larry Smith, athletic director at the Portsmouth Christian School in Portsmouth, Va. "Our kids are going to class seven periods a day and doing all the things kids in a normal situation are doing."

Indeed, as a group Coastal Christian's players aren't typical high-school students. Mr. Webb says almost all of this year's postgraduate players have met the NCAA eligibility standards. Six of them live in a house owned by Mr. Webb. The postgrads receive tutoring and SAT or ACT test preparation, if necessary, but have no class requirements. "Basically, it's basketball," point guard Antione Paige says.

Mr. Paige not only has graduated from high school but has attended college. The 18-year-old from Chesapeake, Va., spent the fall semester at Division II Mount Olive College in Mount Olive, N.C., but says he didn't practice with the basketball team. He joined Coastal Christian in January in hopes of landing a Division I scholarship. "Prep school is basically showcase," he says. "There's more exposure."

Coastal Christian's roster fluctuates with transfers, in and out, during the season. (Mr. Webb says he doesn't recruit players.) For instance, after the start of the academic year, Mr. Webb added a senior who wouldn't have been eligible to play for his Norfolk high school. Another Coastal Christian player is on his fifth secondary school, four of them private.

Mr. Webb's two best players -- 6-foot-6 Terrance Woodbury of Norfolk and 6-foot-10 Leo Criswell of Piper, Kan. -- came to Coastal Christian even though they were on track to meet the NCAA requirements at their public schools and already had committed to major Division I programs, the universities of Georgia and Missouri, respectively. The players wanted better competition. "Everybody on your public-school team is not that good," Mr. Woodbury says.

Coastal Christian's tuition is around \$5,000 a year. The school says it offers no scholarships, but Mr. Webb raises money, largely from church members, to help players who can't afford it.

### Pragmatic Approach

Mr. Webb says his players learn academic, athletic and personal discipline. Small classes, for those who take them, offer closer teacher attention. The team has nightly curfews. Rules include no cursing, no drinking, no drugs, no smoking and no sex. Postgraduates have to wear Coastal Christian's tie-and-slacks uniform during test-prep sessions, and the school

Mr. Butler scored 27 points per game and led Coastal Christian to a 46-9 record. But he didn't become academically eligible there, and it's not clear he intended to try. Mr. Butler says he already had decided to turn pro when he got to the prep school, the commitment to Tennessee notwithstanding. "I was coming out anyway," he says. Ignoring lukewarm ratings from pro scouts, Mr. Butler in early 2004 entered the National Basketball Association draft.

Walter Webb, Coastal Christian's coach, says it wasn't his job -- and it wasn't possible -- to turn a quiet kid from Mississippi who had been a basketball commodity since junior high into a college student. Mr. Webb says he was there to help Mr. Butler prepare physically and personally for the NBA.

Ken Harris, an agent in Charlotte, N.C., who represented Mr. Butler, praises Mr. Webb's efforts. "I'm talking about non-basketball-related issues," Mr. Harris says. "Being on time, understanding the importance of speaking up and talking properly, carrying yourself the right way."

In the end, Coastal Christian for Mr. Butler was less a school than a training camp. He wasn't chosen in the NBA draft. He tried out for the league's Minnesota Timberwolves, but was cut, then joined the Great Lakes Storm of the Continental Basketball Association, a minor league.

"I've been through a lot," Mr. Butler said last month from a Flint, Mich., hotel where the Storm's players live. "But it's all going to pay off. It's just a matter of time."

On Feb. 27, the New York Knicks signed Mr. Butler, who is 20 years old, to a contract for the rest of the NBA season.

--Stefan Fatsis

sends evaluations to their parents every two weeks.

The coach says he's tired of criticism of prep basketball. To him, Coastal Christian and other schools are pragmatic: Not all kids are strong in academics. But they can be taught to work hard enough to earn an opportunity to attend college, or to improve their chances of making millions in the NBA. Mr. Webb says almost all of his players have gone on to college.

"There's nobody sitting behind a desk in America that didn't have a second chance or a third chance," he says. "How do you tell a family they lost a \$120,000 scholarship because there was no place for a kid to go?"

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