



WIN

BY GLENN COOK

AT ALL COSTS

As professional sports move down to the teenage ranks, a troubling swirl of events is enveloping the world of high school athletics

Alexis Hornbuckle is the best girls' basketball player in West Virginia. Good enough to be a two-time *Parade* Magazine All-American, a second team All-USA Today athlete, and two-time state player of the year. Good enough to lead her first high school to consecutive state championships and her second high school—a team that had won only four games in four years—to the title in her junior season.

“As a dad and as a coach,” Hornbuckle’s father, Jerome, says, “I think you’d need to show me another high school player who can do that before you say she’s not the best out there. I don’t think

another kid has transferred to a subpar program and taken it to the top like she has, as quickly as she did.”

And there’s the rub, at least as far as the Kanawha County Board of Education is concerned.

The board started a review of its open-door transfer policy after Hornbuckle and three teammates left Charleston’s Capital High, a magnet performing arts school, to attend South Charleston High in the fall of 2002. The result, enacted amid controversy in May, was even stricter than is recommended by the state high school athletic association: a one-year ban from competition for athletes who transfer within the district.

Derided as a knee-jerk reaction by parents and coaches, the hard-line ban is one of several attempts by school districts across the country to curtail free agency among top athletes. In the school choice and open enrollment era, the need for such a ban also points to the troubling swirl of events that have enveloped high school athletics over the past decade.

What is emerging is a win-at-all-costs mentality that increasingly promotes commercialism over academics. It’s the same mentality that has parents suing coaches over playing time for their son or daughter, puts high school games on national television, and has kids as young as 12 or 13 looking for that one-in-a-billion shot—with blinders on.

“High school should be the largest and most pure form of athletics we have, but increasingly it’s not,” says Charlie Adams, executive director of the North Carolina High School Athletic Association. “If we keep letting these outside agents and outside coaches and gifts and trips and money and shoe companies get involved, we’re going to have a mess that we won’t be able to get out from under.”

THE LURE OF THE BIG TIME

The potential for this “mess,” as Adams and others call it, has been there for a long time. Top athletes have been recruited for decades, especially in hyper-competitive areas where football, basketball, and baseball reign. And transfers from school to school are not new either, although they have accelerated as districts move to less-stringent enrollment policies.

“The lure these days is much greater for both the athlete and the parent than it ever was 10, 15, or 20 years ago,” says Barbara Fiege, commissioner of the California Interscholastic Federation-Los Angeles City Section. “Parents are much more motivated to go out and school shop for the places that provide the best opportunity for their son or daughter to excel in athletics.”

One reason, Fiege says, is the lure of a college scholarship—a potential \$100,000 to \$150,000 windfall if a student is accepted to an elite university. What is also different is the commercialism associated with high school sports, especially in connection with shoe companies such as Nike, Adidas, and Reebok. All three sponsor high-profile national tournaments featuring high school athletes, and the McDonald’s All-American program is one of the most prestigious in sports.

Television also is increasingly a factor. ESPN covers the major high school basketball tournaments, and games featur-

ing Ohio high school phenomenon LeBron James drew almost 2 million viewers in December. James, who attended Akron’s private St. Vincent-St. Mary High School, became the second high schooler drafted No. 1 overall by the NBA in June.

“What has driven high school sports to this point is the professional model, and that’s very, very dangerous because the missions are the polar opposite,” says Tim Flannery, associate director of the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS). “So now, if the coach isn’t winning, then you’ve got to fire him. If my kid’s not playing, then I’ll go to the school board. If things don’t go my way, then I’m going to sue you.”

And sue they do. Although national figures are not available, Flannery and various sports law specialists note that the number of parents filing lawsuits is on the rise. The parents usually do not win, but fighting the litigation costs districts and coaches money. Since 2000, the NFHS has recommended that coaches get three times as much liability insurance as the school district provides.

Fiege, who oversees the governing body for athletics in the nation’s second largest school system, has been braced for a lawsuit since CIF-LA tightened its transfer policy in May. Starting in 2003-04, students who transfer without their parent or legal guardian moving into a school’s attendance zone will be banned from participating in varsity athletics for a year.

“The high-quality athlete who is doing all the moving maybe benefits athletically, but I would be curious about the academic benefit,” Fiege says. “And I still maintain that high school is an educational program.”

THE TRANSFER OPTION

Alexis Hornbuckle has played basketball “since she could walk,” her father says. But as a rising freshman, already better and more skilled than her classmates, she didn’t have a place to participate in varsity sports.

Except for Capital High School. The performing arts magnet offered freshmen an opportunity to play on the varsity team. So Alexis took advantage of Kanawha County’s transfer program and signed up, averaging 16.5 points during her first season and 25.6 during her sophomore year. Capital won state championships in 2000-01 and 2001-02, and Hornbuckle spent her summers taking part in the Nike All-America Camp.

But Alexis and her teammates became increasingly dissatisfied with the coaching staff at Capital, says her father, Jerome, and their schoolwork suffered. So as Alexis entered her junior season, her grades having tumbled, he decided she needed to transfer back to South Charleston, her home school.

“She had to transfer back because she wasn’t happy at Capital,” Hornbuckle says of Alexis. “The environment she was in was not conducive to her success.”

The transfer paid off for South Charleston. The school, which had finished 3-20 in girls’ basketball the previous season, won the state championship, with Alexis averaging 22.8 points and 12 rebounds per game. Capital remained strong but lost twice to South Charleston and was eliminated in the sectionals.

The transfer of Alexis and her teammates also touched off an uproar. Hornbuckle, who is the general manager/coach for West Virginia's Nike National Invitational Tournament team and assistant pastor at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Charleston, says he received threats from people unhappy about his daughter's transfer.

As the basketball season wound down, the Kanawha County school board started looking at the transfer policy and voted for the tightest possible option over the objection of Superintendent Ron Duerring and Capital High Principal Clinton Giles. Giles and Duerring, as well as two board members and several coaches who opposed the ban, believe students should be allowed to transfer at least once before losing eligibility.

"I believe this is unfair, because the band student who also wants to play soccer will be unfairly punished, but I agree that there is too much recruiting of high school athletes," Giles says. "Recruiting is immoral. It's unethical, and it communicates the wrong set of values to kids. I don't believe we as adults can even subconsciously, surreptitiously, or accidentally want to do that. You cannot snow kids."

Or can you?

THE 'AMERICAN IDOL' THING

Jimmy Conner, chairman of the Lake County School Board in north central Florida, has watched as schools across the state

have struggled with the recruiting of athletes. But it wasn't until a rash of students switched schools in his district in the fall of 2001—including one who moved four times in four years—that Conner decided to do something about it.

The resulting policy, enacted in May 2002, prevents students who transfer without a related change of residence from competing in high school sports for one year. Conner says the policy has eliminated "99 percent of the problem."

"The hopping around changes the culture of high school, and we're trying to keep the integrity of that culture," he says. "We were starting to treat high school athletes like prima donnas, and there's no reason for that. That needed to stop."

John McGinnis, principal of Memorial High School in Tulsa, Okla., says coddling athletes is all too common.

"It's an 'American Idol' thing. If you're gifted academically and you're gifted athletically, you seem to get breaks that other kids don't get," says McGinnis, former president of the National High School Coaches Association. "I hate to admit that, but those things do happen. And what are we telling these kids? What kind of message does this send? And as educators, what are we going to do about it?"

Adams, who has directed the North Carolina association for 35 years, says school boards and administrators must be firm to put an end to recruiting.

"Recruiting has no place in high school athletics," he says.

RULES OF THE GAME

Charlie Jordan, athletic director at the Glynn Academy in Brunswick, Ga., never thought he'd get to know the national media firsthand. But then again, he never thought he would have a student athlete like Kwame Brown at his high school.

A 6-foot, 11-inch forward, Brown rose through the basketball ranks to become the first high school player ever selected No. 1 in the NBA draft. In 2001, he signed a four-year, \$17.29 million contract with the Washington Wizards in a year that saw four high schoolers drafted among the top eight picks.

Brown committed to the University of Florida during his junior year but played well in summer camps. As Brown's senior season approached and his stock rose, Jordan started fielding calls from the national media about his star player. For a small county like Brunswick, the media glare was something to see.

"Brunswick, Ga., isn't exactly on the main highway for the media," Jordan says, "so when a kid can do something outstanding in a ball game on Tuesday night and the entire world knows about it on a Wednesday, that's due to increased technology. It's scary to know what's out there."

When it became obvious that the NBA would call, Jor-

dan and Brown's coach—Dan Moore—sat down with the youth's family and talked about the rules and regulations. High school players who want to keep their college eligibility cannot select an agent or receive gifts or loans that would violate NCAA rules. Those considering entering the draft must be sure not to violate state high school athletics regulations or face losing eligibility.

"All you can do is approach it like we did. Sit down with the athlete himself, the parents, and anyone making the decisions. Explain all the rules and the ramifications of breaking those rules," Jordan says. "That's all you can do."

Brown has struggled in his first two seasons in the pros, showing flashes of brilliance but seeming lost in the world of the NBA. Jordan says that's logical, noting that high school draft picks are made on the basis of potential, not proven ability.

"Dadgum, you take an 18-year-old and throw him in there with grown men, that's a different world," the athletic director says. "I don't care how talented you are. It'll take him a long time to learn the position, but for all practical purposes he's still just a young man."

And a rich one, too.—G.C.

“It’s easier to win the New Jersey or New York or Pennsylvania lottery than to be in the NBA lottery.”

— Tom Konchalski

“You’ve got to have a system of checks and balances with your schools and the central office. The central office has to let principals and athletic directors know that you will lose your job if you recruit.”

Conner, whose son will become the third generation in his family to attend Tavares High School, says that message has been sent to his district’s coaches.

“In Lake County, we want a culture that whoever lives here plays sports here,” he says. “We don’t want to be an athletic magnet. We want to be competitive, but we want the same kids to be playing together. That’s how you build a team.”

PLAYING THE LOTTERY

It is a commonly held belief, though no statistics are readily available, that a high school student has a 1 to 3 percent chance of receiving an athletic scholarship for college. That figure drops to one-tenth of 1 percent for players making it to the pros.

That hasn’t stopped the chase, however, and the technology boom is encouraging it. Web sites that analyze and promote student athletes are popping up all over the place. Internet companies such as EdgeTalent.com and topjock.net offer to promote prospective college players, charging parents a fee to do so. And recruiting analysts, constantly in the business of finding the best new player, are ranking kids as early as the sixth grade.

Clark Francis, publisher of the Louisville, Ky.-based Hoop-Scoop, has placed national rankings on players as young as age 10. He says it’s a way to track students through their high school years, and does nothing more than “put them on a list.”

“If a kid’s a great sixth-grader, seventh-grader, or eighth-grader, people call me and I’ll put their name on a list,” Francis says. “It’s an interesting story, a starting point. Does it ultimately mean anything? Maybe not. By the time these guys are juniors and seniors in high school, we will have followed them for a long time. We’ll know whether they are truly good or not.”

Tom Konchalski, a Queens, N.Y.-based recruiting analyst for almost 40 years, says early rankings set up kids for a rude awakening, especially when the athletes and their parents buy into the hype.

“It’s easier to win the New Jersey or New York or Pennsylvania lottery than to be in the NBA lottery,” says Konchalski, one of the most respected high school basketball analysts in the business. “Too many people are chasing false dreams. They’re being told how good they are, and this keeps them from understanding where the future lies, that education is their best shot.

“If you’re the best fourth-grader in the country, who cares?

FALSE DREAMS AND FRIDAY ‘LIGHTS’

Buzz Bissinger says the high school football games he saw in Odessa, Texas, “were, and always will be, the most exquisite sporting events that I have ever experienced.”

Bissinger, a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist and contributing editor to *Vanity Fair*, moved to Odessa in 1988 to capture the townspeople who single-mindedly dreamed of their beloved Permian Panthers and the football games that drew up to 20,000 fans on Fridays.

The result—the 1990 book *Friday Night Lights*—is considered a classic of its genre, a story used in classrooms to tell the cautionary tale of rivalries run amok, of racism and favoritism, of high school sports taken far too seriously.

While Bissinger says things have improved in Odessa, where he was vilified after the book’s publication, he’s even more pessimistic about the business of high school sports today.

“Education right now is at the bottom of the pile,” he says. “It’s more and more about potential profits and less and less about what kind of place sports should have in a high school setting, and that’s kind of tragic.

“There’s more technology, more exposure for today’s athletes. For everybody who thinks that LeBron James is too high falutin’ and a jerk, they didn’t see ESPN and *Sports Illustrated* saying that because they helped create him. He was too much of a moneymaker for them. He got them a lot of attention, and when I see that, I cringe.”

As an investigative reporter working for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Bissinger recalls the mid-1980s days when he saw high school coaches in Chicago rabidly recruiting 11, 12, and 13-year-old basketball players.

“They were just selling a false dream,” he says of the coaches. “How many kids are ever going to get to the college level? And of those, how many are going to get to the professional level? It’s sad.

“The spectre of kids and parents shopping around for the best basketball program and football program. ... Is that the purpose of high school? God, I hope not.”—G.C.

It's easy for kids to fall into the mistaken belief that they can be the next Michael Jordan.

If you're the best eighth-grader in the country, it's better," Konchalski says. "But it's more important to be good late than early. The rest of it is not healthy at all. It's hard enough for a kid to stay focused anyway."

Francis, who says he was one of the first recruiting analysts to tout LeBron James, says he gets more calls from parents upset that a child is not on his list than from people unhappy about a player's placement.

"It's not my responsibility to make sure these kids are doing what they need to," he says. "It should be the job of the parent, the counselor, and the coach, just like everything else in life. It's politically correct to say that you shouldn't do this because some kids can't handle it, but why should I penalize kids who can, who do benefit?"

Charlie Jordan, athletic director at the Glynn Academy in Brunswick, Ga., supervised the senior year of Kwame Brown, the first high school student to be selected No. 1 overall in the NBA draft. He says it's easy for kids to fall into the mistaken belief that they can be the next Michael Jordan or Roger Clemens.

"Where you get into trouble is that sometimes kids see that happen to a young man and think it can happen to them," Jordan says. "They don't realize exactly how difficult that is. It's a very small percentage that make it all the way. Most parents would be better off to start a good savings plan when their child is born."

SACRIFICING SPORTS FOR GRADES

Mary Hall McArver's parents had that good savings plan. But thanks to talent, a little luck, and the hard work of their middle child, they won't need it.

Mary Hall, a shooting guard who graduated in May from Forestview High School in Gastonia, N.C., has received a full basketball scholarship to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The all-state player, who rebounded from a serious knee injury during her junior year, prides herself on hard work—on the court and in the classroom.

"It was definitely difficult at times," says Mary Hall, who averaged 25 points while carrying a 3.97 unweighted GPA and serving as co-editor of the school yearbook. "I'd be in the yearbook room until practice and even after practice I'd have to go back in, so it could get tough. Some nights I had to stay up really late, but I tried to take advantage of every opportunity I had."

Mary Hall, like Alexis Hornbuckle, played other sports as she started high school. But while Hornbuckle has continued

to be a multisport athlete—a rarity among today's top high schoolers—Mary Hall says she had to sacrifice sports for grades.

"Basketball has always been my first love and it was the first sport I played," she says. "I just knew that if I was serious about playing in college that the other sports were not that important. I could live without those because I knew I needed to work harder in basketball."

Her father, Roger, says he and his wife encouraged Mary Hall to drop activities or sports "when she was showing signs of being overwhelmed." But beyond that, he says he remained hands off in her decisions as long as her grades remained good.

"I think there's only so much a parent can do. Parents can help their child be exposed to opportunities, but that's where the role ends," he says. "You're not going to talk a college recruiter into recruiting your child if they don't think the child can make it or that they can offer something, no matter how hard you try."

TWO DIFFERENT PATHS

As the 2003-04 school year approaches, Alexis Hornbuckle and Mary Hall McArver are having much different summers.

Hornbuckle, who has narrowed her college choices to Duke and Tennessee, is on the road, participating in Nike tournaments in Portland, Ore., Washington, D.C., and Chicago during the month of July. Her grades are up, she qualified for college admissions with a solid ACT score, and now she's looking to win her fourth state championship as a senior at South Charleston.

Jerome Hornbuckle has no qualms about his daughter's transfer and says he would do it again if put in the same situation. "Kids are letting their parents know that these coaches aren't doing their job," he says. "Instead of people addressing the issue of quality coaches, we've got teachers coaching sports."

But isn't that the way it's supposed to be? As the parent of a future Division I athlete, Hornbuckle doesn't think so.

"Kids want a chance to go to college, and the environment they were in was not conducive to that," he says. "I don't think kids are following a program as much as they are following coaches. If you make phone calls for me and do things to get me into college, then that's where I want to be."

Mary Hall, on the other hand, went to the beach with friends for a few days after graduation. In late June, she enrolled early at UNC-Chapel Hill, getting a head start on her education. She's taking core classes now and isn't ready to decide on a major.

"Ever since I was really little, my parents ingrained that thought in my head, that education came first," McArver says. "I just don't think you can rely on sports to get you through college or get you through life or anything."

"I was lucky to have basketball to help me, but I never relied on basketball. I could always fall back on my grades and how hard I worked, too. That comes first."

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