

Findlay Prep produced 17 NBA players. Then overnight, the controversial program shut down.

Rich Levine June 27 at 7:00 AM



Cliff Findlay, far left, founded Findlay Prep in 2006, producing 17 NBA careers and counting. The school closed over Memorial Day weekend without warning. (Josh Holmberg/Cal Sport Media/Associated Press)

HENDERSON, Nev. — Carey Wohlman was home in Minnesota late last month when she received a call with news that upended her family's carefully laid plans. She chose to wait to tell her 18-year-old son, Blaise Beauchamp, until he returned from a basketball tournament in Dallas with his AAU team.

Beauchamp had recently completed his first year at Findlay Prep, a high school basketball powerhouse outside Las Vegas with a nagging reputation as a hoops incubator with little education to offer beyond the hardwood. He had earned his first Division I scholarship offer (California-Riverside) and, with another season looming, he had landed in Texas eager to nab a few more. After all, its negative image aside, Findlay produced 17 NBA players in the past decade and more than 70 Division I scholarships.

“Then all of a sudden Blaise found [the news] online,” Wohlman said, “and I was just like, ‘Oh [expletive].’ ”

Findlay Prep had closed, leaving Beauchamp, along with a handful of other elite basketball prospects, without a high school. Beauchamp’s predicament is particularly challenging. He’s ineligible to play his senior year back in Minnesota, because he repeated eighth grade after moving from California, not realizing what was at stake. He’s essentially a high school free agent before the biggest season of his life.

Even so, he still defends the institution that left him stranded. Many of his teammates feel the same way.

Turbulence from the start

Founded in 2006 by Cliff Findlay, a Las Vegas car dealership heavyweight, Findlay Prep quickly established itself as one of the world’s most successful high school basketball programs, producing a 381-43 (.899) lifetime record.

But Findlay Prep was viewed with a critical eye before it got off the ground, said Eddie Bonine, former executive director of the Nevada Interscholastic Activities Association. It wasn’t a school as much as a basketball team: 12 teenage boys from across the globe, sharing a house owned by Findlay, a UNLV booster.

The program lacked its own education curriculum, as well as its own classrooms, so the team took courses at Henderson International, a nearby private school, when it wasn’t barnstorming the country as part of a 30-game schedule.

"When [Findlay] first came to the committee, it was to the chagrin of many in the Las Vegas area," said Bonine, who now leads Louisiana's high school sports association. "The first impression was it would be a diploma mill to establish athletes from around the world to feed into the UNLV Runnin' Rebels, but they adhered to everything we asked. We knew their stripes and what they wanted to do."

By 2009, though, the chagrin went national, thanks in large part to a recruiting class highlighted by Avery Bradley, a senior guard from Seattle.

"I was ready to spread my wings, and [Findlay] was the perfect opportunity," said Bradley, now a 10-year NBA veteran. "It changed my life."

Bradley was joined by juniors Cory Joseph and Tristan Thompson, both from Canada, and the three future NBA first-round draft picks led Findlay to a 33-0 season and its first national high school championship.

After the title, Sports Illustrated called Findlay "the latest step in the evolution of high school basketball: a program that operates completely outside the traditional system and makes no pretense about its top priority."

In 2012, after future No. 1 pick Anthony Bennett helped Findlay win a third title in four years, the New York Post called the Pilots "nothing more than an AAU team masquerading as a high school. Its education is a sham."

Mike Peck, the coach for all three championships who amassed a 157-

8 record in five years at Findlay, learned to ignore the noise.

"Every year I'd call the colleges our guys attended and ask for their GPA. And up until I left, the lowest cumulative GPA of any kid was a 2.3," said Peck, now entering his fourth season as associate head coach at the University of Texas San Antonio. "I used to take that to the state association every fall and say: 'Here's the real success. Here's how I know why our program works.' "

Peck left Findlay after the 2012 season, but news of its closure hit him hard.

"It's disheartening," he said. "And I'm not going to lie to you, I'm a little mad."

When Bradley heard the news, he immediately texted his old coach, "What can we do?" Peck didn't have an answer.

"It bothers me," Peck said. "It took a lot of work to get off the ground and achieve that level of success for as long as we did."

Players left behind

When Findlay Prep quietly shut down over Memorial Day weekend, the closure was announced in a brief story in the Las Vegas Review-Journal, published late that Friday.

Zachary Clemence, a 6-foot-10 incoming junior, received the news at home in San Antonio, leaving his family unsettled.

"Zach had other offers last year, but he chose Findlay," said his mother, Dusti Clemence. "He was ready to give three years to that

place. And now this? Discarded without an explanation?"

Robby Findlay, the founder's son, said "there sounds like there could've been better communication, but I think at the end of the day, there's no good time."

"It's like when a coach leaves a college program," continued Findlay, director of operations for Findlay Automotive Group. "Do you recruit kids and then leave, or do you leave first and now the next coach doesn't have time to recruit? We told them at a time when we knew they'd have time to find somewhere to play."

There's one thing almost everyone agrees on: After more than a decade, the partnership between Findlay Prep and Henderson International had strained.

Rodney Haddix, a member of Findlay's inaugural roster and perhaps its last coach, was aware of the building tension but imagined the Pilots would find another home. Robby Findlay hasn't ruled out relaunching the program if the right opportunity presents itself.

"Nothing worked out," Haddix said. "There's a lot of things that have to happen to make this work. We're a niche operation."

Findlay Prep also hasn't won a title since 2012. This past season, the Pilots failed to qualify for the national high school tournament for the first time in school history.

"A few tough seasons definitely magnifies everything else," said Findlay, whose prep year at Maine Central Institute inspired his father to start Findlay Prep. "In the basketball world, winning games solves a

lot of problems.”

High school basketball has caught up, in part because of Findlay Prep.

“What they did out west is unparalleled,” said Josh Gershon, a basketball scout and national analyst for 247Sports.com. “There wasn’t a big prep school following out here before they came, but the blueprint Findlay laid down has been picked up, and prep basketball is more relevant than ever out here.”

But even in an off year, Findlay Prep had an impact. Raymond Hawkins III, a 6-8 forward from Oakland, arrived in Henderson in August with seemingly limitless potential but just one season to piece it all together.

“Without the stage Findlay provided, this probably isn’t possible,” Hawkins said this spring after accepting a full scholarship to Alabama.

Among Hawkins’s Findlay teammates, there was Alex Tchikou, a 6-9 forward from Paris, and Saba Gigiberia, a 7-footer from the country of Georgia. They came to Findlay as unknowns and were likely headed elsewhere regardless, but they’ll do so as established four-star recruits. Two recent Findlay players, Bol Bol and P.J. Washington, were selected in last week’s NBA draft.

As a result, a month after the news broke, many of those affected most by the closure still stand by the school.

Clemence has heard from most of the nation’s top high school programs, including Sunrise Christian in Kansas and DeMatha, since Memorial Day. He also recently received a scholarship offer from

national runner-up Texas Tech.

"I came [to Findlay] to get better," said Clemence, who's only 16 and has credible NBA aspirations. "And it happened."

Then there's Beauchamp, the 6-2 combo guard with NBA range and a Stephen Curry-quick release, and the player most affected by Findlay's closure, given his eligibility issues.

Beauchamp, who's currently seeking an out-of-state prep school for his senior year, still said he has no regrets.

"I would come here again even if I knew the outcome," he said. "It was a great experience. I made relationships and met people from all over the world. I got my first D-I offer with these guys. I've never experienced anything like it."

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