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SPM 205  
March 22nd, 2023

### Benefits of the NBA Promoting Collegiate Basketball

The National Basketball Association's (NBA) "one-and-done rule" refers to the 2005 rule that raised the minimum draft age from 18 to 19. Initially implemented to prevent teams from spending millions of dollars on bust players drafted straight out of high school, the NBA and sporting landscape has changed drastically since 2005, forcing the league and the NBA Player Association (NBPA) to revisit draft eligibility requirements (Charania, 2022). It is expected that the NBA and NBPA will come to an agreement on this topic before the new Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) comes to fruition (Charania, 2022).

This rule change will cause ripples throughout amateur and professional basketball. Not only will it affect the NBA and current and future NBA players, but it will also affect college basketball, the NBA's Gatorade League (G League), the Overtime Elite league, and fans. The reality is that the NBA and NBPA should keep the draft age at 19 (or even raise it) to encourage their draft picks to follow a collegiate athletics path. The result would be an increase in thriving retired professionals, developed players, more economic benefits for players pre-NBA, and the fulfillment of the right to higher education.

Socially, we can look at the impact the one-and-done rule has on fans and players. Fans of the NBA want to see the game of basketball thrive, watch their team win, and watch good basketball. The ultimate reality is that any change in the draft age by a couple of years (above or below 19) likely won't affect the quality of play in the NBA. Across professional sport leagues, the age at which players are getting drafted keeps dropping, but how is it affecting athletes' careers? FiveThirtyEight found that between 2000 and 2013, NFL first-round draft picks aged

20-22 experienced the highest career approximate value, and after the age of 22, the career approximate value dropped off significantly (Salfino, 2018). Adam Fromal also analyzed age when drafted and four-year win shares for players drafted between 1990 and 2007. For our purposes, career approximate value and four-year win shares are comparable because they're what each article uses to determine the post-draft success/value of each player. Fromal found the same pattern as FiveThirtyEight did: NBA players' four-year win share was the highest for first-round draft picks aged 18-21 and players' four-year win share significantly dropped off if they were drafted at 22 or older (Fromal, 2011). These analyses prove that a player's career value and on-court performance are not significantly affected until 21/22 years of age, far above the proposed draft age of 18 and the current draft age of 19. I would even argue that the NBA could raise the draft age to 20 or 21 with a minimal effect on the level of play.

Numerous top athletes across professional sports leagues have expressed their opinions on being drafted young. Peyton Manning famously forwent the NFL Draft to complete his eligibility at the University of Tennessee. In his statement, he said, "I'm having an incredible experience as a student-athlete at Tennessee, but if I'm good enough to play in the N.F.L., as many experts say I am, then I can only be better after one more season" (Eskenazi, 1997). Manning went on to be drafted at the age of 22, having a record-breaking NFL career and being inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Manning's decision to forgo the NFL Draft and get drafted at 22 clearly had no negative impact on his impressive career and playing accolades. It's hard to say whether it was Manning's extended college career or his generational talent that contributed to his impressive professional career. Still, to those worried about athletes wasting the prime of their careers in college, Manning's example proves the contrary.

Gerald Green, the 18th overall pick of the 2005 NBA Draft, was drafted out of high school and gave his support to the one-and-done rule saying:

I guess it was a smart move, because there's a lot of players that come out of high school that are not really prepared. Everybody's not LeBron James. I'm not LeBron James, Martell's not LeBron James, there's only one LeBron James. He came in ready and he dominated the league. There's a lot of players that have to get developed. Me, I've got to get developed. But I guess that age limit, that one year of college experience, can get you more developed and I think that's pretty good. (Beck, 2005).

Despite being part of the last draft allowing high schoolers, even Green saw the merit of the college basketball experience, having committed to Oklahoma State University before declaring for the NBA Draft.

With the age of draftees having a minimal effect on the level of play in the NBA, attention can be turned to the well-being of future and current NBA players. Research has shown that NCAA student-athletes fare better than their non-athlete counterparts. A 2020 Gallup survey of former NCAA student-athletes and non-athletes from 1975 to the present shows that former NCAA student-athletes are more likely to be thriving in purpose, social, financial, and community well-being than their non-athlete counterparts (Gallup, 2020, p. 3, 6). These patterns withstand NCAA division, graduation cohort, gender, race, and ethnicity, further proving the benefits of being a collegiate athlete (Gallup, 2020, p. 3).

All research points to the impact of athlete draft age on career performance being minimal as a young adult, meaning a minimum draft age of 19 would have little impact on NBA game quality compared to a minimum draft age of 18. From there, player well-being becomes crucial in making draft-age decisions and research shows that being an NCAA student-athlete promotes post-graduation success and well-being.

When it comes to the legal implications of the one-and-done rule, there are no obvious direct implications. If the NBA and NBPA come to a legal agreement surrounding the new CBA,

lowering the draft age is perfectly legal. However, there's an argument to be made that lowering the draft age has an indirect legal implication. Research has continued to find that crime peaks around late adolescence (18-21), the age at which NBA players are getting drafted (Blonigen, 2010, p. 90). This societal tendency to commit a crime during this period puts newly-drafted NBA players at risk of making a decision that ends their career because of serving time or having an undesirable image. Furthermore, research also shows that college graduation rates have a significant impact on decreasing crime rates, with one study finding a 5% increase in college graduation rates correlating significantly with a 16.5% decrease in homicide rates (Gonzalez, 2015, p. 36). With these findings, it can be argued that the NBA should encourage an older draft age to reduce crime rates correlated with age and education.

When the earliest discussions about lowering the NBA Draft age occurred, NCAA student-athletes were barred from making any money from their name, image, or likeness (NIL). Now that NIL compensation is legal, the discussion around playing college basketball vs. earning an NBA salary becomes less relevant. Much of the backlash surrounding the one-and-done rule is associated with player draft value and salary decreasing after one year of college play. The argument is that star players deserved to be paid as soon as possible instead of being forced to play for no compensation in the NCAA. The recent changes to NIL counter this argument. Now, for players choosing between playing in the NCAA or the G League, the exposure and sponsorship opportunities that comes from playing in the NCAA are far more than in the G League. To back this up are the G League and NCAA viewership statistics and quotes from industry professionals. In 2019, the first two weekends of the G League averaged 8,300 viewers (Mattone, 2019). In contrast, NCAA basketball viewership on Fox Sports alone during the 2023 season averaged 1.25 million viewers (Christovich, 2023). This is important because

NCAA basketball still holds more influence than other paths into the NBA. As one NBA agent said about college basketball star Jalen Suggs, “I think it became very clear that Jalen Suggs is now a legend. He’s now more marketable, he’s a nationally known name, and you can’t replicate that in the G league” (Uggetti, 2021). Suggs’s single season with Gonzaga University culminated in an on-court loss to Baylor in the NCAA tournament final but an off-court financial win as he signed a multi-year and multi-million dollar footwear and apparel deal with Adidas as well as endorsements and partnerships with Chipotle, Wells Fargo, AT&T, Gatorade, 2K Sports, Hugo Boss, and New Era before the 2021 NBA Draft (Meehan, 2021). Suggs’s impressive business portfolio came before the NIL era but still proves the financial benefits of building a college brand. However, it’s important to note that there have been G League players who have also built successful and marketable personal brands, and in the end, like the NBA agent above said, “...it’s all situational because at the end of the day, it’s about what’s the best decision for that player” (Uggetti, 2021). For many, the possibility of making an earning playing college basketball while increasing marketability in the NBA has eased financial worries for many players, making the G League salaries less appealing.

The ethics behind the NBA draft likely won’t change if the minimum age changes. Racial and socioeconomic impacts on the diversity of the players entering the league will be minimal. Players worried about the socioeconomic disadvantage of not being paid a salary to play college basketball (despite NIL opportunities), have the stable G League salaries to fall back on. The one consideration to keep in mind is that the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) considers higher education a right (Sabzalieva et al., 2022, p. 7). There is an argument to be made that by lowering the minimum draft age, the NBA is discouraging higher education, infringing on player’s human rights.

Some college coaches are worried about the impact of lowering the draft age on the college basketball scene. However, most believe in the stability of the NCAA compared to the G League or the Overtime Elite league. In a survey done by CBS Sports, it was reported that 77% of coaches were unconcerned or moderately concerned. Their reasoning was the stability of college basketball and how deeply ingrained it is in American society with one coach saying:

College basketball is in a great place. We have dealt with change before and continued to find a way to put a great product out there for fans across the country to enjoy. We survived not having LeBron James, Kobe Bryant, Kevin Garnett and on and on. Stars will emerge as upperclassmen -- and, frankly, I think that is what the majority of our fans want to see anyway. Players like Drew Timme, Jared Butler, Davion Mitchell and Luka Garza will continue to emerge and keep the future of college basketball bright and exciting. (Parrish, 2021)

The coaches that were concerned were mostly concerned about the Elite Overtime league, a professional basketball league for players aged 16-20, with one saying:

I'm not concerned for me personally -- but I am worried some kids are getting pulled in a bad direction. A lot of these players Overtime Elite is taking are not NBA players. So what do they do when they leave Overtime Elite? A basketball scholarship is no longer available to them because they're ineligible. So you're 19 years old and you've blown through whatever money they gave you. Now what? Where do you go? (Parrish, 2021)

These NCAA coaches have significant influence on the basketball world, especially the fans. If the coaches don't express worry over changes in the NBA, the majority of the fans, especially college basketball fans, will not express worry over changes in the draft changes either.

The NBPA is obviously a big part of these decisions. The NBPA being the union of NBA players holds significant leverage over NBA decisions. NBPA executive director Tamika Tremaglio said, "We recognize that we really do need to make sure that we have the structure in place, if we're going to have people join the league at the age of 18...And so you know, certainly anything that we would even consider, to be quite honest, would have to include a component that would allow veterans to be a part of it as well" (Walsh, 2023). It's clear that the NBPA's

position is to protect current players and set up future players for success, and they will continue to use their leverage to make decisions with the NBA and when it comes to the CBA with this in mind.

When it comes to optics, many argue that by lowering the draft age, the NBA is showing basketball fans that they don't care about college basketball. The way the NBA could show their support for college basketball while still lowering the draft age is for the NBA and NBPA to come to an agreement that allows college players to be drafted but still retain NCAA eligibility (much like the NHL does). This would allow players to be drafted by the NBA, providing financial and job security, but still develop their basketball skills and get an education.

There are many reasons to get rid of the one-and-done rule or leave it be, these reasons will be considered when the NBA and NBPA negotiate the new CBA. From the research I did, the benefits of keeping the one-and-done rule and promoting collegiate basketball far outway the benefits of being drafted out of high school and progressing through the G League and into the NBA. The career impact of being drafted a year later is negligible compared to the long-term benefits of being a student-athlete. If anything, I believe that the NBA could raise the minimum draft age to further promote the path through the NCAA and have their athletes reap the benefits of being an NCAA student-athlete.

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