

College Report

What happens after Doug McDermott leaves Creighton? Or Stephen Curry at Davidson? Jameer Nelson at Saint Joseph's? Do those programs keep growing, or fall back from the loss of the best player they ever had?

The Replacements

By Andrew Kahn

Stephen Curry put Davidson on the map when he led the Wildcats to within a game of the Final Four as a sophomore in 2008. He stayed one more season before being selected with the seventh pick in the NBA draft. He is now one of the best young players in the league.

"There is a tremendous residual from that success," says Jim Murphy, Davidson's athletic director since 1995, about the NCAA Tournament run. "It buoyed the entire program. Everyone still talks about Steph Curry. It has remained a positive force for us in recruiting and the extension of the Davidson brand."

It's an effect that's hard to quantify, on or off the court, but high school players know a deep tournament run and future NBA career are possible by attending Davidson. "That goal is tangible," Murphy says. "It's one our coaches are talking about on a regular basis." Davidson will be moving from the Southern Conference to the Atlantic 10 this season, and while it's impossible to attribute this jump to one person, Curry's success played a big part.

Is it really that easy? Acquire one transcendent talent and sit back and enjoy the massive windfall? Creighton hopes so. Last season, Doug McDermott led the Bluejays to a 27-9 record, an appearance in the top 10 and a third straight year with an NCAA Tournament victory. All the while, Creighton adjusted to the Big East after 37 years in the Missouri Valley Conference. McDermott swept national player-of-the-year awards and was the No. 11 pick in June's draft. Can the program keep the momentum going without its once-in-a-generation talent?

Recruiting is the lifeblood of any successful program. McDermott ended up at Creighton because his dad, Greg, was the coach; before Greg moved from Iowa State to Creighton; Doug had committed to Northern Iowa, another Missouri Valley school. Curry went to Davidson because none of the ACC schools in his backyard were interested in the 6-foot-2, 160-pound guard. Stars who end up at smaller schools, for the most part, were not stars coming out of high school. They blossomed late, and through a mixture of hard work, coaching and luck, became better than anyone expected. Give college coaches a time machine and Curry ends up at Virginia Tech, where his father was a star, and Greg McDermott recruits Doug to Iowa State. But given their success — valued at both the college and NBA levels — might future blue-chip recruits consider the Creightons

and Davidsons when making their college choice?

Davidson's coaches might emphasize Curry's path to recruits, as Murphy mentioned, but that doesn't mean the recruits are listening. Recruiting service rankings show no measureable uptick in the quality of players Davidson has acquired since Curry's departure. The Wildcats still count on under-the-radar local talent and the occasional three-star who might have gotten a look from a lower-tier ACC school. Win totals at Davidson have remained high, however, and the team has been to two NCAA Tournaments in the five post-Curry seasons.

Surely you remember the name Wally Szczerbiak, even if you couldn't spell it. He led Miami (Ohio), a 10 seed in the 1999 NCAA Tournament, to two upset wins, scoring 43 of his team's 59 points in the opening round and 23 of 66 in the next round against Utah. "He carried us to heights Miami had not been to and hasn't been since," says then-athletic director Joel Maturi, now the special assistant to the president at Minnesota. Miami has been back to the tournament just once since Szczerbiak was chosen with the sixth overall pick in '99 and embarked on a 10-year NBA career.

"When you lose a guy like that it will impact any program, especially at a mid-major," Maturi says. "But you would hope — and I can even say this for football with (2004 Miami graduate) Ben Roethlisberger — you could convince recruits you can make it to the NBA or NFL coming here. It's not easy, but it can be done."

And yet, the majority of top recruits still end up at the traditional powers.

Saint Joseph's experienced wild success during Jameer Nelson's college career, including an undefeated regular season in 2003-04. But did his stellar play — and subsequent NBA success — lead to better players matriculating to St. Joe's? It might have given the school an in with higher-level talent, but suddenly the competition for the players was greater.

"He made our net wider," says longtime coach Phil Martelli. "Our name was known because of the way he played while he was here. But I don't think recruits say, 'Jameer Nelson went to St. Joe's and made it to the NBA, so I want to go there.' The kids think they can go anywhere and fulfill their dreams. They don't necessarily want to pattern themselves after someone else's path."

Maryland was an ACC contender under coach Lefty

Driesell for more than 15 years before Bob Wade took over in 1986. Wade got the program in trouble, resulting in a postseason and television ban for the Terrapins, meaning Gary Williams did not inherit a great situation three years later. He did inherit sophomore star Walt Williams. "He was exciting and charismatic," Gary Williams says. "He allowed us to be good enough that the sanctions, even though they put us at a disadvantage in recruiting, allowed us to recruit locally. That's the key to turning around a program. He was a legend in this area and kids, despite the sanctions, were willing to give Maryland a shot. I've always believed Walt Williams was greatly responsible for that." Maryland was able to build off that momentum, going to 11 straight NCAA Tournaments and winning a national championship over two Final Fours.

ESPN college basketball analyst Jay Bilas, a former player and assistant coach at Duke, believes programs like Creighton and Davidson have benefited in every way from having a star player. "But it's not some magic bullet that has catapulted them into a different stratosphere. A lot of these players we're talking about were missed somehow out of high school. It's hard to get those kinds of players. You have to do a good job of recruiting in your wheelhouse. Wichita State is a prime example. They've done so well not just because they've had some big star. They find players that fit their culture."

Time will tell if Wichita State, which lost just one game last season and went to the Final Four the year before, can maintain its success. At the very least, the school can expect plenty of benefits that don't appear in the standings. Says St. Joe's athletic director Don DiJulia, "The excitement Jameer Nelson created advanced our visibility as a university. More people were interested in learning more about Saint Joseph's." DiJulia says applications to the school increased significantly after Nelson's magical season and have sustained over time. A *USA Today* article that ran before the 2004 NCAA Tournament estimated Nelson's value to the school at \$2 million, thanks to a packed arena, increased merchandise sales and added sponsorships.

Nelson and St. Joe's are certainly not an isolated case. There is plenty of evidence connecting a successful men's basketball or football team with increased applicants, as high school kids are often introduced to a college through sports. It's not inconceivable to think

many of Davidson's applicants in the year or two after the school's NCAA Tournament run had not even heard of the school before Curry.

Murphy talks about Davidson becoming a national brand and enhancing its visibility through the success of its basketball program. "To be able to do that at a school with 1,800 students is very special," he says. Davidson's visibility will only increase this season as its teams move from the Southern Conference to the Atlantic 10.

Creighton, entering its second year in the football-less Big East, made the conference switch not just for its athletic department. "In order for universities to remain strong and maintain quality and quantity in regards to enrollment, you have to have more of a national brand," says Creighton athletic director Bruce Rasmussen. Adds coach Greg McDermott: "The move to the Big East has opened doors in different parts of country for student recruitment. Now with our trips to major East Coast and Midwest cities, places we didn't play before, we can foster some relationships that would not have been possible when we were in the Missouri Valley." The men's basketball team generates 95 percent of Creighton's athletic budget, so it's important it be given a bigger platform to succeed.

Defining success for a college basketball program starts with determining its purpose. And in an era of billion-dollar television contracts and million-dollar salaries for assistant coaches, that's not easy.

Bilas points to the narrative surrounding Butler, the supposed "the little engine that could," when the Bulldogs appeared in their second straight finals in 2011. Two seasons later, they were in the Atlantic 10, and a year after that bolted for the Big East and their coach left for the Celtics. "They like money, too," Bilas says. "And there's nothing wrong with that. Butler, Davidson, VCU and other others jumped (to better conferences). And they didn't do it for basketball. They did it for

money and institutional advancement. And that's OK."

The athletic directors and coaches agree that conference realignment was not solely for the benefit of the basketball team. As Murphy, Rasmussen, and McDermott noted, increased exposure is good for the entire university. But at a school where football is small-time or nonexistent, the basketball program takes on a greater purpose. "I recognize the importance of our program to the university and its mission," Martelli says. "Success is measured in wins and postseason (appearances), but success is also measured in pride we can provide all those that will wear Saint Joseph's across their chest, near Philly and far from it."

Maturi, having worked in various capacities at schools of all sizes, says it's important for mid-majors not to lose sight of their identity. "You need to go back to what the purpose of college athletics was to begin with: to provide opportunities to young people, entertainment to the students and community and alumni, and add diversity to the campus. We should take pride in the Miamis getting to the tournament and winning a game now and then."

That mindset suggests that the Davidsons should be grateful to have ever had Curry and not expect another player like him. Navy admitted a skinny, inexperienced player who was two inches above its height limit, watched him grow four inches and lead the program to three straight NCAA Tournament appearances and an Elite Eight. But since David Robinson graduated in 1987, Navy has been to just three tournaments. Indiana State went 81-13 in Larry Bird's three seasons, culminating with a title game appearance in 1979; the school has finished under .500 in most seasons since and has reached the tourney just three times. Louisiana Tech got a boost from Karl Malone's time there, but it didn't last long.

Creighton basketball was successful before Doug McDermott arrived, going to the NCAA Tournament

seven times in a nine-year span from 1999 to 2007. But the program reached new heights with him. Greg McDermott expects to bring in higher-level players going forward. "Doug has opened more doors for us," he says. "He's a household name with high school basketball players. We're just in the middle of recruiting now, but every kid we talk to is well aware of Doug's success and his story to get to the point he is today."

Incoming Creighton freshmen Ronnie Harrell (No. 84) and Leon Gilmore (135) cracked the top 150 on major recruiting service sites, rare gets for Creighton. Harrell had received offers from Big Ten and Pac-12 schools. Justin Patton is a consensus top-50 recruit in the class of 2015. Asked about Doug McDermott, Patton says, "He played a big part in my decision, mostly because of player development," referencing the fact that McDermott, a three-star recruit, blossomed into a lottery pick in his four years at Creighton.

Of course, there have been far more lottery picks to come out of Duke, Kansas and Kentucky, each of which nabbed multiple top-15 prospects in this year's class. "Creighton is an outstanding program," Bilas says. "They're not just a good team because of Doug McDermott. The brand is built up. The challenge is much different now in the Big East, but I think they'll do just fine."

Creighton lost four starters from last year's team and is not among most preseason Top 25s. But Greg McDermott believes the returning players "learned how to win" with his son and are ready to fill the void. Doug McDermott is not walking through that door. But he did once, and it might make all the difference.

Andrew Kahn is a freelance writer who has been published in Newsday, The Wall Street Journal and Sports on Earth, among others. He writes about college basketball and other sports at <http://andrewkahn.com>. Email him at andrewkahn@gmail.com and follow him on Twitter at @AndrewKahn

DREAMING of a CAREER in BASKETBALL?

Attend our
Basketball Career
Conference
at the Portsmouth
Tournament
April 9-10, 2015



**SPORTS
MANAGEMENT
WORLDWIDE**

Earn college credit or a Masters/Doctorate
with these courses:

For more information and to register online go
to SMWW.com or call 503-445-7105.

Start or Advance your Career in:

- Scouting
- Sports Agent
- Broadcasting
- Game Operations
- Coaching
- Digital Video Editing
- Player Personnel
- Marketing
- Management
- Front Office

8-week online training courses facilitated by experts including:

- NBA Scout **Frank Burlison**
- Former Golden State Warriors GM **Ed Gregory**
- NBA Announcer **Brian Wheeler**
- NBA Agent **Jeff Brodie**
- Synergy Sports **Josh Keith Uri**

Learn the skills and the strategies to advance to the front of the hiring line in the NBA, NCAA, WNBA, NBDL, USBA, or International leagues. Courses include training with cutting-edge software and video editing, using the #1 software by the NBA & EA Sports: Synergy Sports.