

NASSIR LITTLE IS LEARNING THE HARD WAY

He was a presumed one-and-done and sure-shot NBA lottery pick. Now he's a bench player for UNC. How is the No. 2 recruit in the 2018 class handling a coach, Roy Williams, whose program is notoriously demanding of freshmen? And does he regret choosing this path?

[MIRIN FADER](#) DECEMBER 20, 2018

Nassir Little mixes up a defensive rotation. The freshman is in the wrong spot now. Confused. Frustrated. North Carolina head coach Roy Williams halts practice.

"What were you *doing*?" Williams asks him on this recent afternoon in Chapel Hill.

Little doesn't know the answer. Just doesn't. He wishes he did. He lifts his chin. Doesn't hide. Doesn't give lip. "I don't know," he admits. "Where should I be?"

He never found himself searching for answers like this in high school. He was so athletic that if he wanted to block a shot, he'd simply stretch his long noodle arms and swat away the ball. If he wanted to steal a ball, he'd simply roll his arms into the passing lane, and magic happened. He never had to read a scouting report, never had to think about how to guard someone.

But that's all he's doing now: thinking, thinking, thinking. He's realizing defense isn't necessarily an effort thing, a *wanting-it-bad-enough* thing. It's an angles, timing, precision, position thing. And he's learning that side of the game for the first time at the highest level of college basketball.

Outside of this gym—around the college basketball world, on Twitter, on Instagram, on message boards—there's little patience for this maturation process or for Little's productive line of 11.5 points and 4.6 rebounds in just 19.9 minutes a game off the bench. Many are already starting to write him off: *His draft stock is tanking. He's overrated. A bust. A cautionary tale for why 5-star recruits shouldn't go to North Carolina, where freshmen, even highly touted, assumed one-and-done freshmen like Little, don't always start.*

Freshmen here are not anointed with status, not guaranteed extensive minutes. Some succeed, as current freshman starter Coby White (15.2 points per game) has so far, but it's a demanding road for all. They eat meals last, drink water last. They are required to run sprints after some practices while screaming at the top of their lungs, barely able to breathe in, let alone yell out.

Little has yet to win one of these sprints, but on this day, he flies down the court, screaming, releasing his frustration, his doubts, as he runs faster, harder, hoping to impress his coaches, to earn more playing time.

"I'd like for him to play more," Williams says, smiling. "It's easy. Play better."

Nothing about what Little is going through here is easy, though. The projected [lottery pick](#) is trying to tune out commentators who question his imminent NBA future, who question his decision to come to North Carolina.

He's learning two positions, the 3 and the 4, playing behind seniors Kenny Williams, Cameron Johnson and Luke Maye, who know everything there is to know about each spot.

And he's constantly being compared to the three one-and-dones just down the road in Durham. Their situations look nothing like his. Unlike Williams, Duke head coach Mike Krzyzewski has embraced college basketball's one-and-done era, and his team's super freshmen, Zion Williamson, RJ Barrett and Cam Reddish, are playing more minutes, dazzling on TV highlights and dominating headlines.

That's the expectation for freshmen of Little's caliber now. Astronomically high. Higher than they were five years ago. Ten years ago. Certainly 20 years ago, when first-year players were less likely to see the court at all.

The journey nowadays for a one-and-done is, in theory, quick and linear. *Dominate college, ascend to the pros, cash in for millions.* He must be so polished, so ahead of his time, that he's projected NBA-ready before he's driver's license-ready.

Little has never quite been on that path, though.

He didn't start playing basketball competitively until around age 12, until he taught himself the game watching YouTube highlights, mainly Kevin Durant's. Little was so mesmerized by Durant, he did a little shoulder shimmy before his free throws too.

He was regarded as a good-if-not-elite recruit through his junior year—a 4-star, according to [Rivals](#). But then at the Adidas Gauntlet that summer, he seemed to elevate himself quicker than everyone else and once even dunked over a 7'2" player. After that, he got the fifth star, and he became one of the country's most sought-after players. He would finish his senior year as Rivals' second-ranked player in the 2018 class and become the only player other than LeBron James to win MVP honors at the Jordan Brand Classic and McDonald's All-American Game.

Also the bearer of a 4.2 high school GPA, Little had his pick of any university but made the unconventional choice to become the highest-ranked player to come to Chapel Hill since Harrison Barnes in 2010, a nod to the tattoo on his left arm: *Create your own legacy.*

Little wasn't worried that the school and its coach had a reputation for not being one-and-done friendly. He actually liked that the Tar Heels were the lone program in his final five schools that didn't promise him he could be a "Day 1 starter."

"I was always taught, if you earn something, you can keep it," Little says, "but if it's given to you, you can get it taken away."

But did he anticipate playing less than 20 minutes a game? Did he think he'd have to wonder if his draft stock might dip? Did he realize how *hard* it would be to play for a coach like Williams, who has, more or less, resisted the one-and-done ethos by still holding players' feet to the fire rather than merely giving them jerseys for a year?

Probably not.

"You gotta be able to learn to take that kind of coaching," Little says. "I don't think this program is for everybody."

Neither is his journey. "To be on the path that I'm on, you gotta be wired differently," Little says. "You gotta have an insane work ethic. You gotta be able to realize, like, things aren't going to be handed to you. Not everything is going to go your way, but you gotta give it all you got.

"When you make a decision like this and initially things aren't working out, it's easy to kind of start freaking out and panicking, like: *Oh crap, I made the wrong choice. Now my career is going to go downhill.* But I don't really feel that way."

Neither does his father. People tell Harold Little he should have sent his son elsewhere. Harold rejects that kind of thinking, saying North Carolina was—and still is—the best school for his son.

"It's not like, *Oh my God, the sky is falling!* It's not anything like that at all," Harold says. But, when talking about his son's mental toughness, Harold says, "We are worried about things more than he is."

Little does not look worried, at least on the outside, on this chilly December afternoon. He walks into the team's media room, and his imposing 6'6", 220-pound chiseled frame makes him already look like an NBA player. He talks like a veteran one too: poised and measured, as if watching himself from above.

He hasn't yet found his comfort on the floor, but he hasn't lost his confidence either. "I'm comfortable with who I am as a player," Little says. He is remarkably calm for an 18-year-old who, for most of his life, wilted when things did not go perfectly.

As a young kid, he used to refuse to eat his favorite breakfast, a strawberry Pop-Tart with the rainbow sprinkles, if it broke while being toasted. And when he made snowballs with his family, he'd get frustrated if the snowball would melt in his hand before he could construct an immaculate sphere. In high school, he'd get irritated when an offensive play would break down before his team could smoothly run through all the options.

And now he finds himself confronting the imperfect, battling the outtakes. Trying to wade through the thorny parts of the 5-star experience few talk about: the adjustments and the struggles of adapting to a game that is quicker than he had anticipated.

"There's a whole 'nother level to where I can take it, and I don't think the world knows that yet, but I believe I do," Little says.

"When it really clicks," he adds later, "I think I can be dangerous."

He has a motor that never tires. A first step that can't be imitated. He can beat just about anyone to the basket. He doesn't need the millisecond other players need to jump to his highest peak; he just *jets* without warning.

"I've been a head coach for 31 years," Williams says, "and he could be the most explosive athlete I've ever coached."

Little wants to be known as more than athletic. He releases hundreds of long-range shots every day with assistant coach Hubert Davis, who sits second in NBA history in three-point percentage. Little also constantly asks Williams questions.

During a recent film session, Little watched himself mess up on a defensive assignment. "That's *embarrassing*," Little said to Williams. He was frustrated with himself, as he is most days.

Williams loves that about Little. That he knows he doesn't have all the answers. That he wants to be coached and is willing to work. "That's going to be his saving grace," Williams says.

"He wants to be a good defensive player," Williams adds. "That just takes time."

But time is at odds with the immediate-gratification ethos ingrained into Little's generation, with the booming business of college basketball, and with the mixed messages coming from the NBA, which wants players to arrive fully developed yet also come at their youngest.

Is there something to be gained from taking time to develop? From earning playing time? Being held accountable? Even if Little's experiences do crash his draft stock, could they also prepare him for a lengthy, productive pro career?

No one knows the answers, but those in Little's inner circle remind him to think of the bigger picture on his down days.

Days like November 28, when he found himself on the bench in North Carolina's stinging 84-67 loss to Michigan. Little had four points on 1-of-5 shooting, plus one rebound in 16 minutes. He looked out onto the court, blank-faced. His body was cold. Out of rhythm. Feeling far from where he wants to be.

"When you're winning, you're gonna have people on your side saying: 'Oh man, you're awesome! You're amazing!'" says Darryl Hardin, Little's mentor and former AAU coach at 1Family. "To me, I think that's more poison than what he's going through right now."

Right now, he's trying to listen. Take in what his coach is saying to him. Well, yelling at him.

Like when the Tar Heels were trading baskets with UCLA late last month and Little failed to crash the offensive boards on two straight possessions. He didn't know who he was guarding either.

Williams subbed him out and screamed at him. Little nodded. Vowed to himself to do better when he got back in.

Williams gave him another shot. This time around, Little boxed out and pounded the boards. He seemed to enter a flow, picking the right shots at the right times to spark a comeback 94-78 win over the Bruins. He finished with 14 points, including a monstrous [dunk](#) over Jalen Hill in the second half.

"He was sensational," Williams says now of Little's performance against UCLA, praising his ability to correct his mistakes mid-game. "You can't be a better kid."

But Little is hard on himself. Learning to come off the bench is new for him. Sometimes he questions his moves on offense. *Should I shoot this one? Do I attack this gap here?*

He's still figuring out how to plug his skills into Williams' system and the college game in general, which doesn't always cater to his uptempo style of play.

"Being a freshman here is so hard," Luke Maye says. "Coach is asking Nas to play three positions—and to play three positions in an offense that you read everything is really difficult. He's doing the best he can."

Some games, Little looks passive. Out of sync. Others, more assertive, accurate.

He *is* productive in his time, shooting 52.3 percent on field goals. And even if he's not the centerpiece, he is playing key minutes for a North Carolina team that already has wins over two of the top teams in the country: UCLA and Gonzaga, whom the Tar Heels beat 103-90 last week (Little had seven points and three boards in 21 minutes).

Still, he hears the critics:

Where the hell is Nassir Little?

He forces things.

Roy is single-handedly killing Nassir Little's draft stock.

"It seems like every game that he plays becomes this referendum about how good or bad of a player he is," Harold says. "He's doing a good job of blocking out the noise, but he hears and sees things."

And he isn't immune to those comments. "People forget that athletes are human beings," Little says. "People mess up. People make mistakes. There's factors outside of basketball that can affect somebody's playing. We go through stuff all the time that might not necessarily be in the injury report."

Little is still mourning the loss of his best friend, Tommy. Tommy killed himself August 30.

Tommy was the first friend Little made when he and his family moved to Jacksonville, Florida, at age 12, having previously lived in England, Hawaii, Spain and Japan (Little's parents worked in the military).

Tommy was also the first person who believed in his basketball abilities. Back then, Little was a goofy, tall, lanky kid with more body than he knew what to do with. He wore skinny, square-wire glasses that made him look more like a nerd than a basketball player. But Tommy still told Little he could make the NBA one day.

When Tommy died, "Nas became undone," Harold says. Harold and Williams told him to take time off, but he wouldn't. He needed to play.

"For a little bit, I thought it was affecting me, how I was playing, because [Tommy] was always there," Little says, his voice growing thin. "I'm trying to turn it into a positive thing. I just play for him now. Everything I do is for him."

So he keeps laboring on his rotations, on his three-point shot, rarely leaving the gym.

"People, when they think of Nassir Little, they just think of Jam Fam, that he can just dunk," says Leaky Black, a freshman guard and Little's roommate. "But really he works on his craft all the time. ... He looks at this as an opportunity to show people he can really play."

He's always had to.

It'd be 5 a.m., and 16-year-old Little would barely be able to open his eyes, but there he'd be, at the local LA Fitness gym in Orlando, releasing jumper after jumper. Hardin, his AAU coach, would also be there every morning before school.

Most times, Little was working on his ball-handling and his shooting, hoping to show colleges he was a complete player, even though he never needed to be to dominate.

One game in eighth grade, he caught the ball at the free-throw line and dunked over four kids. He was still growing into his body then. Not fully polished but genuinely curious.

"He was eager to learn. He looked you in the eye when you were telling him something," says Mark Miller, his former assistant coach at Oakleaf Junior High in Orange Park, Florida.

Little would go on to play for Oakleaf High before transferring to Orlando Christian Prep as a junior. Few college recruiters knew who he was at the time. "He just took it as a sign to get better, to prove people wrong," says Ronaldo Segu, Little's close friend who plays for the University of Buffalo. "He just worked harder."

He has the same mindset nowadays, even though he has the national celebrity he never did growing up. "As talented as he is, as athletic as he is, he's still relatively raw," says Randy Hadley, his longtime strength and conditioning coach. "Being able to hone in on his skills and own what he has is the scary part. It's only just getting started with what his potential is."

Little is trying to stay patient, but *The Year of the Freshmen* tugs at him. Tells him he must have success *now*. Stats *now*. Be like Zion, RJ, Cam *now*.

But he reminds himself he's in a different situation. He tells his dad over the phone often: "It's all right. I'm built for this."

"I know what I can do. I'm also able to know what I can't do," Little says. "I know what I gotta learn and what I gotta get better at."

"The people around me tell me what I need to hear, not what I want to hear."

Williams sits in his office, one of his three NCAA championship rings hugging his ring finger. He's accustomed to reporters asking why Little isn't playing more. That question isn't asked yet, but Williams is ready to offer a statistic.

"Four, four, three, one, four," he says. "You know what that is? It's how many minutes Luke played the first five games his [freshman] year."

Maye is now a first-team All-ACC player and could play at the next level. Williams then brings up Marvin Williams, the 14-year NBA veteran and 2005 No. 2 overall pick who didn't start a single game for UNC's 2004-05 national championship team.

Coach Williams' point is clear: Limited playing time early in one's college career doesn't necessarily hinder success later in one's pro career.

Sam Wasson/Getty Images

"I don't get caught up in that," Williams says, referring to minutes. Win or lose, right or wrong, this is Williams' system. A system that many think could hurt Little's draft prospects. But Williams views Little's situation with a different lens.

"If I'm a player and I'm playing 20 minutes at the University of North Carolina, that's pretty daggone *good*," Williams says.

Little and Williams cause us to contemplate what our metrics for success are. What production really means. What can really predict production at the next level. What can be gained from the college experience, aside from its being a ladder.

Maybe Little will miss out on being drafted where he wants to be. Or perhaps he will still be drafted in the top five and have a long, successful career. Or he could stay in Chapel Hill another year.

Maybe Williams will miss out on another player of Little's caliber next season or the season after, as prospects watch what happens with Little. Or perhaps Williams will find another 5-star to buy into his system.

It's hard to say, but Harold realized something while talking to Nassir over the phone recently: His son is growing. Growing in ways beyond learning when to slide over for help side and when to pull up for a 15-footer.

"I think Nassir is finally discovering that he can't control everything," Harold says. "Not everything is going to come out the way he pictures it in his mind."

That means letting go of perfect. Letting the Pop-Tart break. And seeing what happens next.

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