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The Quick Fix

Schools Where the Only Real Test Is Basketball

By [PETE THAMEL](#)

Each day at Eldon Academy in Michigan, Dewayne Walker could sleep till 11 a.m., practice basketball for 90 minutes and never spend more than two hours in class. He said that the only other students were his teammates, that his only teacher was also his coach. "I'm not a Harvard-type person," Walker said, "but I thought it would be a lot more work."

Justin Gardenhire laughed when recalling his classes at Redemption Christian Academy in Troy, N.Y., where many high school students are basketball players. Gardenhire said the school was so disorganized, a Spanish class one day would be French the next. "We had a spelling class," Gardenhire said. "I was like, 'Come on, are you serious?'"

Phil Jones attended Lutheran Christian Academy, an unaccredited private high school in Philadelphia where, he said, all of the students were basketball players. In his seven months there, he said, class consisted of the coach, Darryl Schofield, giving workbooks to the students to fill out. "I thought prep school was supposed to be hard," Jones said.

In the past two years, these young men attended unusual institutions — some called prep schools, some called learning centers — where all or most of the students were highly regarded basketball players. These athletes were trying to raise their grades to compensate for poor College Board scores or trying to gain attention from major-college coaches.

An investigation by The New York Times found more than a dozen of these institutions, some of which closed soon after opening. The Times found that at least 200 players had enrolled at such places in the past 10 years and that dozens had gone on to play at N.C.A.A. Division I universities like Mississippi State, George Washington, Georgetown and Texas-El Paso.

"I would say that in my 21 years, the number of those schools has quadrupled, and I would put schools in quotation marks," Phil Martelli, the men's basketball coach at St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia, said. "They're not all academic institutions."

The National Collegiate Athletic Association acknowledges that it has not acted as such places have proliferated. For years, its Clearinghouse has approved transcripts from these institutions without questioning them.

Until revelations last year about a diploma mill in Florida and concerns about other schools like it, the N.C.A.A. chose not to police high schools. Although the N.C.A.A. recently commissioned a task force charged with curbing academic abuse, it still faces the tricky task of separating the legitimate from the nonlegitimate schools.

The Times found several schools with curious student populations.

¶Genesis One Christian Academy in Mendenhall, Miss.: Two years ago, this kindergarten-to-Grade 8 school added a high school and a Grade 13, for basketball players who did not graduate to raise their grade-point averages. At least 33 of about 40 students at the unaccredited high school play

basketball, and its stars have signed letters of intent to attend Oklahoma State, Arkansas and Alabama.

¶Boys to Men Academy in Chicago: The student body consists of 16 basketball players, who can earn credit for the equivalent of eight high school core courses in a year by studying online through an accredited correspondence school.

¶Rise Academy in Philadelphia: Opened last fall, it outsources lessons to others, including Lutheran Christian and two online high schools.

¶God's Academy in Irving, Tex.: A summer basketball coach started with three students in August. Now 40 students in Grades 6 to 12, all basketball players, meet with two full-time teachers four days a week at a recreation center. The curriculum is provided and graded by an education center 25 miles away. Its star player, Jeremy Mayfield, signed with Oklahoma.

Some of these institutions recently joined other private schools to form the National Elite Athletic Association. With more than two dozen teams from Los Angeles to Toronto, this conference is seeking a shoe contract and a television deal. Its teams sometimes travel thousands of miles to play in tournaments that often attract more college coaches than fans. Those coaches will pay \$100 for booklets of information about the players.

"I believe that our high school associations create mediocrity," said Linzy Davis, a conference founder, who coaches in Stockbridge, Ga. "We have rules in high school associations that say a coach can coach a kid at this time and not at this time. Meanwhile, you have the Europeans that can practice eight hours a day."

The increase in secondary-school options has forged a culture of free agency in prep basketball. Travis George, a senior at Lutheran Christian, left his Boston-area public high school after three-plus years without passing a single core course. The N.C.A.A. requires high school athletes to complete 14 core courses, including four years of English, two years of math and two years of science.

Since the fall of 2004, George has attended six prep schools. He and his coaches say he is on track to qualify for a scholarship at the end of this school year.

"If a kid really wants to, he can find a place that will get him his grades," said Steve Smith, the coach at Oak Hill Academy, a traditional prep powerhouse in Virginia. "That's not good. I believe in kids earning it."

Profit and Opportunity

Basketball-centered schools multiplied after Tracy McGrady leapt to the National Basketball Association from Mount Zion Christian Academy in North Carolina in 1997. He signed a deal with Adidas that gave \$300,000 to Mount Zion, which had about 200 students and was not founded as a basketball academy, and nearly \$1 million to his coach.

The notion that top players could be a financial boon, combined with the relaxing of N.C.A.A. rules, spawned more basketball academies. In 2000, the N.C.A.A. began allowing high school administrators to determine the legitimacy of their own core courses. Three years later, the N.C.A.A. began allowing students to compensate for low College Board scores with higher grade-point averages.

"Why did these schools come about?" said Mike Byrnes, who has coached for 10 years at

80-year-old Winchendon School in Massachusetts. "Because these kids need to have a higher grade-point average because you can't beat the SAT."

Under these rules, University High School in Miami, a correspondence school with no teachers, classrooms or sports, helped 28 athletes qualify for college. After The Times reported in November that University High gave fast and easy grades to college football prospects, the school shut down. It is under investigation by the Miami-Dade County state attorney's office.

Kevin Lennon, the N.C.A.A.'s vice president for membership services, who is in charge of the task force on secondary schools, said he could not estimate the number of schools abusing the system.

"All we know is that we're seeing more of them," he said.

Mysteries and Discrepancies

Coach Martelli of St. Joseph's said Tommy Lloyd, an assistant at Gonzaga, called last fall asking for directions to Lutheran. Although Coach Schofield said Lutheran sent more than 50 players to Division I in the past eight years, Coach Martelli could not help Mr. Lloyd.

"I have no idea," Coach Martelli, a lifelong resident of Philadelphia, recalled saying. "I've never been there."

The red-brick community center that houses Lutheran has become a running joke in recruiting circles. Interviews with 10 current or former players revealed that all of Lutheran's more than 30 students are college basketball prospects. They have classes in one community center, a converted grocery store on North 17th Street, and practice in another.

Three former Lutheran students — Roosevelt Lee, Jamual Warren and Bobby Maze — echoed Phil Jones in saying that they were not required to attend classes and that Coach Schofield was their only instructor. Maze said he did no work when he did attend class.

Warren said his mother took him home to Springfield, Mass., after a month because he told her there was no school building.

"I like to get by easy," Warren said, "but not that easy."

Jones, a Brooklyn native, is a senior at Laurinburg Prep in North Carolina. He said he was glad he left Lutheran because universities like Kansas, Virginia Tech and Kentucky indicated that they could not recruit him there.

Lee and Warren did not qualify for Division I scholarships out of high school; they now attend Globe Institute of Technology, a junior college in Manhattan. Lee said that in one month at Lutheran, he received credit for five courses, earning all B's, although he never took a test, attended a class or received instruction.

"There were no classes," Lee said. "We went to basketball practice every single day. What we were told when we first went there was: How you perform on the court, that's what you do for your grades."

Coach Schofield filed paperwork listing 35 courses, which the N.C.A.A. certified; among them are Latin 2, chemistry and physics. He said Lutheran had four full-time and two part-time teachers, and was accredited by the state. But a spokesman for the Pennsylvania Department of Education said Lutheran was not accredited and had never applied for accreditation.

Coach Schofield said that the students' improved academic performance could be attributed to Lutheran's strict discipline and that the students were required to retake exams until they achieved a score of at least 80.

Some students praise Lutheran. Charles Bronson said that in two years, he improved his grade-point average to 3.5 (on a 4-point scale) from 2.1. "Nothing was given to me," said Bronson, who attended East Carolina before transferring to Panola College, a junior college in Carthage, Tex., and then signing with Xavier. "I had to work."

Coach Schofield said he gave opportunity to teenagers with no hope. He said that Lutheran's tuition was \$5,000 but that he rarely charged more than \$2,000.

"If you're going to fail, you might as well go home and fail," he said. "We don't want that. We want all success stories."

Coach Schofield has plenty. Last year, Lutheran sent at least 11 players to Division I, including two each to Mississippi State, Texas-El Paso and Tennessee-Chattanooga. Other former Lutheran students play for Washington State, Middle Tennessee State and Temple. Omar Williams and Maureece Rice are key players for No. 6 George Washington. Marc Egerson is a freshman for No. 23 Georgetown.

Don Haman, Egerson's coach at Glasgow High School in Delaware, said Egerson earned a core-course G.P.A. under 2.0, scored in the 600's on his combined SAT and never graduated from Glasgow before going to Lutheran.

"I wonder about it myself," Mr. Haman said of Egerson's acceptance to Georgetown. "But I can't say anything if he gets the score and gets into school."

Jamont Gordon went to Lutheran after withdrawing from Oak Hill last April. Coach Smith said Gordon would have been a borderline prospect to qualify for college academically if he had completed the final quarter of his senior year at Oak Hill.

Gordon now leads Mississippi State in scoring as a freshman. Bulldogs Coach Rick Stansbury said Gordon had gone to Lutheran to "finish one class." Told that Gordon had left Oak Hill needing to complete all his classes, Coach Stansbury said: "He went there to finish. That's all. He did what he had to do to finish his academics."

Coach Stansbury, who refused several requests to allow Gordon to comment for this article, said he had no reason to check whether Lutheran, which has been open in various forms for eight years, was accredited. Despite Gordon's tenuous academic situation and the fact that Mississippi State's top recruit, Vernon Goodridge, also went there, Coach Stansbury said he neither visited Lutheran nor talked to teachers or guidance counselors. He did, however, go to the gym.

"We don't talk to teachers when we're recruiting kids," he said. "Everyone does it differently."

Lutheran also produced Paul Graham III, one of six players signed last spring by Florida Atlantic. Matt Doherty, Florida Atlantic's new coach, said he went to the gym once to watch Graham but did not visit any teachers, as he usually does, because he was scrambling to sign players. "The fact that the school is not accredited and I wasn't aware of that, that's on me as a coach," Coach Doherty, who previously coached at Notre Dame and North Carolina, said.

It is no surprise that few teams have as many players from Lutheran as Texas-El Paso; among them are the top recruits last year, Maurice Thomas and Stefon Jackson. David Anwar, who

founded Lutheran with Coach Schofield, is the director for basketball operations at Texas-El Paso.

Mr. Anwar said he had not been to Lutheran in six years. He said he knew the school had teachers but did not know their names.

"He takes kids that have nothing, absolutely nothing, and gives them a chance to go to school," Mr. Anwar said of Coach Schofield. "It's a shame that everyone looks at that as a bad thing."

Expectations and Realities

When Ifeanyi Ehirim accepted a full scholarship to Eldon Academy for its inaugural year in 2004, he said, he was led to believe the school had a building, a typical student body, full-time teachers and standard courses.

But Ehirim and, a year later, Dewayne Walker, each found little more than a traveling basketball team. Ehirim said Eldon's classes were held in the basement of the bookstore in Petoskey, Mich. When Walker arrived, Eldon used a classroom at a local community college. All of the students were high school graduates who needed higher standardized test scores or wanted the exposure of a national schedule. Ehirim and Walker said they learned little at Eldon. During Walker's year, he said, the coach, Gerald E. Ernst Jr., was the only teacher, who taught English and had students take practice standardized tests from a book.

Academically qualified for college when he went to Eldon, Walker was hoping to earn a Division I scholarship. But in late January, Walker saw the message "Pack your stuff" on the board in the apartment where the students lived. Walker said they were told that some had not paid tuition, prompting Coach Ernst to close Eldon. That cut the season short and hurt Walker's chances.

"It was a big waste of time and money," said Judy McGee, Walker's mother. "I didn't have \$4,300 to throw away."

Eldon's official documents refer to it as a "learning center for ACT preparation, life skills and vocabulary." But the players said Coach Ernst portrayed it differently. Five calls to his home were not returned.

"They told me it was prep school," Ehirim, now a freshman at Birmingham Southern, said.

Old Order and New World

A decade ago, athletes with poor academic records often went to traditional prep schools, many of them in New England; military academies; or junior colleges. The elite players have since abandoned junior colleges, and the level of play at the traditional prep schools has dipped.

"Now, the Larry Johnsons and Nick Van Exels, they go to prep school," said Scott Monarch, the coach at Panola College. "I don't think junior college is ever going to get a marquee player again. The Shawn Kemps, the Sam Cassells and Mookie Blaylocks, I just don't think you're going to get them anymore."

Places like Eldon clearly bother the coaches at the venerable New England prep schools known for academic rigor. Raphael Chillious, the coach at the South Kent School in Connecticut, said the coach at a Florida public school sneered when they were introduced. "As soon as people say prep school," Coach Chillious said, "there's a negative connotation now."

Coach Byrnes of the Winchendon School said college coaches called asking for grades for their

recruits as if they were ordering takeout: B's in seven core courses and a 900 SAT. When he tells them that cannot be done at Winchendon, the coaches keep shopping.

"I don't know how an administration at a school can allow that," Coach Byrnes said, referring to colleges that accept players from basketball academies. "What if Albert Einstein wanted to go to one of these schools? They wouldn't accept him? He could patent a cure for cancer, and they would tell him he couldn't come to school because he couldn't score a basket."

Catching Up and Cracking Down

Travis George is a 6-foot-7 forward, a strong rebounder who shows the potential to play elite college basketball. But his grades got in the way. A copy of his high school transcript shows that by the time he was a senior, George had passed only sheet metal and health education. Neither counts toward the 14 core courses the N.C.A.A. requires.

At Notre Dame Prep in Fitchburg, Mass., George earned credit for half a core course before leaving in January 2005. Several coaches said he then went to Mount Zion, Laurinburg and Patterson in North Carolina, then to Rise Academy and Lutheran in Philadelphia.

George and his coaches say he should be eligible for college by the end of the school year. If his high school transcript is correct, that means he will have completed 13½ core courses in about 18 months.

"I just had to find a place where I was comfortable," said George, who contended that Lutheran was his third prep school.

One of the ways a nomad like George can earn eligibility is to avoid graduation. Sam Rines Jr., who opened Rise as a basketball academy, said a student could get credit for as many as eight core courses in a year. He said that if students finished their senior year and did not meet the N.C.A.A.'s eligibility standards, he encouraged them not to graduate, then to retake classes to raise their averages.

"Graduation," Mr. Rines said, "is a horrible thing."

Rise and Eldon are relatively new, but Redemption Christian has existed since 1979. The N.B.A. star Lamar Odom attended Redemption, known in recruiting circles for its work-study program. Students work shifts in a bakery and sell cake and cookies door to door. Redemption's founder and head administrator, the Rev. John Massey Jr., said, "Kids come here as a last resort."

Many of its basketball stars are postgraduates in need of higher standardized test scores, but it also has high school students. Yet Redemption is not registered with the New York State Department of Education, so it cannot award diplomas.

"Is the college not asking them for a bona fide high school diploma?" said Thomas Hogan, the supervisor for the office of nonpublic school services in the education department. "Because they can't legally give one."

When Laura Holmes, a vice principal at Redemption, was asked about its accreditation, its diploma policy and the percentage of the students who play basketball, she sent a 15-page fax that included positive articles about Redemption, awards given to Mr. Massey and an anonymous post defending him taken from a George Washington fan Web site, gwhoops.com.

But Lorenzo Keeler said there was no comparison between Redemption and his current school,

South Kent. "We were literally doing fractions in math class," he said of Redemption. "Stuff I did years and years ago."

Mr. Lennon, the head of the N.C.A.A task force, said it would focus first on schools like Redemption that are not under state regulation. "We're committed to flushing out those high schools abusing the system and putting a stop to it," he said.

One question the task force must answer: What is the maximum course load? For now, there is no rule against taking the required 14 core courses in a year. It is essentially impossible for a student at Winchendon or South Kent to take more than five core courses in a school year, the coaches there said. (Intense summer school could add one or two more.)

"If they set the limit at five, I'd be in favor of that," Coach Chillious of South Kent said.

With the task force recommendations due June 1, Mr. Lennon issued a warning: "Any student contemplating leaving their high school right now to pick up additional courses needs to be aware the N.C.A.A. will be implementing policies. They need to make sure they are taking real courses, academic courses, and not simply trying to buy eligibility."

But after years of not policing secondary schools, the biggest challenge for the N.C.A.A. will be determining which of the nation's 5,000 private schools that do not fall under state regulation are exploiting the system.

Thayer Evans contributed reporting from Carthage, Tex., for this article. Jack Begg and Sandra Jamison contributed research.