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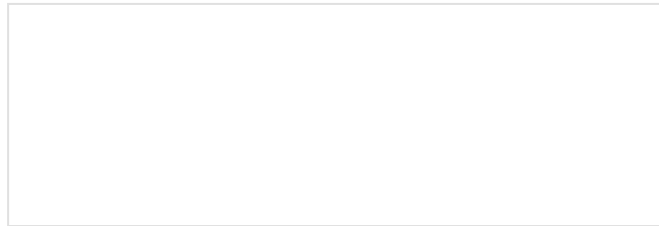
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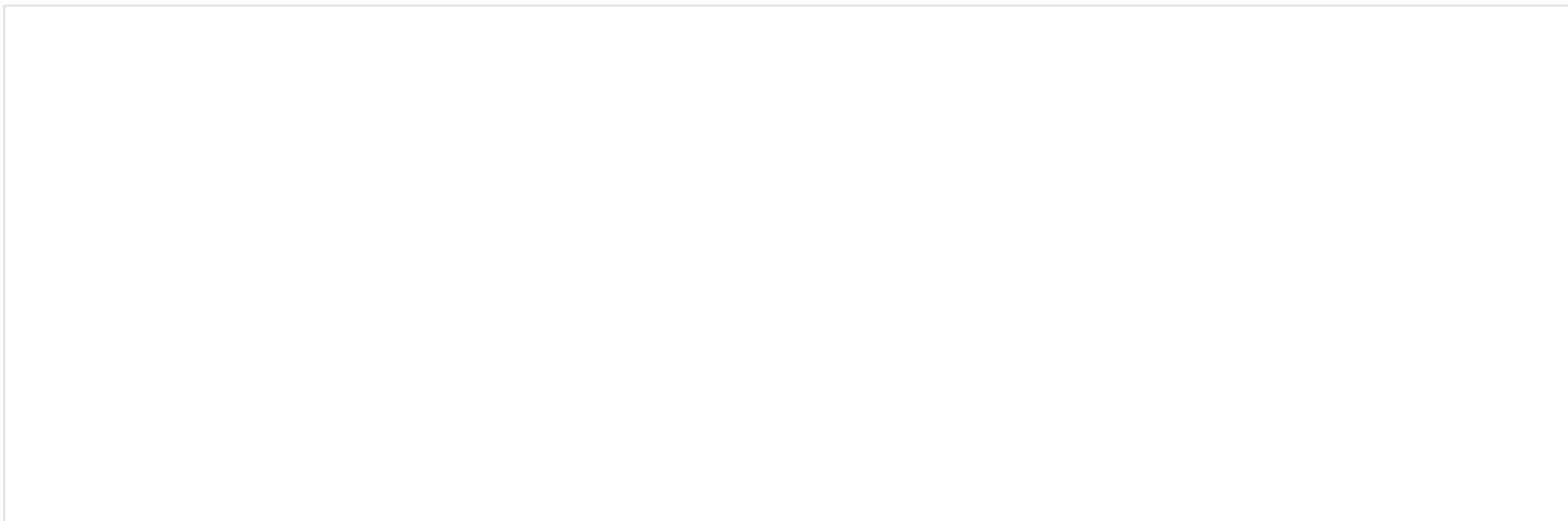
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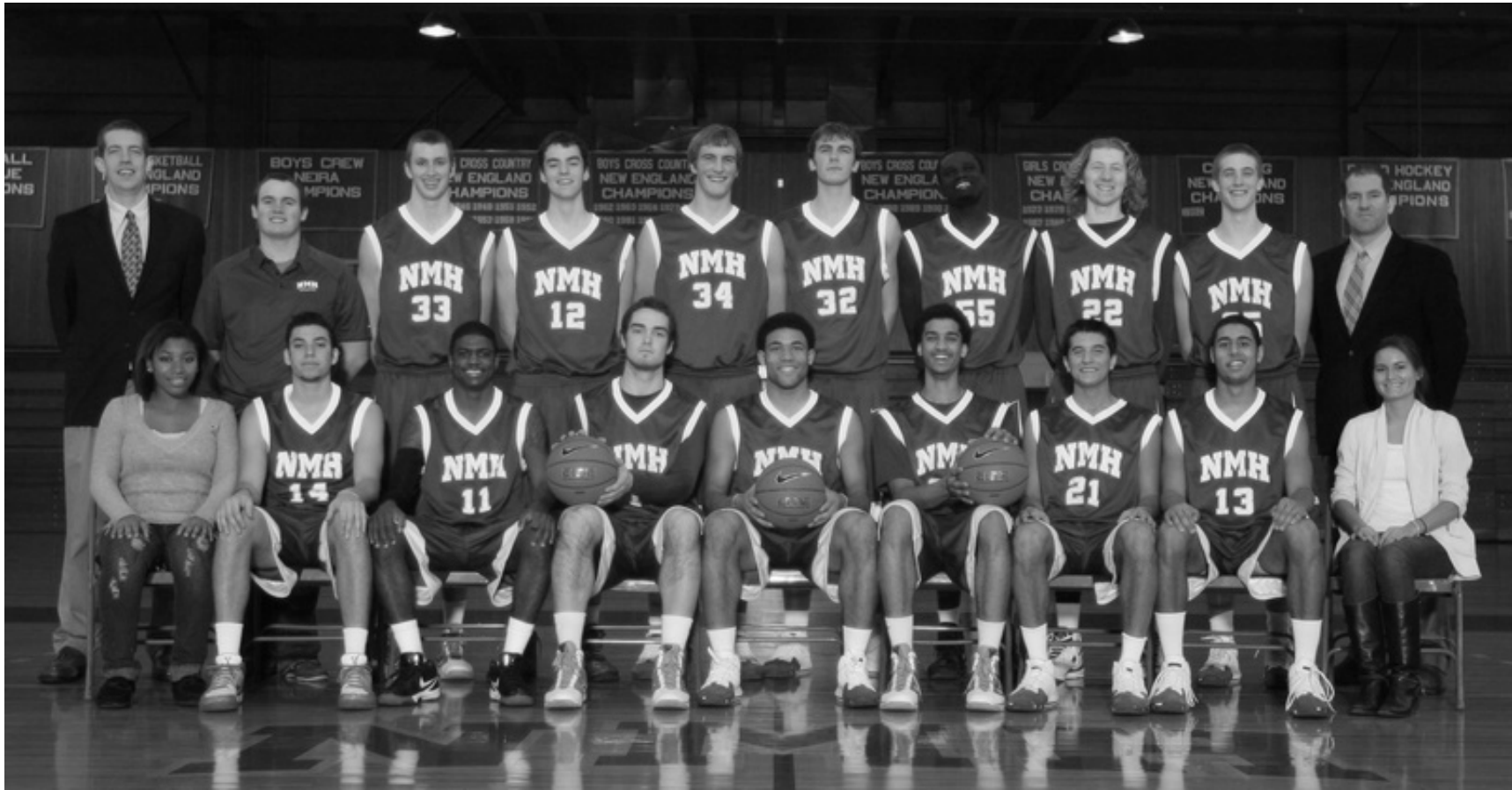


Taking Their Talents to the Ivies

By ANDREW FARBER and CALEB LEE, CRIMSON STAFF WRITERS [April 11, 2014](#)

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RISLEY SPORTS PHOTOGRAPHY

The NMH 2009-2010 varsity boys basketball team.

In one of college sports' oldest rivalries, the Harvard men's basketball team stormed into Yale's Payne Whitney Gymnasium on March 7 looking to clinch the Ivy League title outright for the third straight year.

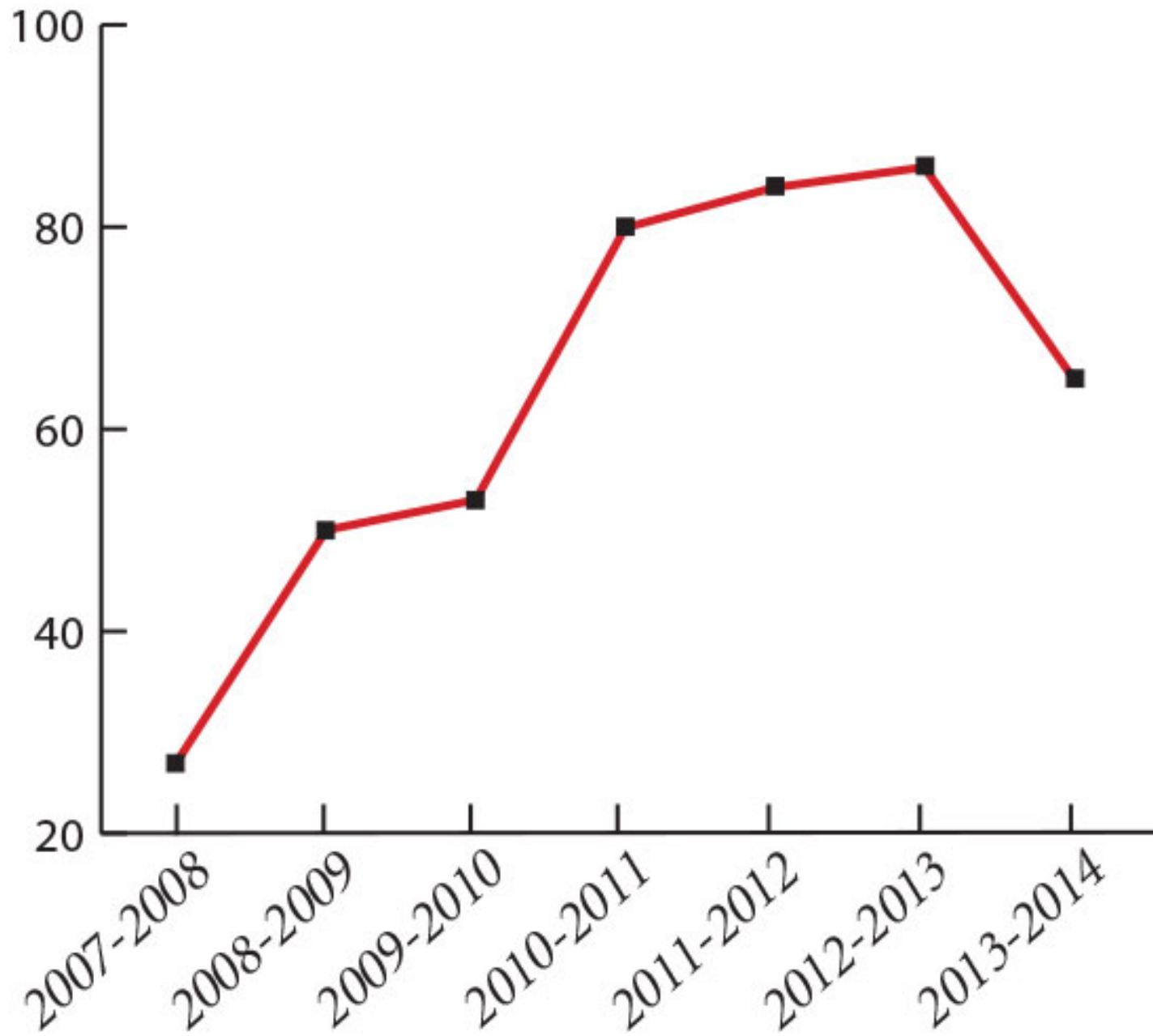
Eight minutes into the first half, Yale freshman Anthony Dallier entered the game for the first time, tapping out junior Armani Cotton and immediately getting matched up with Harvard co-captain Laurent Rivard. Eleven seconds later, the Bulldogs drew a foul on Harvard sophomore Evan Cummins, who immediately headed to the bench and took a seat alongside teammates junior Matt Brown and freshman Zena Edosomwan.

In 40 minutes, the six never took the court at the same time. Yet, only five years ago, they had battled hundreds of times together in the same high school gym at Northfield Mount Hermon, a small New England prep school that was the best-represented institution

on the Payne Whitney hardwood.

NMH trumpets its basketball roots—on its basketball webpage, 2013 NCAA Tournament diaper dandy and NMH alumnus Spike Albrecht is pictured front and center. But the sophomore Michigan point guard isn't the focal point of head coach John Carroll's note to visitors. Instead, Carroll proudly writes, "In 2013-2014, NMH will have 11 players in the Ivy League, which is over three times more than any other school in the nation."

Carroll has been at the helm of NMH's program since 2001, and in this time he has built a dynasty with rosters that have included NCAA champions, McDonald's All-American Nominees and Academic All-Americans. His players are known for entering Division I basketball programs and being ready to compete on the hardwood from move-in day.



Over the last six years, the percentage of prep school students on Amaker's team has spiked. [ANDREW FARBER](#)

When Tommy Amaker was hired as Harvard's head coach in 2007, tapping into this talent became a priority of his that has transformed into a luxury over the past seven seasons. In those seven seasons, Amaker has added 28 recruits from prep schools—five from NMH. His first year, prep school students composed barely a quarter of the roster; five years later, 86 percent of the players had prep school roots. While Ivy League admissions officers have traditionally traveled to prep schools in search of top students, the trend of Ivy League coaches heading into prep schools gyms for premier prospects is much newer.

FIVE-STAR STUDENT-ATHLETES

A high school sophomore at the time, as Brown watched fifth-seeded USC defeat Arkansas and Texas at Spokane Veterans Memorial Arena in 2007, he could certainly see himself playing there in the NCAA Tournament in a few years. While he had the location and tournament right, the colors that he would be wearing were a little different.

At the time, USC was led by current Los Angeles Lakers guard Nick Young and Chicago Bulls forward Taj Gibson. The Trojans played in the powerhouse Pac-12 conference, featured a national schedule, and was one of the fast rising programs in the NCAA with the nation's **No. 2** recruiting class with top prospect and current Milwaukee Bucks forward O.J. Mayo according to Rivals.com. Everything a high school sophomore could want in a program and all in sunny Los Angeles.

After Brown's sophomore year at Barrington High School, the list of college coaches knocking on his door stretched all the way from Rhode Island to Los Angeles. Nonetheless, Gill, Mass. would be his next stop.

But Brown would have been the last person to guess he'd be at NMH after his sophomore season, in which he averaged over 20 points a game for Barrington. Instead, Brown was busy visiting the hottest basketball schools in the country, with each coach courting his talents.

"I went out [to USC] and visited and was close to committing," said Brown. "Notre Dame was recruiting me for basketball and football."

But as Brown continued to impress coaches on his AAU team, the Rhode Island Hawks, another coach caught sight of his talents. Carroll saw the athletic guard at a local tournament and convinced him to take a visit. While Brown looked at other prep schools, such as Deerfield and Exeter, he eventually decided to attend NMH and reclassify as a sophomore. Once at NMH, Brown became a perfect illustration of the ever-changing landscape in college basketball.

NMH plays in arguably the toughest division in high school basketball, with a travel schedule that takes the team across the nation and a practice plan that is modeled after top-tier Division I basketball programs. In Brown's senior season, NMH lost in the national championship game on a buzzer-beater.

“I remember I’d be shooting a free throw and see [former West Virginia coach] Bob Huggins watching through the gym,” said Brown. “Any major school from Duke to Florida to Kansas to Kentucky, I have seen them consistently.”

When the recruiting process heated up after Brown’s first year at NMH, he sat down for a meeting with Carroll to weigh out his college options. At the time, Brown had his sights set on playing for a national powerhouse, and attending anything less was almost laughable.

“I wasn’t really looking at the Ivy League because I wanted to play Big East, Big Ten,” said Brown. “So when the Ivy schools were coming to recruit me I wasn’t interested.”

But Carroll has always stressed to his players the importance of attending schools that excelled not only athletically but also academically. So, Carroll made a point to send his star guard to Harvard’s Crimson Elite basketball camp in the winter of 2008.

“Coach Amaker is a top-level recruiter and he sat me down and sold me on what has happened [at Harvard],” Brown said. “He sold us on that seven or six years ago, telling us what we were going to do and how we were going to do it. I know I bought into that vision and he said ‘Matt, this is Harvard University. This is the best university in the country. What other things can you say you were the first person to do there?’”

After the camp, Brown’s next meeting with Carroll went much differently. Now he was the one explaining why Harvard was the right choice for him.





A nationally sought-after recruit, Matt Brown chose the Ivy League over the Pac-12 and Big East. [RISLEY SPORTS PHOTOGRAPHY](#)

Brown became another name in the rapidly growing list of highly recruited players to choose an Ivy League school. In previous years, playing Ivy League basketball meant sacrificing the opportunity to play in front of a national audience in return for an unparalleled

diploma. But with Amaker coaching Harvard and Cornell making the Sweet Sixteen, the league had begun to gain back respect for a conference that had not been on the national radar since the 1970s.

The conference is more than a one-man show, however. For a league that was previously considered an afterthought, the Ivy League has brought down Big East, Pac-10, and Big Ten giants in the tournament the past five years.

“It is as good a group of coaches as the Ivy League has ever had I think,” said Carroll. “They’ve had really really great coaches historically, but across the board, you have real depth, knowledge, and expertise. Some really good guys, excellent recruiters, they understand their universities. I think this as good as it gets or as good as its gotten as far as the eight Ivy League schools.”

As the competition of the Ivy League has increased, so have the number of recruits from prep schools attending the Ancient Eight. Top recruits have flocked to schools like NMH to better their academic standing and receive an offer to play Ivy League basketball.

“The prep schools are great for a number of different reasons,” Yale coach James Jones said. “Some kids, it bolsters them academically. It helps them because they can take classes that will be helpful going forward.”

The prep-to-Ivy route has become more common and consistent as the Ancient Eight has come up with wins against the likes of Arizona, Cincinnati, and Wisconsin. The Ivy League is also now in its second year of a television contract with NBC Sports. In 2013-2013, this contract extended to 39 televised games, not including the two tournament games apiece Harvard and Yale played in front of national audiences.

“I think [the NMH grads at Harvard] could all play in power conferences,” Albrecht said. “I tell Evan that all the time. He had a bunch of big time offers but he chose to stay locally. I can’t blame him going to the best school in America.”

EVERYTHING NORTHFIELD

Cummins, like Edosomwan and Brown, was highly recruited out of NMH. But his preparation for Division I basketball began long before Amaker stepped into the NMH gym.

Every year, hundreds of Division I college coaches make trips across the country to watch high school prospects compete in league games, tournaments, and showcases. But although the focus is most often put on players once they have displayed college-level potential, the athletes’ preparation and schooling decisions begin much earlier.

Carroll is constantly on the lookout for basketball talent that matches his philosophy. As he strives to make NMH the best academic and basketball school in the country for students preparing for college, Carroll scans the internet for videos and highlight clips of

athletes that could fit his program.

He is often the one reaching out to players like Albrecht, convincing them to consider his school, telling them that NMH can offer a proven and developed basketball program that has sent almost 60 of its hoops stars to Division I programs. After refining his program over the past decade, Carroll can offer something that public schools and even most private institutions and prep schools cannot: the opportunity to play college basketball—in high school.

Cummins was another recruit that Carroll pushed hard for. After considering the Phillips Exeter and NMH, Cummins transferred to Carroll's program after his sophomore year in high school, fully convinced by the merits of Carroll's program.

“Athletically, Coach Carroll does a lot of work talking with college coaches about everything,” Cummins said. “Whether its how they schedule their practices, [and other] things like that. He makes an effort to make his program as close as possible to a college program.”

And while winning championships is one of Carroll's goals, his ultimate focus is far beyond taking home a prep school title. He wants to ensure that his players not only reach the next level but also go the extra mile.

“The idea of coming to NMH is to get the preparation and the exposure academically, socially, and athletically to not just get to these great colleges but to also excel once they are there,” Carroll said. “It all starts before their arrival here. They have an intent. They have goals, dreams, and aspirations to be at the level. When they get here, we go to work for them to get them the exposure they are looking for.”



Sophomore Evan Cummins was one of Carroll's many recruits to NMH. [RISLEY SPORTS PHOTOGRAPHY](#)

Part of that exposure comes automatically with the competition that NMH faces on a week-to-week basis in the New England Prep School Athletic Conference, whose Class AAA division has **in recent years** produced Nik Stauskas, Maurice Harkless, and Andre Drummond. The top-notch level of play prepares prospects for college basketball, while also bringing dozens Division I talent evaluators and coaches to games.

“When we used to play at NMH our conference had three or four, up to seven or eight Division I players,” Albrecht said. “These were big time players you were playing against. All of the size and athleticism was much like college basketball.”

Along with competing on the court, potential recruits spend much of their time ensuring that their work in the classroom meets the necessary academic standards. To bridge the gap between high school and college, Carroll’s college-esque athletic program is coupled with an academic structure that is specifically tailored for potential Division I athletes.

“We’re not a high school--the only high school thing about us is the age of our kids,” Carroll said. “I call this a pre-college.... We’re as close to college as you can get.”

With students taking three full-year courses each semester and six total for the year, the school work is specifically aligned to be as close to a college curriculum as possible.

“Most high schools stop at AP Calculus, but these kids can go years beyond that here,” Carroll said. “[Students] can take linear algebra and number theory, so they have that opportunity to be in a collegiate type of experience [at NMH].”

Switching schools also gives players more flexibility in the recruiting process, as transferring to NMH often entails a reclassification of the student’s current grade. The process is designed to allow the players an extra year of recruiting and academic preparation and, according to Cummins, most players at NMH take advantage of the opportunity to get ahead.

“As far as coursework, I took all of my junior classes as a sophomore,” Cummins said. “It’s helpful having another year to mature both on the court and off, [and] it’s huge in preparing for college life and college basketball in general.”

Part of that preparation often includes retaking standardized tests in order to reach academic thresholds, especially the high bar set in place by the Ivy League. The Academic Index, a two-part measure that assesses a prospective student on their grades and standardized test scores, weighs heavily during Ivy League recruiting season. In a conference without athletic scholarships, each student must be thoroughly vetted by the admission committee before being admitted into the school.

For some NMH athletes, the additional year was a chance to reach certain score benchmarks. Edosomwan transferred to NMH after he was thrice unable to earn the SAT score in high school required to qualify under Academic Index regulations.

Similarly, Albrecht, recruited by Brown University out of high school, was told his senior year that he was a point short on his ACT of meeting the necessary academic benchmarks. When Carroll came calling, persuading Albrecht to look at prep school as a way of improving his scores, he transferred to NMH and used the extra year as a chance to hone his scores and basketball game.

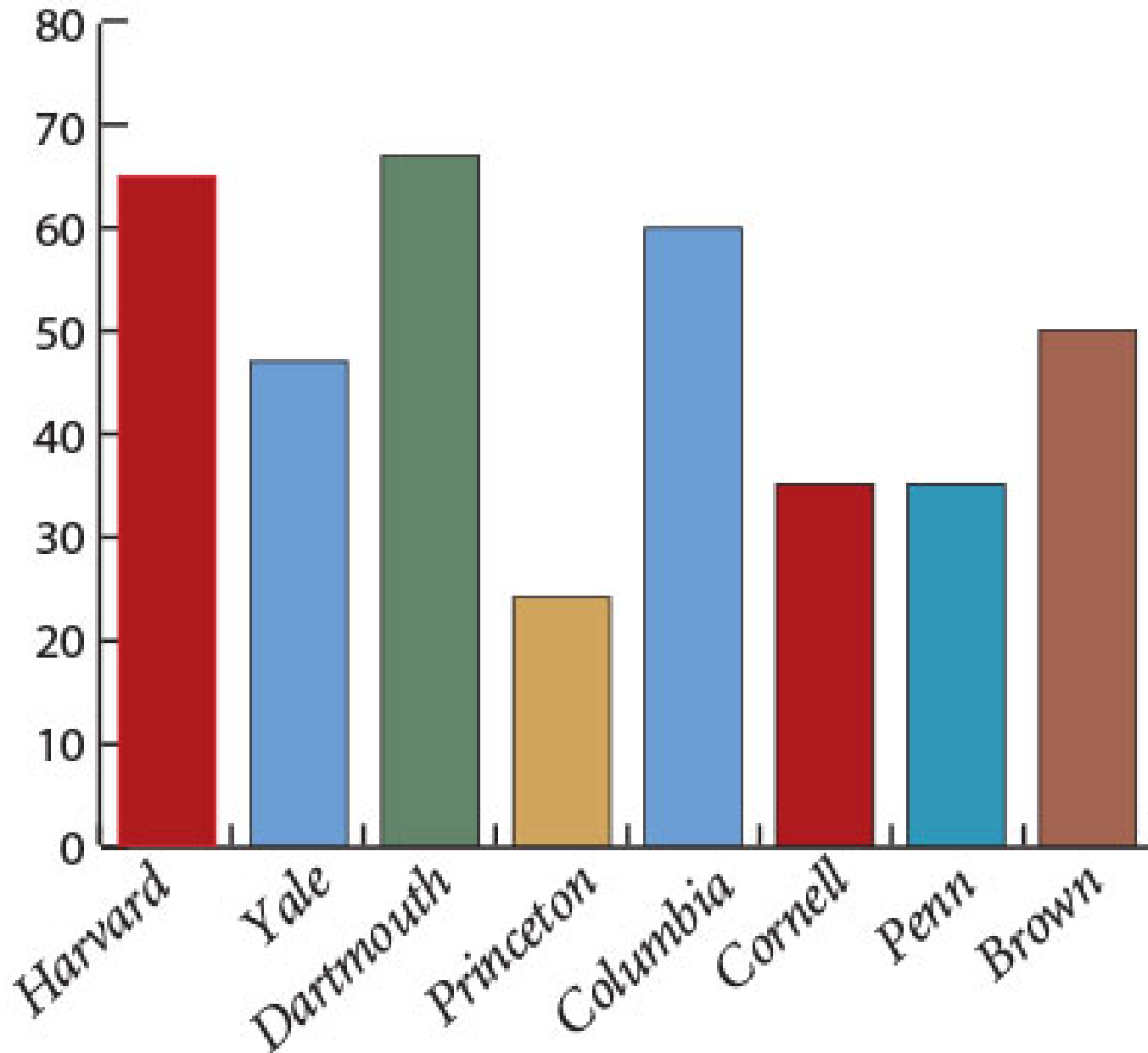
“The only reason I was going out there was [that] I was planning on playing basketball and getting my grades up,” Albrecht said. “[I wanted] my SAT and ACT scores a little higher so that I could get into an Ivy League [school].”

THE NORTHFIELD NETWORK

While Albrecht came to Massachusetts with his eye on the Ivy League, his play and the school’s exposure caught the eye of Michigan coach John Beilein. With then-freshman Trey Burke considering leaving the Wolverines after a disappointing first-round tournament exit, Beilein needed an insurance policy. A Midwesterner himself, Albrecht wanted to go home. He visited Michigan and instantly committed.

However, Albrecht’s road was the one less traveled. The ties between NMH and the Ivy League run extremely deep. Although NMH has sent more players to Harvard than any other school, Carroll’s players dot rosters across the Ancient Eight.

“Over the last seven years we’ve sent at least one player to every Ivy League school,” Carroll said. “We currently have three at Dartmouth, two at Yale, two at Brown, [and] one at Princeton.”



In the 2013-2014 season, prep school players made up 47.7 percent all Ivy League men's basketball players. [ANDREW FARBER](#)

Beyond the players that have already been recruited and matriculated to Ivy League schools, the increase in numbers have important implications for the future prep-to-Ivy connection.

“When our kids visit these schools, they can have conversations ahead of time with our players and alumni, and then also times they get hosted by our players when they’re there,” Carroll said. “They feel like the visit and information they are getting is a lot more genuine, because it is within the NMH family.”

The recruitment structure presents an opportunity to both sides; from the recruit’s perspective, the personal attention and trust with the NMH college athletes in the Ivy League helps ease the otherwise stressful process.

“It was easy to talk to [Crimson players] about their experience here and what it was like,” Cummins said. “Coming up to visit and being able to stay with guys that you were friends with from school. It definitely helped. The biggest thing [was] being able to get honest evaluations of every place throughout the Ivy league was a big role.”

For the institution, the NMH family provides a welcoming committee and, in turn, an increased likelihood of a commitment. Brown says that he personally reaches out to NMH players Amaker is scouting, serving as their guide when they take campus visits.

“When they come up here, [you] take them under your wing and show them the ropes and open the eyes to what Harvard can give them,” Brown said.

In this way, the rise of Ivy League recruiting is self-fulfilling; once the core base of former NMH and other prep school players is established, the growing relationships bring in more top-flight prospects, further strengthening the program. There is perhaps no better example than Edosomwan—the highest profile recruit to hit Harvard’s campus this century.

When Edosomwan actively chose to attend NMH in order to meet the Academic Index and qualify to play at Harvard, he became a pioneer. A player of Edosomwan’s talent would be seen much more of in the Big East or ACC, but the 6’10” power forward chose the Ivy League—turning down Texas and UCLA along the way—because he didn’t see top-level basketball and an Ivy League diploma as mutually exclusive.

“Four years from now, when no one cares who Zena Edosomwan is, I know a lot of opportunities will be there for me to be successful on and off the court,” Edosomwan **told** Sports Illustrated in 2012. “... If I become successful, people will remember that I took that chance, that I had a higher purpose than basketball.”

Carroll concurs, noting that the success of the Ivy League on the NCAA’s biggest stage—the league has posted a 4-5 record in the NCAA Tournament since 2011—has changed the college basketball landscape at NMH.

“The shift has already happened--now there is no longer a conversation of you should explore the Ivy League, [and] I don’t have those conversations anymore,” Carroll said. “The kids are already coming to me with those schools on their list and they don’t have

to be convinced that the Ivy League is a strong enough basketball conference...these kids are now putting those schools on their list right off the bat.”

INTO THE SPOTLIGHT

In New Haven, the Crimson walked away with a 70-58 victory to clinch its third straight outright title and an NCAA Tournament bid. All in all, five Ivy League teams made a postseason tournament in 2014, as the league has continued its push for national recognition.

But people were taking notice of more than just the Ivy League. A year earlier at the Dance, NMH talents were on full display.

First it was Rivard, who in 2013 torched third-seeded New Mexico to the tune of 17 points on just nine shots—all of them from behind the arc. The senior never left the court as the 14th-seeded Crimson walked out of the EnergySolutions Arena in Salt Lake City, Utah with the 68-62 upset win over the Lobos.

A few weeks later, Albrecht had his moment to shine as Michigan made a run to the final. Averaging a shade above two points per game, he seemed to be the most unlikely of impact players coming into the game. However, the 175-pound guard exited the building with his opponents' utmost respect.