

Homeschooled Athletes Score Acceptance

Claire Novak

Basketball coaches at Maryland's Riverdale Baptist High School have a special athlete on their hands. Ranked second in the class of 2007 by NBA recruiting agents and named "most promising prospect" by the Yonkers, New York-based Five-Star Basketball Camp (their alumni roster includes Michael Jordan), Michael Beasley is a 6-foot-9 competitor who averaged 31 points per game last season and plays with a much more advanced style than the other 16-year-olds on his team. But Beasley is also homeschooled, and that doesn't sit well with the executive director of the Maryland Public Secondary Schools Athletic Association (MPSSAA). According to the association's rules, players must be enrolled in a public or private school—so the young athlete has been forced to sit out some games. To make matters worse, other states are following the MPSSAA's lead—such as the Illinois High School Association, whose decision to not allow its members to play against homeschoolers kept Beasley out of two games in that state. "It bothers me a lot," Beasley told *Washington Post* staff writer Josh Barr. "But I'm not sour. I'm a team supporter. If I'm not playing, if I'm hurt, I'm going to be at games . . . on the bench, clapping and supporting my teammates."

Thankfully, in Beasley's case, many games are not governed by the MPSSAA, enough to keep him active and learning. Known as a player who can put up the numbers and play the court with surprisingly ambidextrous tactics, Beasley hasn't let the exclusion from games hamper his style. And while recruiters say he has the potential to move directly to the NBA, Beasley has another plan—to pursue college athletics while obtaining a business degree from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

Homeschoolers Pursue Athletic Credentials, Scholarships

Michael Beasley and his peers are part of a growing number of upcoming homeschool graduates who are choosing colleges based on their athletics programs. Unlike athletics organizations at the high school level, intercollegiate sports associations welcome—and in some cases are actively recruiting—homeschoolers. In fact, the National Christian Homeschooling Athletic Association (NCHAA) was created specifically to provide services to homeschooled athletes at high school and college levels, granting automatic freshman eligibility to homeschooled athletes who have sufficient standardized test scores and meet the association's coursework standards.

At the intercollegiate level, the pro-homeschooler attitude comes mainly from the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), an organization that supports equality in the college application process—thanks to a young man named Jason Taylor. This homeschooler made a big impression on college recruiters during his two seasons as a member of a high school football team and earned a scholarship to Akron University, where he developed into an experienced athlete. But after Taylor's freshman year, the NCAA decided to revoke his scholarship because he had been homeschooled.

Thankfully, the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA) took up his case, and

the NCAA renewed Taylor's academic eligibility. They also created a waiver process for homeschooled athletes, which led to the approval of an average 75-100 homeschooled students per year. "The only difference is homeschoolers don't ride a yellow bus in the mornings," Taylor told *Observer-Reporter* staff writer Tom Rose. "Quite frankly, it is easier. You can get done with your [schoolwork] and move on with your day."

Founded in 1906, the NCAA oversees three divisions. Division I has 326 larger universities, while Division II has 288 smaller colleges. Schools in both of these divisions offer athletic scholarships, while the 420 schools in Division III do not. The NCAA sponsors 87 championships in 22 sports, and almost 362,000 men and women student athletes annually compete for the NCAA titles. While Jason Taylor's case led to the waiver process, the NCAA continued to modify its registration policy and finally allowed homeschoolers to register in the same manner as their traditionally schooled counterparts. Because of the joint work of the NCAA and HSLDA, the way has been cleared for homeschoolers to receive scholarships in basketball, baseball, volleyball, football, wrestling, and track.

And homeschoolers are responding with sterling performance. Kevin Johnson, a key member of the University of Tulsa's men's basketball team, gained recognition from his coach as "One of the classiest young men I have ever worked with." Son of an NFL football player, Johnson spent his high school years with the Homeschool Christian Youth Association Warriors Basketball team and was eventually named Most Valuable Player at the National Homeschool Basketball Tournament, when recruiters for the Tulsa team offered him a scholarship. Homeschoolers Josh, Nathan, and Jeremy Day helped develop the high-school-level Olathe Christian Basketball team under the coaching of their father, then surprised critics by obtaining three scholarships to two Division I universities. Their fellow teammate, Luke McDonald, obtained a scholarship from Drake University and played starting point guard for the school's basketball team.

Online commenter Snippets Blog (www.robastewart.net/snippets) wrote in a post entitled "Getting Schooled in Homeschooling," "[In] a ballgame we observed . . . our Monterey High School sophomores played a tournament game against the Lubbock Warriors, a homeschool team. That was the first I knew of their existence. My pre-game misconceptions and biases [against homeschoolers] had me assuming a one-sided romp to our advantage. I was right; it was a one-sided romp . . . to their advantage, and by 50 some-odd points."

According to colleges, most homeschoolers who are pursuing athletics have a strong competitive drive and inborn self-discipline, and many coaches enjoy working with these unique athletes. "The homeschoolers who come into our athletics program are some of the finest young athletes I've had the privilege to work with in the past twenty-five years," said one coach. "People ask me if I'm surprised that homeschoolers are doing well in athletics," said another. "Why should I be surprised? They take the commitment seriously."

Colleges Recruit Homeschooled Athletes

“The difference between today’s homeschool teams versus those that were around eight or ten years ago is drastic,” Bryan College basketball coach Don Rekoske told TOS. “You can find a lot of good kids in the different tournaments now. There are more good teams out there, and you have a better chance of getting a kid who is ready to play going right into their freshman year. They have the expertise and the work ethic to do it.”

Cory Mullins, assistant women’s basketball coach at Bryan College, spends a great deal of time recruiting athletes for his team, the Lady Lions. “One of the benefits with recruiting homeschooled players is that they seem to be a lot more disciplined than your average student,” he said. “We love their work ethic, attitudes, and the way they’re willing to learn.”

“Through our experience with homeschoolers, we’ve formed a good network with homeschool co-ops and support groups,” Mullins told TOS. “As far as athletes go, we like to go watch them play first. If we’re interested, we’ll follow up by asking for a video or more information on the player. Then we’ll bring them on campus for a visit and interviews, to make sure the fit is right for all of us.”

It’s Mullins’s job to attend events like the National Association of Christian Athletes’ camp tournament for Christian schools and homeschool students, where approximately 600 students show up for three weeks of basketball. “You watch a lot of games,” Mullins says with a laugh. While his job may seem unusual, he loves every minute of it. “It’s something that the average person would look at and say, ‘Are you crazy? Watching six hundred kids play basketball?’ But if you love the game and love the athletes, it’s such a blessing. My favorite part of coaching and recruiting is getting to know the families and hearing their testimonies of what the Lord is doing in their lives. It’s a great job.”

Homeschoolers’ College Applications Up

According to admissions officials at Pennsylvania State University, the number of homeschoolers who are being admitted to their college continues to rise. With a unique multi-campus system, the university offers homeschoolers the chance to live at home while attending classes—an option that many students must forgo in order to attend the school of their choice. In 2005, about 65 of the 45,000 applications received at Penn State were from homeschooled students. Although this seems like a small number, it’s double the number of homeschooled applicants who applied last year. This trend is reflected across the nation, and colleges big and small are working to become more homeschooler friendly, be it through advertising or easily accessed information for homeschoolers.

In their admissions letter for homeschoolers, Stanford University says: “In all students, we look for a clear sense of the intellectual growth and quest for knowledge. Homeschooled students may even have a potential advantage over others in this aspect of the application since they have consciously chosen and pursued an independent course of study. In particular we would like to hear from them about how the family chose

homeschooling, how the learning was organized, and what benefits they have derived from the experience.” At Grace College and Theological Seminary in Winona Lake, Indiana, homeschoolers are welcomed because “At Grace College, we place a high value on students who have been educated at home, students who have ‘served the commandments of their fathers and have not forsaken the teaching of their mothers’ (Proverbs 6:20).” Visitors to the website of Ohio-based Antioch College discover that the school “welcomes applications from homeschooled students wishing to pursue a liberal arts education. We recognize the important contributions made by homeschoolers both in the classroom and as part of student life, and make a deliberate effort to accommodate the special circumstances of homeschoolers during the admissions process.”

At Trinity College in Florida, homeschoolers make up 20% of the student population. Several faculty members were homeschooled or homeschool their own children. “There’s a good deal of familiarity and comfort level with the process of home education here,” said Dr. David Colburn, admissions director for the college. “We have a smaller campus where homeschoolers can really get to know people. We advertise in a variety of homeschool venues—card packs, large homeschool conventions, magazines, et cetera.”

Some colleges are even modifying their admissions processes, and while these modifications may not be directed specifically toward homeschoolers, they definitely make it easier for individuals with unique educational backgrounds to apply. At New York’s Sarah Lawrence College, directors “consider many factors in addition to traditional academic criteria when making admission decisions.” Because the school values strong writing skills and the clear expression of interests, perspectives, and goals, the admissions committee “looks closely at an applicant’s response to the essay and short-answer questions.” The school’s recent decision to remove all standardized testing from their admissions process reflects their unique emphasis on writing rather than testing. “We believe that the most profound learning takes place when the process of education is linked to the experiences, interests, and capacities of the individual student,” reads the college’s philosophy. “By investing their own human and intellectual resources in the process of education, students more effectively commit themselves to academic study.”

Make the Most of Your Athletic and Academic Experience

While college athletics recruiters judge ability and style, admissions directors look at grades and study habits. It’s important for athletes who are attempting to gain scholarships or admission to highly competitive colleges (such as Division I Harvard University) to provide detailed information on all aspects of past education. Homeschooled athletes who have substantial test scores may also qualify for double scholarships—both athletic and academic. Remember to thoroughly explore all your options before committing to a college for the sole sake of athletics. Although finding a good college team is important, attending a school with sound doctrine and a Christian worldview is more so.

In a final word of advice to homeschooled athletes who are pursuing a college education, a formerly homeschooled Division I athlete had this to say: “Provide transcripts, assemble a portfolio, hone your writing skills for admissions essays, and keep improving your game in the sport of your choice. Thanks to homeschooled athletes who have gone before you, the road is much easier than it was five or ten years ago.”

Biographical Information

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