

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

For Many Recruits Picking a Program, Basketball Isn't the Top Priority

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By WILLIAM C. RHODEN JUNE 19, 2016

NEW HAVEN — Will Ingram, a 17-year-old who has played basketball since he was 3, is clear about his place on the conveyor belt that supplies supple young bodies to college basketball programs.

While many of Ingram's peers fantasize about earning a Division I scholarship and playing in the N.B.A., Ingram outgrew that dream long ago, he said. He loves basketball but now sees it as a means to an end.

"I know that I'm not going to a big D-1 school that produces N.B.A. prospects because I know I'm not good enough," said Ingram, who will be a senior at St. Mark's School of Texas in Dallas. "Being in the N.B.A. was never really my goal."

I met Ingram and his father, Tyrous, in New Haven recently at a three-day camp hosted by the Yale men's coach, James Jones. More than 150 players attended, most of them high academic achievers and each one hoping to catch the eye of a member of Jones's staff or the more than 60 Division III coaches there.

Some were headed to the Princeton camp the next day; others planned to be at the Harvard camp this weekend.

Ingram went to the Penn camp on Saturday and planned to attend the Columbia camp on Thursday. Ivy League colleges are high on his list, as are the University of Chicago and a number of other Division III universities with top-flight academics.

“I’d rather have D-1; that’s why I went to the Yale camp,” Ingram said. “But Division III is fine with me. I’m just trying to use basketball as a tool so I can get into a good school and further my education.”

That sort of candid assessment may be a bit off-putting to college coaches who are used to using recruits as tools. But Ingram’s perspective reflects a more sophisticated selection approach by athletes and parents on the supply side of a sprawling basketball industry that can chew up the unaware.

Ingram entertained visions of playing at a top-tier Division I program until he attended a tournament during his sophomore year of high school, he said.

“I just realized that there was no way I was going to be able to compete with some of these guys,” he said. “My sophomore year is when I flipped the switch and changed.”

An increasing number of families see Ivy League and academically elite Division III colleges, which cannot offer athletic scholarships, as a desirable alternative to those Division I sweatshops where education is often compromised by the time demands of athletic competition.

Unlike many basketball players in Division I, those in Division III are not required to make an 11-month commitment to their sport. Coaches are not allowed to hold workouts during the off-season.

Tyrous Ingram, Will’s father, said, “If you are not going to the N.B.A., why put yourself in a position that could compromise your academic performance?”

Will Ingram will not have an easier path to earning a spot in a top-flight Division III program, though. The competition has never been more intense, and he will be competing against academic achievers from across the United States and overseas.

“It’s so competitive now,” said Kyle Dudley, an assistant at Division III Middlebury. “The reality is, only a small number of high school players are able to continue to play in college.”

In the last 10 years, the most successful Division III programs have had larger recruiting budgets, and there are more showcases and camps at which coaches can recruit. Still, despite the abundance of potential players and the high demand for those with Division I skills but Division III inclinations, the supply of elite talent is limited.

At the so-called elite Division III camps, coaches can buy a program that contains information about each player, including his grade-point average and standardized-test scores.

“That’s the first thing you’re looking for anyway,” said Jones, Yale’s coach. “If you’re one of those who attend our camp schools, you have 139 kids that you can take a look at and know they’re qualified academically. That’s a big help.”

These camps also serve as a reality check for players. Some will find they are better than they thought; some will discover they are not as good.

“I think what we do in this camp is provide a great opportunity for these kids to meet a lot of coaches and figure that out sooner than later,” Jones said.

Noah Lack graduated from high school in May and will spend a year at a prep school in New Hampshire beginning in the fall. He received no offers to play basketball coming out of high school but thinks an extra year could make a difference.

“I see myself playing at a high-academic Division I school or a low-major Division I school,” he said.

I asked Lack what the most difficult part of being on the camp and tournament circuit was.

“Passing the eye test,” he said. “Coming in as a skinny white guard, you obviously have to play with a chip on your shoulder. You really have to prove yourself even more.”

When I asked Jones what he thought about Lack's perspective, he said: “There's a kid that we're recruiting right now — he might be the skinniest white kid you've ever seen, but he can play. You could be blue for all I care. If you can play, I like you.”

Lack said that a day earlier he had held his own against two highly regarded recruits, one of whom had committed to Yale. Jones said he did not see the scrimmage but added: “If that did happen, we would certainly want to take notice of that and be aware. That's why we're here doing this. We're trying to find that diamond in the rough.”

Lack's father, Jonathan, has tried to nudge Lack toward the Division III route without much success. Unlike Ingram, Lack is holding on to a Division I dream.

“He's not mature enough to understand life after basketball,” Jonathan Lack said. “He would like to play Division I. That's his dream. Our dream is for him to be a fully functional, contributing member of society and self-reliant.”

I said something about young people following their dreams. Jonathan Lack replied: “At what point do you have a fantasy versus a dream? At some point for him and all these other kids, he's going to have to have a reality check. He's going to have to make a decision on whether he wants to keep playing at a D-III level or stop playing.”

The younger Lack may be surprised to find that Division III competition is not a walk in the park.

Jeff Brown, Middlebury's longtime coach, has seen the recruiting process intensify. Twenty years ago, Brown said, he basically coached the talent “that showed up on campus and people that sought out Middlebury College.” Now, Brown and Dudley, the assistant, attend six of the eight Ivy League prospect camps every year.

“We go to numerous A.A.U. tournaments, some of the other academically geared camps around the country, scouting out talent,” Brown said as he watched

players scrimmage. “Many of these athletes are really going to be disappointed by their recruitment level.

“Many of them aspire to be Division I players. Probably less than a dozen of these guys will be Division I players, and they’ll settle into Division II or Division III. Some of them will not play in college. There will be a lot of disappointment in terms of landing spots.”

Not for the Ingram family. Tyrous Ingram was clear: Division III is where he wants his son to be.

“We’re trying to leverage his athletic ability to get him into the best school that he can get into,” he said.

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