

Turning Prodigies into Pros: The Oak Hill Basketball Family

By Alejandro Danois, Special to Bleacher Report - May 10, 2016



*"Success is not a random act. It arises out of a predictable and powerful set of circumstances and opportunities."—Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers**

The first new automobile Steve Smith ever purchased, a stripped-down, bronze-gold Mazda 626, was barreling through some blistering heat in the Appalachian Mountains with the windows down on the last Sunday of August 1983. He was zooming out of Kentucky with a heavy foot on the gas pedal, pushing through southern Virginia, not too far from the North Carolina border.

A bank cashier, Smith was driving to interview for a job as an assistant basketball coach, and he was running late.

Three weeks prior, he'd moved into a new apartment with his pregnant wife, Lisa. Now, he was thinking about relocating six hours away from their home in Wilmore, Kentucky, to a place called Mouth of Wilson, Virginia, a quaint village with a population of about 100 people that was surrounded by rolling green hills, Christmas tree and tobacco farms and grazing cattle.

Larry Davis, his best friend and former college classmate, had just been named the head basketball coach at Oak Hill Academy, the tiny, isolated boarding school in Mouth of Wilson in the rustic Blue Ridge Mountains. He phoned Smith with an intriguing proposition.

"Larry called me and wanted to know if I'd be his assistant coach," said Smith, who'd basically learned to walk on a basketball court while trailing behind his father,

Winston, who was a head coach at a number of small colleges in Ohio, Indiana, California and Kentucky. "I missed basketball. I wanted to coach, and I wanted to teach."

He interviewed for a job as a biology teacher and Larry's assistant with the basketball team and was surprised when he got the job.

"I went back to Kentucky, took my wife and son home from the hospital. We got packed up and moved into our house on Oak Hill's campus two weeks later," said Smith. "At the time, I didn't think I'd be here that long. We've been here ever since."



The basketball trophy case at Oak Hill Academy.

Steve Smith is now a legendary icon in prep basketball circles. His teams have won eight national championships during his 31-year tenure at Oak Hill that began after a two-year stint as an assistant coach. Those title squads have a combined record of 289 wins and four losses.

This year, he was nominated for the Basketball Hall of Fame and achieved the remarkable milestone of eclipsing 1,000 coaching victories on Dec. 29 when the Warriors beat Oregon's West Linn High School 77-47 in the semifinal of the Les Schwab Invitational in Portland, Oregon.

The Warriors wrapped up their season April 2, in New York's Madison Square Garden, where they defeated Indiana's La Lumiere School 62-60 in overtime to capture the championship of the DICK'S High School Nationals. They finished the year with a record of 45-1 and were the No. 2 team in the country in *USA Today's* Super 25 boys basketball rankings.

The night prior to the release of the new Air Jordan XXX, on Feb. 11, Oak Hill kicks off the NBA All-Star festivities in Toronto as the marquee attraction of the inaugural Jordan Brand Invitational, when it took on Ontario's No. 1-ranked team, Orangeville Prep, the school that most recently produced Kentucky star freshman Jamal Murray.

As NBA players Bismack Biyombo, Andre Drummond and Victor Oladipo sit courtside, Steve Smith is stationed on the bench with his arms crossed, dressed nattily in stylish blue slacks, the brown shoes of an investment banker and a crisp, light blue starched shirt underneath a chic burgundy sweater. He looks serious yet serene and relaxed.

His austere, green-eyed gaze, however, provides some evidence of the competitive embers burning inside him. He occasionally leans forward in his chair during the game, extending a fist. His hand is adorned with the gold national championship ring from 2012 that is the size of a small boulder.

In sideline huddles, he doesn't scream. He looks his players in the eye with more of a grandfatherly affection than a menacing glare. They lean in and stare back at him, digesting every syllable.



Carmelo Anthony as a player at Oak Hill.

With 7:49 left before halftime, a buzz ripples through the arena. Loud, spontaneous chants of "Melo! Melo! Melo!" fill the stands as New York Knicks star Carmelo Anthony, one of Oak Hill's most distinguished alumni, outfitted in a black and white lumberjack shirt buttoned to the neck underneath a matching black and white winter coat, ambles to his courtside chair.

At halftime, Smith walks over to embrace Carmelo before heading back to the locker room. They smile widely, affectionately. It's obvious that the relationship is meaningful for both of them.

"Coach Smith changed my whole perspective going from Baltimore to Mouth of Wilson, Virginia," said Anthony. "If it wasn't for him helping me through that transition at Oak Hill, I probably wouldn't be sitting here talking to you now.

"It was two entirely different worlds. I went from running the streets and being out all night to having a curfew, having to make my bed every day, eating and going to sleep at a certain time. Being told what to do and being surrounded by all that structure was definitely an adjustment."

After Oak Hill's 77-67 victory, Quinn Cook, a point guard on Duke's national championship-winning squad last year—this season he played for the Canton Charge in the NBA Development League—emerges from the locker room before Smith and the rest of the team and reflects on the time he spent in Mouth of Wilson.

"I wouldn't have experienced the success I did in college if it wasn't for Oak Hill," said Cook, a native of Washington, D.C. "Coach Smith is like a second father to me. He'd pull me into his office to talk about everything but basketball.

"He wanted to know how I was doing, how I was dealing with the experience. Growing up with a single mom, he stepped up and became a major part of my life. I remember crying in his arms when he told me that I'd been named a McDonald's All-American and how he hugged me when I graduated, telling me how proud he and my parents were of the growth I'd shown that year."



Seven years before Smith came to work at Oak Hill in 1983, Chuck Eisner, the son of the school's president, came up with the idea of establishing a high-powered hoops program.

Oak Hill Academy was established in 1878, founded by the New River Baptist Association as a school for kids growing up in the mountains. During the 1950s, it grew into a coed boarding school that specialized in helping unmotivated students realize their academic potential.

By 1976, enrollment was decreasing and expenses began outpacing revenue. With his father's blessing, Chuck went to the playgrounds of New York City armed with a handful of scholarships and a dream of making the school a big-time player on the high school hoops landscape.

Oak Hill had fielded some pretty good teams by the time Smith got there, but it had never had a player like the one who was flying in from New York and looking to get his academics up to par so he could qualify for a college scholarship.

"Back then, we had some good teams with three or four guys who were going to play Division I basketball," said Smith. "The rest of the guys were role players. No one really knew who Oak Hill was. That changed when Rod Strickland got here."

Strickland had just won a state championship at Truman High School in the Bronx as a junior.

"We got a call from Steve Lappas, his high school coach, along with Lou D'Almeida, who ran the Bronx Gauchos program," said Smith. "There wasn't any Internet or

YouTube clips back then, so we called Bob Gibbons and Tom Konchalski, two of the best scouts around, and they told us how good he was."

"I didn't know anything about Oak Hill," said Strickland. "I had slacked up on my books and needed to get out of the Bronx to get my academics together. I remember getting on the plane, not sure what was going on, and then taking this long drive up this winding road. I'm coming from the Mitchell Projects in the Bronx, and I'm looking out the window seeing cows and mountains. We were passing these little stores, and it looked like I was in Mayberry, the small town in *The Andy Griffith Show*."

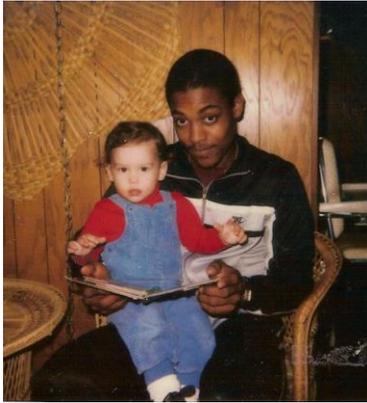


The bucolic setting of Oak Hill Academy.

Strickland came straight from the airport to the gym, where about 20 college assistant coaches had assembled to watch the guys play some pickup games. When Frank Merino, a New York City native who was on the staff at the University of Detroit, heard that Strickland was coming, Smith noticed his excitement. "When that kid walks in here, he's going to own this gym," Merino told him.

"I was thinking, 'Yeah, right. We've got some pretty good players, five or six guys that were going D-I,'" said Smith. "I thought he'd be on the same level as the rest of them. And sure enough, from the minute he started playing, Frank was right. Rod owned that gym. He was incredible, on an entirely different level than anyone else. That guy could get anywhere he wanted to on the court with the ball in his hands. He was an exceptional scorer, passer, ball-handler and floor general. And he was a quiet kid who showed no emotion. He simply dominated."

"I was from the NYC projects and had grown up around nothing but black and Hispanic people," said Strickland. "Being at Oak Hill was a huge culture shock. If it wasn't for Coach Smith and his wife, I wouldn't have made it through, because I wanted to go home every day."



Rod Strickland with Steve Smith's infant son in 1985.

When the walls were closing in on him during that 1984-85 season, Strickland would knock on the Smiths' door to watch TV, play with their son, drink Kool-Aid, eat grilled cheese sandwiches and brownies, and be around a family.

"I spent a lot of time at their house," said Strickland. "The thing that stood out about him was how honest he was. He wasn't worried about hurting your feelings. He was going to tell you the truth. I respected that big time."

When Larry Davis left Oak Hill in 1985 to take an assistant coaching job at the University of Delaware, Smith was named the head coach. He would drive to Washington, D.C., and New York City to recruit players in the summer.

"We had to travel a lot, and out of a 30-game schedule, 25 of those were probably on the road," said Smith. "That was costly. We had to pay for gas, meals and hotels, and it was expensive. The word was getting out about the school, but those were tough times."

When Ed Patton became Oak Hill's new president during Smith's first year as the head coach, he was floored when he looked at the books.



Kevin Durant

"He told me, 'We can't afford to do this. We're gonna have to water it down,'" said Smith. "I thought, 'Uh-oh! We're in trouble.'"

Smith had assembled a good team that year, and it traveled to play in the Las Vegas Prep Classic, one of the country's premier tournaments, which featured more than 50 of the top high school programs in the country.

"Well, we won that tournament, and that's when everything changed," said Smith. "We got invited back the next year, all expenses paid. And it's been that way with everywhere we've gone ever since. People started saying, 'We gotta get Oak Hill to play in our tournament.' It's amazing to think that if we hadn't won that tournament, the basketball program might have been shut down after that season."

Since Strickland, an assembly line of phenoms have made their way to Mouth of Wilson, the most prominent being Ron Mercer, Jerry Stackhouse, Carmelo Anthony, Rajon Rondo, [Josh Smith](#), [Brandon Jennings](#) and [Kevin Durant](#). Smith has coached a total of 29 McDonald's All-Americans and 28 NBA draft picks during his tenure. "Being at Oak Hill meant a lot in my basketball journey," said Durant. "It was my first time out there on the national stage, being exposed to the highest level of talent. That experience catapulted me. Being isolated up there gave me a laser focus. It's in the middle of nowhere, but the family environment really helped me. It was an amazing experience."



Steve Smith, second from left, during an Oak Hill home game.

Many people in the high school hoops community aren't enamored with Oak Hill's basketball success. The detractors snicker at what they perceive to be the school's supposed perfect marriage of blackboards and backboards.

Some public schools refuse to schedule games against Oak Hill, claiming it is not a high school team but rather a squad of hired mercenaries.

"When I first became the head coach, I'd call schools to try to schedule games, and some of them passed, calling us a bunch of outlaws," said Smith.

In the 1970s and early '80s, Oak Hill was known for assembling talented rosters by any means necessary. Opposing coaches complained that they could scout one Oak Hill squad in the fall and face an entirely different one that winter. Prior to Smith taking the head job, the Warriors bench was a revolving door—and not only for players. Six coaches came and went between 1972 and 1982.

Some of that negative perception carries over to the present day, a dynamic that dismays many people in the school's community. Smith realizes that he can't do anything about the residual perception and the fact that some people still view the team as bandits. But he knows the difference between outside opinions and the truth of what he sees every day.

Approximately 150 students in eighth through 12th grade attend Oak Hill Academy, where tuition tops \$33,000 per year. The student-teacher ratio is 9-to-1. When students are addressed over the loudspeaker in the academic building, they're referred to by their first names only.

Every basketball player is on scholarship, but Smith is quick to point out that the majority of the student body receives financial assistance, which is need-based. He says that even if a kid receives an all-expenses-paid trip to Oak Hill to play ball, his family is required to pay about \$1,500 a year.

"The core of our mission is faith-based," said Dr. Michael D. Groves, the current school president, who started at Oak Hill fresh out of grad school in 1988 as a social studies teacher living in the girls dorm. "We've been here as a school community for 137 years. It's a rigorous environment. But the success we have here, both with our basketball players and all of our students, doesn't just happen. It's a byproduct of structure, discipline and a unique environment that has a family vibe to it."



Oak Hill in action at home during 2015-16 season.

On March 9, as unseasonably warm temperatures move into the Virginia mountain's as a reprieve from a fleeting winter, the perpetually tan Smith is smiling, sitting at a round table in Oak Hill's small cafeteria, eating lunch and telling stories.

His face lights up, he laughs heartily and his words spill into one another when he talks about his former players. He's a gifted raconteur at heart who shakes his head while recalling Michael Beasley's time on campus and his penchant for classroom flatulence.

He'll share the almost unbelievable story of Rajon Rondo's recruitment by Tubby Smith at Kentucky, how extraordinary Jerry Stackhouse was in high school and how

Stackhouse stepped out of the car with his mother after driving for hours on a dusty, unpaved back road to visit and, looking perplexed, asked, "Coach, where am I?!"

His wife, Lisa, joins him for lunch as he sits with assistant coaches Bryan Meagher and Taylor Conn along with Norfolk, Virginia, native Matt Coleman, the team's outstanding junior point guard. Coleman is dressed in khaki shorts, tan Dockers boat shoes and a stylish black "bubble goose" coat adorned with the Air Jordan logo that says "Oak Hill Basketball" in yellow lettering.

Lisa hands her husband four recruiting letters from Virginia Tech and the University of North Carolina.

At the other tables, where students eat and converse with amused expressions, the team's members are scattered. Only after they stand up and amble to dispose of their plates and silverware can you discern, by their towering statures and athletic gaits, that they're among the most elite young athletes in America.

Lisa shifts the conversation to the previous night's game, a nail-biting 73-72 overtime win against Mountain Mission School, as her husband replays a terrible call from an overzealous referee over and over. She turns her kindhearted gaze to Coleman and asks, "And how many turnovers did you have last night?"

Steve and Lisa were college sweethearts at Asbury College in Kentucky. She remembers he asked her out on their first date while wearing white overalls splattered with paint.

"My players are more fearful of her than me," Smith said. "She works in the principal's office and sees all of their transcripts. They have to answer to her when it comes to their academics. She knows them just as well [as], if not better than, I do."

Lisa is also Smith's secretary. She handles all of the team's travel logistics, taking care of the mountainous paperwork associated with itineraries, tournament arrangements, flights, buses, hotels, meals and Smith's eponymous summer camps.



"The over 1,000 wins, nominated for the Hall of Fame, being here for over 30 years, I couldn't have done any of that without her," said Smith.

As he stands and stretches, he hands Coleman a letter addressed to him from the North Carolina Tar Heels.

"I first heard about Oak Hill when I was in the sixth grade," said Coleman. "I grew up playing in the Boo Williams program. Boo's nephew Troy Williams, who plays at Indiana, went here. I also looked at the point guard tradition here with guys like Brandon Jennings, [Ty Lawson](#) and Quinn Cook. I was looking forward to coming here, knowing that what I put into the experience, how that could help toward having some great outcomes in my future."

"Matt is a great kid, and there's no better environment for him to be in than Oak Hill," said Boo Williams, who has coached and mentored the likes of [Allen Iverson](#), J.J. Redick and Alonzo Mourning, among a plethora of others from Virginia's Tidewater region. "The structure, the competition, the level of coaching is all outstanding. And Coach Smith is a stand-up guy, a man of integrity. He doesn't have an agenda. He's not trying to ride the coattails of some kid to a big-time college job."

Smith's agenda can be found on the wall in his office, where the eyes of every Oak Hill player stare back at you from team photographs that date back to the late 1970s. The trophies and awards are everywhere, but that's not what Smith is all about. It's the relationships.

"The thing that separates him from others is his credibility," said Quinn Cook. "He's coached the best of the best. I'd be in his office asking him every day, 'What did Rondo do to get better? What did KD do? What did Carmelo do?' I always listened when he spoke, because in my eyes, he's a living legend."

"Coach Smith is so smart in terms of the way that he approaches the game," said Anthony. "Back then, I didn't understand the depth of the experience, what it would mean in my life, what he would mean in my life, how valuable that time I spent with him was. But today, I have a full appreciation for it."

"Coach Smith taught me so much about the game," said Durant. "He pulled me aside every day, telling me he didn't think I really knew how good I could be. He gave me so much confidence. He showed so much trust in me. I always wanted to do the right things to please him."



Oak Hill players and fans celebrate after another victory.

As the buzzer sounds, ending Oak Hill's final home game of the season, a 98-51 thrashing of South Carolina's York Prep on March 10, the student body is excited to be heading home the next day for a weeklong spring break. Elderly people give the players hugs as little kids try to imitate their moves while hoisting errant jump shots.

Rodney Miller, a 6'11" senior from New York City who'll play for the University of Miami Hurricanes next year, hops into the rickety stands. He's hugged by boys and girls alike, with his massive wingspan resting on at least four necks. He's wearing Oak Hill's prestigious jersey with the Air Jordan logo, but his beaming grin in this moment reminds you that he's just a kid.

Groves, the school president, grabs a microphone, asks for quiet and thanks everyone for coming out.

"Rodney," he says, "please lead us in the singing of the alma mater."

Miller's expression turns serious. Everyone who was seated now rises. He clears his throat, turns his gaze skyward and everyone in the old gymnasium follows his lead.

"Far above the winding Wilson, with its banks of green, stands our noble alma mater, fairest ever seen. Swell the chorus, let it echo, over the hill and dale. Hail to thee, our alma mater. Hail to thee, Oak Hill."

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