

Josh Pastner Confidential, Part 3: The challenge of reclassification

By Michael Cohen

1:00 PM, Jul 9, 2015

This is Part Three of "Josh Pastner Confidential," a five-part series offering an unfiltered look at the University of Memphis men's basketball program via the emails of coach Josh Pastner obtained through a public records request. The newspaper examined more than 2,000 pages of Pastner's correspondence, and each story focuses on a specific aspect of the program, such as scheduling, recruiting and coaching.

They filed into the gymnasium at Ridgeway High School on a chilly January morning, two dozen local basketball players lured out of bed on a Sunday for a new event promising to blend basketball instruction with off-the-court life lessons.

At best, maybe some of the anecdotes from an array of speakers would sink in. At worst, someone was offering an open gym and the chance to play pickup ball. Never a bad option in the Bluff City.

Among the attendees at the inaugural Memphis Athletics & Academics Combine were the three eldest Lawson brothers, and each member of the city's new first family of basketball — K.J., Dedric and Chandler Lawson — unfurled his stilt-like legs on the orange and blue bleachers. They, along with the others, listened as adults paraded before them championing things like proper social media behavior and the importance of earning a college degree.

"Trust me," said Todd Day, the coach at Hamilton High School and a former NBA player, "there is life after basketball."

But sometimes life *is* basketball, especially during the present, and no one knows this better than the Memphis-bound elder Lawsons.

The sons of two former collegiate basketball players — their father, Keelon, is an assistant at the University of Memphis — K.J. and Dedric Lawson were all but crowned saviors of the Tigers' program partway through their final season of high school. They watched from behind the bench as Memphis limped to its worst season under head coach Josh Pastner, an 18-14 campaign that ended without a postseason berth, all while guiding Hamilton to a state championship of their own.

Yet any overhauling effect the Lawsons hoped to have at Memphis, where they headlined a recruiting class that ranked in the top 15 in the country, depended largely on Dedric's skills away from the court. The 17-year-old with a 6-foot-8 frame, soft hands and point-forward versatility was attempting to graduate high school in three years, doubling up on

classes and powering through ACT prep in a race against the clock. The school-centric messages at the combine were perhaps most applicable to Dedric, who was pushing to join the Tigers as fast as possible.

A broad public records request by The Commercial Appeal for Pastner's email offered an inside look at how the reclassification was handled at Memphis, where a group of university employees worked concurrently with the local school system. Pastner, who said he played no part in the actual decision for Dedric to reclassify, swooped in as the conduit between the Shelby County Schools central office and the university, digging into the nitty gritty of course work, classes and credits to ensure the process was swiftly completed.

"Since Dedric is so high profile and once this gets out it will be a national story," Pastner wrote to a pair of university employees, "I think we should be proactive with the NCAA to ensure they are aware and know everything is done above board."

A sense of urgency

By the time the news broke on Sept. 11, 2014, that Dedric Lawson planned to reclassify and join his brother in the 2015 recruiting class, Pastner and at least three additional university employees were already one month into the process of formalizing the switch.

Dedric's reclassification began in earnest at least four weeks earlier, when Pastner said the Lawsons came to him and expressed their desire to make the change. From there, Pastner opened a line of communication with Jacqueline Smith, the guidance counselor at Hamilton, about an early graduation. "We would like for Dedric to graduate the same time with KJ," Pastner wrote. "How can we get that done?"

Emails show that the next was a month of collaborative effort between the university, the central office for Shelby County Schools and the NCAA in a back-and-forth process involving at least eight people in addition to Dedric. Smith, Randy McPherson, manager of student support, and Lou Gettings, another counselor, participated on behalf of Shelby County Schools, while Pastner, Keelon Lawson, assistant athletic director for compliance Jason Gray and director of athletic academics Bob Baker contributed for the university. At least one person from the NCAA was involved as well.

Keelon and Dedric Lawson were not made available for comment by the U of M.

A critical component of Dedric's early graduation was enrolling in virtual school courses through the school district to offset the absence of a true senior year. Students who graduate early, according to literature shared with the newspaper by McPherson, must complete 18 credits within the guidelines outlined by the school district.

To reach 18 credits, Dedric had to take English 3 and English 4 simultaneously, according to an email written by Pastner, with the senior-level English class administered

through virtual school. He also enrolled in at least one other virtual school course and added an extra elective to his daily schedule at Hamilton.

“If he does all that he will be able to graduate next May,” Pastner wrote to Gray and Baker. “He is a very good student, but I wanted to make sure this would not red flag the NCAA in any way, and if so we should alert them ahead of time so they are aware.”

Middle man

An idea that worked in theory was still a cause for concern at the university. Baker, like Pastner, believed that taking two sequential English classes simultaneously was “a potential red flag” for the NCAA, and he recommended that Dedric retain all materials in case the courses were questioned.

“I agree,” Gray wrote five minutes later, “they will more than likely come back and ask for all examples of course work, assignments, notes, exams, etc from all of his virtual classes. So he needs to keep great records of everything.”

Enter McPherson.

As a manager of student support for Shelby County Schools, McPherson was involved in the central office’s process of approving Dedric’s plan for early graduation. An email from Pastner indicates McPherson contacted the NCAA in an attempt to verify the dual-English component.

“It wouldn’t be unusual for someone to take 11th- and 12th-grade English together,” McPherson told the newspaper. “But it would be unusual for someone to take Russian 1 and Russian 2 together.”

The percentage of students in Shelby County who choose to graduate early is growing, McPherson said, though it remains a small portion of each respective junior class. The idea of athletes seeking early graduation for the purpose of reclassification is a “kind of new trend that we’re seeing,” he said. (McPherson pointed out that the central office merely aids a student in graduating early. The actual athletic reclassification has nothing to do with Shelby County Schools, he said.)

Before officially offering the early graduation option, the central office checks the proposed curriculum of each student. Any course offered through the SCS virtual school, McPherson said, has already been vetted by the NCAA.

“Everything has been cleared by the Shelby County School System,” Pastner wrote, “but they would like to make sure the NCAA is okay with Dedric taking Eng 4 under virtual online school which is part of the Shelby County school program.”

Generally speaking, according to McPherson, the central office is wary of allowing students to graduate early. Counselors are asked to sit down with each student and

discuss the realizations that face a 16- or 17-year-old high school graduate. They want to know if the student is physically and socially mature enough to make the transition to adult life; if the student is going to college; if the student has a job lined up.

After all that, “we ask families to put it in writing and say that we’ve discussed these things and (say), ‘Yes, we want to go ahead.’ ”

What separated Dedric from other students, McPherson said, was the presence of a very clear, very controlled, very supportive post-graduation plan to play basketball at the U of M — and his sterling academic standing. A partial transcript included in the public records request shows Dedric was nearly a straight-A student during his first two years at Hamilton.

The Lawson family wished to proceed, and Pastner was more than happy to prod the process along as a communicative middle man between SCS and the university’s compliance team. Sure there is life after basketball, but sometimes life *is* basketball.

“Josh wanted to get the process through,” McPherson said, “because he was very interested in getting a really good basketball player.”