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Big Deals of Summer

Michael Porter Jr.





Porter Jr. staking his claim as nation's No. 1 rising senior

Dick Weiss

Hoops

Michael Porter Jr. is rapidly making a case for himself as the most talented American-born high school basketball player in the country.

The versatile 6-foot-9 Porter was arguably the best player at Team USA's U18 tryouts for the Tournament of the Americas team I watched in Colorado Springs in June. He made another bold statement when he shot 12 for 16, scored 33 points, grabbed six rebounds, had three assists and was voted co-MVP along with point guard and teammate **Trae Young** as Missouri-based MoKan Elite dominated a strong PSA Cardinal team from New York 93-65 in the finals of the annual star-filled Nike Peach Jam in North Augusta, S.C. Porter Jr. put an exclamation point on a brilliant performance with a halfcourt buzzer-beater.

The MoKan travel team is sponsored by **Kevin Durant**, and there have been comparisons between Porter Jr. and Durant at this stage of development. Porter has emerged as the most developed offensive player in his class. He handles the ball like a guard, can make deep 3-pointers and uses his length and athleticism to blow by defenders and finish at the rim. He relentlessly attacks the offensive glass. Porter Jr. averaged 28.5 points, 11.8 rebounds and 3.4 assists as a junior for Father Tolton Catholic High in Columbia, Mo., which won the 2016 Missouri Class 3 state championship. He scored 31 points and grabbed 19 rebounds in a dramatic 62-60 victory over Barstow at the University of Missouri Arena.

"That was the biggest moment of my life," Porter said. "Every kid dreams of winning a state championship.

"Twelve-thousand people. Came down to the wire. I got some of my best friends on that team. It was crazy."

Porter was one of just two juniors on *USA Today's* All-America team.

Growing up, Porter Jr. was always hanging around the Missouri campus, playing pick up games in the Tigers' workout facility. Missouri was initially considered the leader in the recruiting sweepstakes. But after his dad **Michael Sr.** left a women's assistant coaching job at Missouri to accept a new position as an assistant on **Lorenzo Romar's** men's staff at Washington, the dynamics changed.

Porter chose Washington over Missouri, Indiana, Virginia and Oklahoma. Romar, one of the best recruiters in the country, is a longtime friend of the family, having played with Mike Sr. on Athletes in Action. He is also Michael Jr.'s godfather.

Hey, recruiting is a business and Washington has not broken any rules. Porter Jr. is a good kid with a 4.0 GPA who has received well-grounded support from his parents.

He comes from a strong basketball background. His father Mike Sr. played for New Orleans. His mother, the former **Lisa Becker**, is 6-4 and averaged 54 ppg in six-on-six play during her senior year in the state of Iowa and started four years for the Hawkeyes and with USA Basketball in the 1985 Jones Cup. Then there are Porter's seven brothers and sisters. Bri, who's 6-3, and 6-4 Cierra led Rock Bridge girls to three straight Missouri state titles before signing with Missouri. Jontay, who is expected to be a 7-footer, scored double figures in Tolton's 2016 state championship game.

The landscape of college basketball could be on the verge of a change as more and more elite high school prospects consider the possibility of skipping their freshman year in college to play overseas or possibly the NBA Development League for a season if salaries rise high enough for a year before declaring for the NBA draft.

In 2014, McDonald's All-American guard **Edmund Mudiay**, who attended Prime Prep in Dallas and signed to play at Southern Methodist, agreed to a one-year, \$1 million deal to play professionally in China after the NCAA began to research his questionable academic resume at Prime Prep in Dallas. Mudiay declared for the NBA draft in the spring of 2015 and was selected with the fifth pick overall. This past season, McDonald's All-American guard **Terrance Ferguson** of API in Dallas, who was the best player in the Nike Hoop Summit, signed a professional contract in Australia when he failed to qualify at Arizona.

As it turns out, they had no other choices.

The topic of pay-for-play came up again at this summer's Nike Peach Jam when 7-0 rising senior forward **DeAndre Ayton** of the Bahamas, who now lives in Arizona and is arguably the No. 1 prospect in the Class of 2017, and 6-10 rising junior forward **Marvin Bagley** of Arizona, who now lives in California and is the current consensus No. 1 prospect in the Class of 2018, squared off against one another in a pool game.

Ayton seems locked into a desire to play in college for a year and lists Kansas, Kentucky and Arizona as his top three choices. His mother is pushing the idea and Ayton publicly says he wants to win a national championship. But he has been quick to say Ferguson's decision opened a lot of eyes and told SYN "a lot of dudes are going to go overseas." College coaches and high school stars are also talking about the D-League as an option if NBA franchises take a more active role in the league and salaries jump to the low six figures.

Speculation about both players' futures became clouded after Ayton transferred before his junior season from Balboa City High in San Diego to Hillcrest Prep in Scottsdale with the idea of playing with Bagley. But the plan evaporated when Bagley left the school in December, moving to Sierra Canyon High, where he spent second semester but was ruled ineligible to play as an athletic transfer by the California Interscholastic Federation.

Ayton is still at Hillcrest and is currently taking multiple online courses at Arizona Connections Academy – an NCAA-accredited, tuition-free online school – and has been in contact with the NCAA to make sure he will be on track to meet NCAA minimum requirements. Bagley, who has been to three prep schools, has two years left before he makes any final decision, but he is leaving his future wide open, saying skipping college is at least under consideration.

Both could have problems with the NCAA clearing house because when they first enrolled to play for Hillcrest in the fall of 2015, they were taking courses from Starshine Academy, which does not meet NCAA non-traditional core-course legislation.

College basketball has never been at risk for missing consensus No. 1 prospects in back-to-back years, but times are changing.

This FIBA U17 boys World Championship was a celebration of American youth basketball.

The United States captured the gold medal, ripping the heart out of Turkey, 96-56, Sunday night in the final game at Siglo XXI Arena in Zaragosa, Spain, to remain unbeaten in all U16 and U17 international competitions. The U.S., which averaged 106.1 points, got 133 on Korea and scored at least 90 points in six of its seven games and won its games by an average of more than 40 points.

They were a joy to watch in person.

It's obvious that the best thing USA Basketball did in the past year was hire youth coach **Don Showalter** as a fulltime employee. It not only provides continuity, but it also allows Showalter to implement a relentless full court pressing system that has produced a Woodenesque 50-0 record and eight championships in the U16 tournament of Americas and the U17 Worlds.

This was the most talented and by far the best defensive U.S. youth team Showalter has ever coached since his arrival at USA Basketball in 2009. All 12 players are destined to play big-time Division I basketball, and at least half of this roster will likely play in the NBA. Team USA held four teams to under 60 points. They completely shut down Turkey in the final, limiting them to 20 points in the first half and 31 percent shooting, 13 percent (2-for-15) from the 3 overall while forcing 24 turnovers. **Collin Sexton**, a 6-2 guard from Pebblebrook High in Marlboro, Ga., who was the leading scorer in the Nike EBYL spring league and averaged 17 points, 4 rebounds and 4.1 assists in his first FIBA competition, was selected MVP of the tournament.

Sexton and 6-9, 255-pound rising senior forward **Wendell Carter Jr.** of Pace Academy in Atlanta, who led Team USA in rebounds and blocked shots, both made the FIBA All-Star five, along with 6-8 point guard **Dzanan Musa** of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 6-7 forward **Sergi Martinez** and 6-4 point guard **Arnas Velicka** of Lithuania.

But truth be told, there probably wasn't any player other than Musa who could have started for Team USA. I could have made a case for five Americans—Sexton, Carter, **Gary Trent Jr.** of Apple Valley, Minn., 6-8 rising junior forward **Carte'Are Gordon** of Webster Grove, Ill., and 6-8 rising senior forward **Kevin Knox II** of Tampa, Fla. Catholic – as legitimate candidates for the All-Star five.

When the NCAA allowed college coaches to attend FIBA events, it opened the floodgates for resourceful programs looking to upgrade their recruiting. Some 65 men's programs and 42 women's programs made the cross-Atlantic journey to watch the U17 Worlds.

Dick Weiss has covered Final Fours for the Philadelphia Daily News and the New York Daily News since 1970, has received the Curt Gowdy media award from the Basketball Hall of Fame and has written six books with Rick Pitino, John Calipari and Dick Vitale.