



Starting points to a solution: Amateur reform, frosh ineligibility

Marc Isenberg

As someone who actively advocates on behalf of athletes, I am confounded by those who make the case that one-and-done is universally better than none and never. I have never suggested that college basketball turn its back on elite players who want to spend their “gap year” playing at the NCAA level. But let’s just be honest about what is taking place: It’s the (basketball) economy, stupid.

The one-and-done phenomenon brings to light many of the problems facing not just college basketball, but basketball development in general.

So what is the appropriate solution? Any discussion of a possible solution should include reforming amateurism and a return to freshman ineligibility.

There are some in college athletics who make the strained argument that the NBA’s age restriction actually serves as a social program to educate a larger pool of male basketball players, many of whom are African-American. That absent the NBA age rule, hundreds of hoop dreamers might forsake preparing for college entirely. Huh?

I am not against education. Far from it. If you don’t believe me, read my book, *Money Players*, which I wrote to educate athletes about business and life. (See the ad on this page for order information.) I am against one-and-done. Big difference. There are many young people who would be better served to enter the “real world” right out of high school, then work (literally) to figure out what they want to do career-wise. Then, if they need to return to school later, they will be far more motivated to do so. The average age of college graduates is close to 26, which suggests that a significant percentage of students follow a circuitous path to a college education.

Most observers view the embracing of one-and-done as nothing more than basketball commerce, not some high-minded plan to educate the masses.

For example, NBA commissioner David Stern deftly pointed out: “This is not about the NCAA. This is not an enforcement of some social program. This is a business decision by the NBA. We like to see our players in competition after high school.”

Exactly. The NBA cares about how well players compete on the court, not in the classroom.

Rather than fighting reality, perhaps college sports would be better off embracing it. Here’s a sampling of opinion on one-and-done and amateurism, starting with a provocative on-air exchange between John Thompson and Gary Williams.

Thompson: “Why is that if a kid tries out for a pro team and does not make it, even if he was paid something for doing that, why can’t he come back to college based on the redefining of what an amateur is now and how inconsistent it is among all sports?”

Williams: “I’ll give you an honest answer. I think the NCAA is really out of touch with the kids today. I’m 17, 18 years old. I think I am good enough to play. I sign with an agent, I may get \$5,000 from that agent. I go try out, get cut. Why can’t I come back to school and be able to play? I’ve never understood this. We’re supposed to be in this for the benefit of the student-athlete. ... Things change. These kids think they can play. So let them try. If they can’t, they’ll be back ... (and) more kids would get their degrees because they’ll realize they may never make

it in professional basketball.”

Several years ago, the NCAA membership contemplated reforming amateurism along the lines suggested by Thompson and Williams. Unfortunately, this effort failed. Why not provide a safety net for those who mistakenly overrate their ability and turn pro too early? The message should be to stay in school, but if you leave for a reasonably short period (say one year) and want to come to college ready to be a real student-athlete, we welcome you.

Terry Holland, East Carolina athletic director and one of the truly good guys in college athletics, once told me, “Forcing young men to go to college simply does not work for anyone’s long-term best interest. If we truly do not want pros in college with all the attendant agents and NCAA investigations, then we have to make it easier for them to go pro, not harder.”

Even college players recognize the problem. Washington State’s Klay Thompson (son of Mychal Thompson, No. 1 pick in the 1978 NBA draft) told *Sports Illustrated*: “I’d just say, go pro whenever you want, because it makes no sense to force kids to go to just one year of college. I don’t get that. If a kid is already planning on being one-and-done, then he’s going to school for the wrong reasons. He’s going to go for one semester, and then he’s gone.”

Dick Vitale also makes a lot of sense on the issue, writing: “(One-and-done) is unfair to an athlete who has to go to school for one year when he has no desire to be in the classroom. College is supposed to be for those who want an education, for those who want to be there. It is time to end this mockery. If these kids want to make themselves available for the NBA, then so be it. If the NBA sees fit to draft them, so be it.”

No arguments here. One-and-done has become a distraction to those who care about the institution of higher education and to those who want to be student-athletes in every sense of that made-up phase.

So what should happen? There is no complete solution. The most reasonable solution would start with making freshman basketball players ineligible. All those who desire to play D-I basketball would have to get it done in the college classroom as a con-

dition of their eligibility. Legitimate students would go straight to the classroom; all others could go straight to the pros – just not to the NBA.

Best of all, college basketball would finally have a legitimate litmus test to determine eligibility. Freshman ineligibility would eliminate initial-eligibility standards and put the responsibility in the hands of college-admission departments, where it belongs anyway. In terms of development, players would have an entire year to really work on their games and develop their fundamentals, which would serve them well as they try to compete in the global basketball world.

Yes, a few ultra-talented players would opt for Europe or the NBDL, but so what? Even if five Brandon Jennings bypass college every year, college basketball would not suffer financially, in case that matters.

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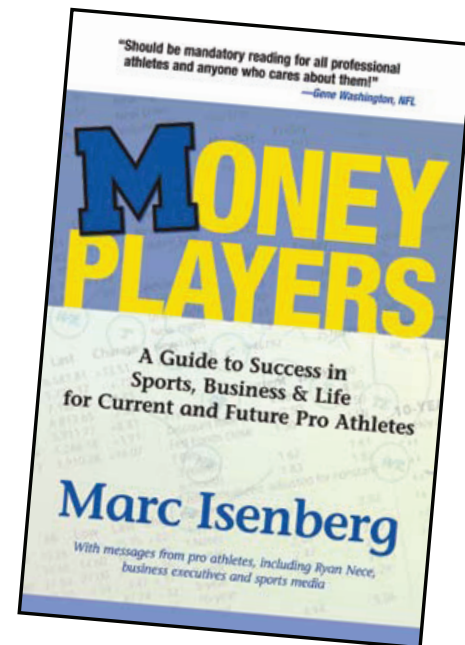
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