Stay in School? Why? NBA Money Looks Too Good

By FREDERICK C. KLEIN

Kentucky won the NCAA basketball tournament last month, but to hear the coaches of the teams in the event’s Final Four tell it, the individual winner was John Wallace, who played forward for the runner-up Syracuse Orangemen.

Whatever the original subject of their meetings with the press, those worthies made a point of praising Mr. Wallace, who this year had declared his intention to enter the draft of the professional National Basketball Association, but then changed his mind and returned to Syracuse for his senior season. The coaches agreed that in doing so, he had improved both his school’s hoops fortunes and his own value as a fledgling pro by “lifting his game.” Wouldn’t it be wonderful, they chortled, if more players followed his example.

I’m sure almost everyone who heard those remarks shook his or her head in agreement; few, after all, take issue with the “stay in school” message that’s drummed into young people these days.

But think for a second: Every time the husky, 6-foot-8-inch Mr. Wallace, who’d already been tagged as a prime pro prospect, came down from a shot or rebound as a Syracuse senior, he came within a half-inch of ending his basketball career. That’s about the width of his anterior cruciate ligaments, the tissues that keep his knees hinged. If one of them had popped during an awkward landing, his basketball future might have popped with it.

The relationship between knee ligaments, professional sports and higher education is an apt subject now, because 11:59 p.m. is the deadline for players with remaining collegiate eligibility to say they’ll be available for the June 26 NBA draft. Fifteen or so undergrads, some of them quite notable, have done so, along with two lads who are just finishing high school. It’s about as big a group as has ever “come out.”

Most of the reaction to those kids’ announcements has been unfavorable. Even when you discount the views of self-serving coaches or booster types who can’t see past the won-lost records of their favorite Jockstrap U., there’s a general feeling abroad that college is, somehow, good for people, whether or not they’re capable of or interested in soaking up what goes on in the classroom. Further, long exposure to big-time campus sports establishments, and their status as pro steppingstones, has led many to conclude that they’re both necessary and proper.

They aren’t. Professional basketball and football use the colleges as feed lots and publicity engines, but Major League Baseball, which came to maturity before college sports became a megabusiness, maintains its own farm system, and no one thinks twice about young baseballers skipping college to turn pro.

Interestingly, I thought the comment that best put the university experience into a proper context for some of today’s so-called student-athletes came not from a coach or educator but from Stephon Marbury, the little point guard whose coming-out press conference, after his freshman year at Georgia Tech, caused such a stir. His college attendance, Marbury said, was “just a way to position myself for the [NBA] draft.” Having accomplished that to his own satisfaction, he quit.

Quit for what? you might ask. If you’re a likely first-round draft choice, as Mr. Marbury is, quite a bit. Yes, the days when kids just out of college could glom on to long-term NBA contracts worth $6 million or $7 million a year are gone now, thanks to the recent labor agreement between owners and players, but the scale for league newcomers was part of that pact provides for starting salaries that are generous by any other standard. It ranges from about $7.8 million over three years, or close to $960,000 per annum. That could be more in a year than his father earned in a lifetime, and more than enough to achieve prosperity for him and his family if he never earns another dime in the game. And it could have disappeared with the kind of misstep described above.

The argument often is made that a young athlete is best off honing his skills among his chronological peers, but I think it’s as faulty as the one that holds that college attendance is beneficial per se. The way to get better in sports is to play more against better opponents, and that’s more likely to happen in the pros than in college. Six-foot-11-inch Kevin Garnett joined the NBA out of high school last year at age 19 amid much talk-talking, but did just fine. I daresay he’ll be a better player at 22 than he would have been if he’d gone to college until then. In the meantime, he doesn’t have to lie when he’s asked where he got his car or jewelry.

The fact is that, for most people, college is about getting credentials, and some don’t need them. It doesn’t take a degree to play basketball—or to sing, dance, act, paint, write, fix a car or wire an electrical circuit—and, if that’s all someone wants, anyone who’s able can just go ahead and do it. Moreover, for exposure to big-time campus sports establishments, and their status as pro steppingstones, has led many to conclude they’re necessary. They aren’t.

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Mal education can be obtained at any point in a person’s life, while sports are best pursued when one is young. As the recent examples of Emmitt Smith and Bo Jackson have shown, college diplomas can be gotten during, or after, professional-sports careers.

There are, certainly, tears to be shed for the “hoop dreams” generation, but these should be saved for its casualties. Those are the youngsters who are deluded, or deceive themselves, into falsely believing they’re among the tiny minority for whom sports can be a road to wealth. The young men whose NBA coming-out announcements rated news-media mention these past few weeks already are beyond that.