



R.J. Barrett (Photo: USA Today Sports)

Transferring in high school hoops a consistent trend

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By: **Jason Jordan, USA Today High School Sports** | February 26, 2018





R.J. Barrett is a 6-foot-7 walking bucket of a basketball player. The Montverde (Fla.) Academy guard gets his per game average of 28 points in every way imaginable, from ferocious dunks to heavily contested Stephen Curry-like three-pointers.

Barrett, a Duke signee, not only is the No. 1 player in the ESPN 100, he's also projected to be the No. 1 pick in the 2019 NBA Draft.

Key to his rise? He says transferring schools made it all possible.

"I think things would've been different," Barrett said.

Barrett, a senior, transferred to Montverde, ranked No. 1 in the USA Today Super 25, from a school in Ontario, Canada, in the eighth grade because he simply "wanted to be the best."

"When I transferred, it was the best decision for me because I wanted to play against the best players," Barrett said. "Since then the competition in Canada is at all-time high. But back then, transferring was necessary for me."

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Barrett's sentiment is shared by hordes of elite high school basketball players who change jerseys for reasons ranging from exposure to opportunity.

How prevalent is ship jumping in high school hoops?

Headed into this season, 21 of the 25 teams ranked in the Super 25 were banking their success on transfers. Last season when La Lumiere (La Porte, Ind.) won the GEICO National title, four of its five starters were transfers.

"Sometimes getting a fresh start is the best option," said Princeton (Cincinnati) forward Darius Bazley, a Syracuse signee. "That one move can turn you into the player you want to be."

Clearly, players see the prospect of skill elevation as an enticing proposition. Of the 27 five-star players in the ESPN 100, 13 have transferred at some point in their high school careers.



Darius Bazley said transferring schools was the best decision he ever made. (Photo: McDAAG)

because he believed he wasn't growing on or off the court.

"It just wasn't working," he said. "It was the best decision I could've made. I felt I wasn't developing as a player and I wasn't growing as a person. A lot of players feel like that sometimes, but just stay. I had to do something."

Sometimes, though, the best move is to stay put. ESPN basketball recruiting director and former college coach Paul Biancardi recalled a conversation with Dennis Smith Jr., now a rookie with the Dallas Mavericks, about potentially transferring to a basketball powerhouse after his sophomore year at Trinity Christian School (Fayetteville, N.C.) in 2014.

Biancardi took Smith to task on everything from his relationship with his high school coach to how much he felt he'd develop if he did or didn't transfer.

"He was happy on all fronts," Biancardi said of Smith. "He loved everything, but he wanted to play a national schedule. That's it. The reality is that he didn't really need the exposure as a top 10 kid. He ended up staying, finished as the No. 1 point guard in the class and went on to be a lottery pick."

Resisting the urge to transfer also worked for Trae Young, a freshman point guard at Oklahoma who leads the NCAA in scoring and assists, and is on everyone's short list for National Player of the Year honors.

He stayed at Norman North (Okla.), despite constantly being courted by basketball powerhouses, won the prestigious Nike Peach Jam and made the McDonald's All American Game.



Trae Young stayed at his local HS despite being courted by national HS powerhouses. (Photo: USA Today Sports)

"It was a tough decision because playing for a Montverde or an Oak Hill was definitely tempting," Young's father Ray Young said. "But, in the end, it was important for Trae to stay and continue to learn how to be a leader and face a different type of adversity, as far as playing in tough gyms where all the opposing fans are against you with not as many five-stars and still being able to win big games as an underdog. We knew he would face that in college."

hopes to have a similar story.

New Albany (Ind.) shooting guard Romeo Langford



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“For me, it was important to leave a legacy where I’m from,” he said. “There was no reason for me to transfer. If you’re doing good and getting better consistently, they’re gonna come and see you wherever you are. It was always a goal of mine to be a guy the community could be proud of. I wanted to finish where I started.”

Spartanburg Day (S.C.) wing Zion Williamson told USA Today Sports in August he’d be staying home for his final season to go for a state title three-peat. Williamson, a Duke signee ranked No. 2 overall, accomplished that goal with a 74-41 win over Trinity-Byrnes (S.C.) on Saturday.

For Coby White, a five-star player headed to North Carolina, resisting transferring from Greenfield (Wilson, N.C.) despite being recruited by several national powers was all about loyalty.

“I just felt like I was in a good situation and I didn’t want to let my teammates down,” he said. “I’m definitely glad I never had to transfer or leave home. I was always there for my mom and dad to help run the house. It helped me through a lot.”

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Still, those seeking greener pastures seem to outnumber the loyalists. After his father got an assistant coaching job at Washington, Michael Porter Jr., then the No. 1 player in the country, transferred from Father Tolton (Columbia, Mo.) to Nathan Hale (Seattle). The Raiders went from winning just three games in 2015-16 to finishing atop the USA Today Super 25 last season with a 29-0 record.

“We’re getting inquiries every week of kids wanting to come and play here,” La Lumiere coach Patrick Holmes said. “We have to feel the kid out. You can’t just come here because we’ve got a great basketball program. It’s got to be the right fit.”

Simi Shittu learned that lesson after transferring from Canada to Montverde early in his high school career. After his sophomore season, Shittu left Montverde for Vermont Academy (Saxtons



Four of La Lumiere's five starters during last season's national title run were transfers. (Photo: Andy Marlin, USA TODAY Sports)

"People thought I was crazy because I left such a big-time school," said Shittu, a senior forward who is signed to Vanderbilt. "I just found a staff that cared about me on and off the court and I see how much I've grown in the last year. I know it was what was right for me."

As independent schools, national powerhouses like La Lumiere, Montverde, Oak Hill Academy (Mouth of Wilson, Va.) and Findlay Prep (Henderson, Nev.) are free to pursue elite talent around the country

with immunity from state associations' eligibility parameters.

Earlier this season, No. 1 junior James Wiseman and his teammate Ryan Boyce needed a court order to finish the season with No. 11 Memphis East (Tenn.) after their eligibility was called into question because they transferred to the school.

"The water becomes grayer if you're a member of your state association," Holmes said.

Biancardi said the decision to transfer often comes down to whether a player feels like he's done enough to impress college coaches during the AAU season in the spring and summer. If not, transferring to a school that plays a national schedule could keep a player on the recruiting radar longer.

"The bottom line is that transferring alone isn't going to elevate you," Biancardi said. "You have to produce once you get there. It always comes back to the personal responsibility and that's what players should keep in mind."

Cameron Smith contributed to this story.

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