

## *Athletics*

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### **College-Basketball Experts Divided Over NBA Age Minimum**

**Some coaches say the rule encourages top players to skip classes, while others believe it could lead to more focus on academic work**

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Last year the National Basketball Association established a controversial rule requiring star players to wait a year after they graduate from high school, and until age 19, to enter the professional draft.

At the time, some college coaches worried that the requirement might pose problems for the highest-profile teams, causing elite players to spend just a year in college, blowing off their classes, and leading many less-talented athletes to have unrealistic expectations for their careers.

Last month Bob Knight, the legendary men's basketball coach at Texas Tech University, created a stir when he described the requirement as the "worst thing that's happened to college basketball since I've been coaching."

"Now you can have a kid come to school for a year and play basketball, and he doesn't even have to go to class," Mr. Knight said before the start of the NCAA men's basketball tournament. "That, I think, has a tremendous effect on the integrity of college sports."

Academic officials share Mr. Knight's concerns, but many people in college sports believe the requirement has had a largely positive effect on the college game. For one thing, it has led a handful of talented high-school players, all likely to have been among the top picks in last year's NBA draft, to spend at least a year in college.

Their presence has improved the quality of college basketball. Greg Oden, a 7-foot center who dunks with such force that he shakes the backboard, led Ohio State University to the national title game here last week. Kevin Durant, who starred for the University of Texas, swept the national player-of-the-year honors — the first time a freshman has ever done that.

The age requirement is having an even bigger impact off the court, Myles Brand, president of the NCAA, told reporters during the Final Four. He said the rule had helped persuade scores of high-school athletes to prepare better for college, and ultimately could help improve the graduation rates of men's basketball players.

"Now they'll be in college, they're prepared for college, and the likelihood they'll stay on is increased because they've prepared for it," he said. "I expect hundreds, maybe even thousands, over the years to be positively affected by this rule."

#### **Eyeing the Pros**

Kevin Garnett was the first modern-day player to jump from high school to the pro ranks, in 1995, and a year later Kobe Bryant followed. The success of those two, who are now household names, led many high-school players to start eyeing the professional league in their teens. After the 2005 season, nine players made the leap from high school to the pros, prompting the NBA to establish its age requirement.

When the rule went into effect last summer, coaches of many top programs feared it would cause recruiting headaches and lead to NCAA penalties. At the time, the college association's rules were designed to punish programs whose players left early for the NBA. The NCAA has since changed its rules, and only penalizes teams whose players are academically ineligible when they leave the campus.

When Mr. Knight heard stories about players barely cracking their books as they waited to go pro, he went on the offensive. During a Big 12 conference call with reporters in March, he described how some freshmen players have gamed the system, passing the minimum six credit hours of classes during the fall semester and then not showing up for their classes the rest of the year.

Under the NBA requirement, a player "certainly doesn't have to go to class the second semester," said Mr. Knight, who prides himself on his teams' high graduation rates. "I'm not exactly positive about the first semester. But he would not have to attend a single class the second semester to play through the whole second semester of basketball."

Some academic advisers acknowledged that that scenario sometimes happens.

"Unfortunately, there are no rules per se to stop it," said Phil Moses, director of academic support at North Carolina State University and a former president of the National Association of Academic Advisors for Athletics.

Asked about the practice, Mr. Brand said: "If there are individuals who are just looking at this as one and out, not taking care of business in the second semester, we have to deal with that. There may well be some of those."

Despite such concerns, the rule has benefited many players. High-school counselors like it because it has encouraged young athletes to pay more attention to their studies, says Ken Fox, a college and career counselor at Ladue Horton Watkins High School, in St. Louis, and chairperson of the admissions-practices committee of the National Association for College Admission Counseling.

"The rule is clearly a step in the right direction because the jump from high school to the pros is so rare," he says. "Kids are starting to get the message that while it's OK to dream about playing in the Final Four or the NBA, their academic dreams are a lot more likely to come true."

Len Elmore, a former University of Maryland basketball star who is now a broadcaster, lawyer, and member of the Knight Foundation Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, also believes the rule has had a positive impact. He says it has forced players to focus on their studies and indirectly helped many athletes realize they are not prepared for the professional game.

"So many kids aren't ready, and by playing a year in college their weaknesses get exposed," he says. "They'll have to go back another year, and maybe a third year. Pretty soon, somebody's gonna get an education."

In an article last month in *SportsBusiness Journal*, Mr. Elmore argued that one year of college is better than none because it helps players improve their basketball skills and become more mature.

Some college administrators, however, disagree that a single season is an acceptable commitment.

"I understand the commercial considerations if a kid can become an instant multimillionaire, but I'm not sure

in the long run it's good for society or college sports if kids leave early to chase a buck," says Robert C. Khayat, chancellor of the University of Mississippi, a former college-football player and former president of the Southeastern Conference. "This may sound terribly naïve, but one of our values in this country is valuing commitments and being loyal — and not just shifting your allegiances on the strength of money."

### **Longer Stays**

Many college-sports officials would rather see basketball players commit to playing two or three years in college before turning pro, as they have to do in baseball and football. Baseball players can either sign minor-league contracts out of high school, or pledge to play at least three years in college. Football players must spend three years in college before entering the NFL draft.

Mr. Brand said last month that part of the reason graduation rates are higher in football than in men's basketball is because football players can't leave for the pros until after their junior year. If basketball players were required to stay more than one year, he believes, that could help raise graduation rates in basketball, which are the lowest of any sport.

The professional leagues, however, are responsible for setting age rules, and NBA officials do not plan to change their requirement.

Ironically, two of the best players in college basketball this season may not make themselves eligible for this June's draft. With all his awards, Mr. Durant does not have much left to prove on the court and would seem a sure bet to go pro. But he has also excelled in the classroom, holding a 3.0 grade-point average, and he says he is still attending classes on the Austin campus.

Mr. Oden apparently wants to be an accountant. He certainly needs to learn how to handle all the NBA riches he is going to bring in someday. But he has repeatedly hinted that he might stay in college longer than one year, even though most basketball experts believe he will go pro this summer.

Buckeyes fans can only hope that because their team lost the national championship game to the University of Florida, Mr. Oden might stick around next season for another shot at the title.

As he walked off the court after the game last week, blue and orange confetti rained on his shoulders. Just before he disappeared into a tunnel under the stadium, an Ohio State fan screamed, "We'll see you next year!"

The big man never looked up.

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