Jalen Green’s Plan to Skip College for the NBA G League and why that can be a Win-Win-Win for Colleges, Players and the NBA.



Jalen Green is widely viewed as basketball’s top high school basketball recruit in America. <https://twitter.com/i/status/1250834497278365702>

He is projected to be a No. 1 NBA draft pick after a year of college “seasoning”. Except Green just announced his seasoning will be in the NBA’s G League. Perhaps he was lured by the G League’s newly-minted package of $500,000, access to NBA coaching during the season, and life skills mentorship from veteran players. Even on-bench experience with NBA teams is possible during his first NBA minor league season. Five-star recruit Isaiah Todd also signed with the G League. He was likely motivated by the same features.

But of course, there will be push-back. It will especially come from those with generational loyalty to the college game just the way it is, with in-bred love for their college of choice. Rarely, if ever, do they directly face the issue of whether their interests are more aligned to the school than the players. So, all that latent emotional attachment seeks objective rationale to justify the conclusion that leaving college for the pros is at least mutinous, if not downright blasphemy. Below are arguments that often rise to the top for maintaining the status quo, and my responses to them.

* Poaching elite players from colleges will destroy the college game by diluting the talent pool.

I suspect not. Here’s why.

Each season, top college programs cultivate a group of senior stars with quality skills worth watching. Exhibit A: Michigan State’s Cassius Winston. People knew he was accepted at Harvard, but chose Michigan State. No one considered him a one-and-done future NBA draft pick. But by his junior year Winston was the Big Ten Player of the Year and All-American. He led his team to the Final Four. As a senior, he became the leading assist maker in the history of the Big Ten Conference, a Wooden Award winner, and again an All-American despite tragically losing his brother early in the season.

It is still an open question as to whether Winston will make an NBA roster. But ask MSU fans, or purist college hoops fans for that matter, whether they would trade him for a one-year elite player. Then go ask MSU coach Tom Izzo whether he stops coaching the rest of the players once a top recruit bypasses college ball. The point is there are Winston’s every season. If the elite recruits jump to the NBA, there will be room for even more “Winstonians”. College hoops fans will remain fanatical, and perhaps more so if they embrace a player’s evolution over a four-year career.

* Teenagers will be surreptitiously enticed to prematurely gamble away their future, ruin their pro career for lack of patience, and thereby lose college eligibility and damage the college team they rejected.

I suspect not. Here’s why.

NBA teams have a track record of drafting well. Most of the highest draft picks have enough longevity and productivity to never have to work again. In part, that is because by the time elite players are 18, they’ve been vetted more thoroughly than presidential candidates, filtered better than French-drip coffee, and prepped for competition beyond Kentucky Derby thoroughbreds. They are identified pre-puberty by well-financed national AAU programs. They are nurtured by the best coaches Nike and major endorsement companies can buy. They play against the best college and pro players during the summer, and tour internationally without fear of planes, cultures, or fans.

If history repeats itself, NBA coaches will continue to vet elite players when “only” investing a half-million dollars per player.

That said, NBA coaches are like any other business managers. They are motivated by self-interest, economic necessity and a quest for efficiency. They will quickly advice other players that they are not quite ready for prime time. That should result in fewer players jumping to the pros before they are ready. As a result, colleges should get a teenager that is easier to coach and perform for a school for two reasons: His over-hyped huge ego will be brought back down to earthly reality and he will be highly motivated to make improvements to his game. That keeps the level of play at a high level for college fans. With dedication, he may become the future NBA player. A win-win-win for the college, player, and the NBA.

* These impressionable, immature, coddled teenagers will likely fail to make it in the NBA without the maturity and skills training of college basketball and academic nurturing only found in America’s great academic institutions.

I suspect not. Here’s why.

Great academic institutions; Yes. But most have thrived on a system that admits the students on a basis other than “academics”. But let’s back up. The underlying assumption of player failure is that the G League team would throw a half million dollars at the player who was not ready. The offer starts with the G – League. As noted above, adolescent prescreening and NBA vetting shows otherwise.

* They’ll miss the “once in a lifetime” college degree and experience.

That assumes the players will not go back to school - that they don’t value education or will never mature enough to do so. That is certainly a risk. But in this modern era of enlightened players, I think it is more likely that if they wash out of the NBA in a year, they will have grown from the coaching reality that when you play for money, you don’t get a hall pass from classes. I hope and believe, they will also grow from life skills tutorials from their veteran role models. And they will appreciate the array of resources available to them at a higher level than we’ve previously known.

* Without college, they’ll fritter away their money with no backup plan for financial sustainability for the rest of their lives.

Elite NBA players get deals in the range of $42 million over four years. And that is within the constraints of a collectively bargained cap between NBA owners and the player’s union. Saliently, the first two years are guaranteed (much to the envy of NFL ballers). Repeating for emphasis, $21 million dollars in that scenario are “guaranteed” even if he fails on the court. The NBA’s website has estimated the average life of an NBA player to be 4.5 years. That is just long enough to receive the full four-year salary. Do you really think most elite NBA players blow $42 million? If I am Jalen Green or Isaiah Todd, I’ll take my chances.

These players (and parents) have access to high quality financial advisors. If even one year’s salary is conservatively invested at say 3 percent interest, compounded annually for 20 years, the player will have $18,963,167.96. How’s that for a present on your 38th birthday? You don’t have to be a financial planner to figure that is more than enough for a comfortable life.

That is the life a high school star in tennis and golf would take. Why wouldn’t one who happened to be one of the best basketball players on the plant at that same age be any different?

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