Burger Boys to the League: Does Participation in the McDonald's All-American Game Predict NBA Draft Position

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Introduction

There are many factors that play into how decision-makers choose who they will hire. The NBA has grown into one of the most well-known professional sports leagues in the world and is a billion-dollar revenue making corporation. Its primary revenue sources come from television, merchandising, sponsorships, and tickets. But most importantly, without its players, the league would cease to exist. Especially in this age of social media, players start to make a name for themselves in high school. Through Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) basketball, elite camps and all-star games; high school players can become sensations before they even reach the collegiate level.

One of the most well-known and long-standing high school All-American games is the McDonald's All-American Game (MCDAAG). According to a spokesperson for the MCDAAG, for a girl or boy that participate in this high school all-star game there is a 60% chance the player will be drafted into either the WNBA or NBA respectively (T. Wootten, personal communication, December 1, 2019). Essentially, this means being a McDonald's All-American is a proxy for being a player drafted into the NBA. A candidate is nominated during their senior year by their high school coach. Players can be from Canada or the United States. There is a committee that evaluates the nominees and precedes to vote on 4 ballots: top 100, top 50, top 40 and top 30. Then, the administrative board reviews the top 30 and determine based on the committee votes who the final 24 selected to the team are. The players will then be split into two subgroups, East and West, were they will compete against each other in a nationally televised game. Players are evaluated year around on the national high school basketball circuit, AAU national circuit and at prospect camps. Surprisingly, stats do not come into the equation for the decision, but rather the nominee's entire body of work starting in the 8th grade. A players'

athleticism, basketball IQ, fundamental skill sets, and their potential to play at the highest collegiate and professional level are all considered. A nominees' athletic and scholastic achievement as well as behavior are also deciding factors. Being a McDonald's All-American brands a player as a top high school talent in the country. But does that mean players who participate in the MCDAAG are more likely to be drafted than players who aren't selected to this game?

The NBA draft is hosted each year in June and gives teams the chance to revamp their roster by selecting from a pool of eligible players who wish to join the league. Following a rule change in 2005, starting in 2006 U.S. born players must be one year removed from high school and be at least 19 years old in order to be eligible for the draft. This means the draft consists of primarily collegiate basketball players, but sometimes international players are featured. College basketball allows players to improve their game, adjust to fame in some instances and become more established in the basketball world. The rule change created the era of the "one and done". This is where players will play one year in college and then declare for the draft as an early-entrant. The draft's format is set in reverse-order and consists of two rounds in which 60 players are selected. The first four picks are lottery picks, in which the teams with the worst records have the highest odds of securing these picks. The rest of the order is organized by teams with the next worst records. Typically, each team has one pick per round, but there are instances where teams trade draft picks for players, money or other draft picks. Draft day is a once in a life time experience for the players and it can change the future of a franchise depending on the outcome. I will first address the question: does participating in the MCDAAG predict draft position? This question will be answered through a simple linear with draft position being the dependent variable and a dummy variable for McDonald's All-American being the independent variable.

Past research has measured the impact of player statistics, characteristics, team characteristics and post-season performance. However, this all-star game consists of the supposed next stars of the NBA, so it is important to see if the selection of talent represents a large percentage of future NBA players. Also, there are players who are not selected to this All-American game, but go on to not only play in the NBA, but are actually drafted. This game receives coverage on major tv networks, such as ESPN. With that being said, players and the media could be overvaluing the worth of being a participant in this All-American game. I will use four other models to estimate draft position as well and control for player statistics, player characteristics, team characteristics and post-season performance in college to see if the effect of being a McDonald's All-American remains consistent. These factors from college impact the model because when it comes to decisions on who to draft, these variables play in role in terms of how decision-makers rank players. So, what does or doesn't happen in a player's collegiate career can change their draft position. For the purpose of this study, the draft years of 2006-2010 are used. The lists of alumni for the MCDAAG are used from the years 2002-2009, in order to capture players that played four years in college, were McDonald's All-Americans and were drafted. Lastly, player statistics are used from their last collegiate season, therefore I use collegiate statistics starting from the 2006 season up until the 2010 season.

Prior literature has addressed how decision-makers make their choice on draft day, primarily in consideration of player collegiate statistics, player characteristics and collegiate team characteristics. It has been observed that players that score more points are more likely to be drafted and are paid higher salaries. More than any other box statistic, points scored is the most influential. As noted in Greer, Price, and Berri (2019) scoring points is the largest predictor of a player being drafted. Knowing a box statistic like points scored has already been observed as

being an important variable when trying to understand draft position, calls for a needed control for it in this study.

Post season team and individual performance can also be impactful when it comes to draft day decisions. Ichniowski and Preston (2017) found that unexpected March Madness performance, whether it is team wins or individual scoring in the tournament, has an effect on draft day decision. If a player scores more than their regular season average and helps his team win games that were not predicted to, they will move up significantly in the NBA draft. This tournament captures the attention of sports fans across the countries and is the biggest showcase of collegiate basketball talent. It is a chance for less known players from small or big schools to make a name for themselves and become nationally known. Also, players that are already on mock draft boards have a chance to improve their stock based on their individual and team performance. The tournament can be high intensity due to the fact it is win or go home and it draws large audiences. Some will rise to the occasion and others will not. Berri et al. (2011) also finds that positive team performance during the tournament has large effects on draft ranks on their sample of players. It appears that performance in this tournament is an indicator to decision makers of potential at the next level. Those that perform better than expected in the tournament stand out especially because according to Ichniowski and Preston (2017) on average players' performance see a decline from the regular season to the tournament. This is due to the on average heightened level of competition and could even be because of the big stage players are on. Playing better than expected during March Madness leads to a big payout on draft day because decision makers value post-season basketball tournament experience.

College productivity matters when it comes to the order players are drafted. In another study it is found that points, assists and blocks per-40-minutes of play during college are correlated with being picked earlier in the NBA draft (Evans, 2018). The results from this paper show that a one standard deviation increase in these given player statistics is correlated with a 4, 1.5 and 2 draft-slot improvement respectively. Similarly, I will control for these statistics amongst a few others in order to observe if there is a measurable change in draft position. This paper creates a model that decision makers can use to find what players will be "busts" and who will be "sleepers". Busts are players who were taken in the draft earlier than they should have been, while sleepers are players that were picked later than the model predicts. There is an issue at hand with how NBA executives are identifying college players who will be successful at the next level.

A large majority of players that are All-American status are recruited by schools in big conferences. These elite players from big conferences tend make up a large majority of the players being selected in the NBA draft. However, Coates and Oguntimein (2008) find that there is little evidence that proves players from big conferences are more productive over their NBA careers than players from smaller conferences. If a player is a highly followed sensation in his high school years he will most likely end up at a highly regarded college program, while if a player flies under the radar he would be at a lower tier program. This could change where the player is taken in the draft according to the previous trends. Therefore, the conference a player's given school can be expected to be significant.

Playing on the biggest stage in collegiate basketball plays a role in draft position. Berri (2010) finds that a player who appears in the Final Four the same year he is drafted will see his draft position increase by 12 slots. Players need to be able to recognize when their stock is rising

in the eyes of decision makers in the NBA. Because it is also seen that for every year older a player is, he will see a decrease of about six spots in the draft. Any player that wants to be drafted into the NBA should know that the younger they are the more attractive they will appear to be to NBA executives. Age is a determining factor in draft position that is obviously measurable.

Understanding what leads to a player being more attractive to NBA decision makers and executives is invaluable for players that have intentions of entering the draft pool. This could make all the difference in being a lottery pick, first rounder, second rounder or ending up undrafted. In this paper, I will contribute to this area of research by finding if there is a measurable effect of being a McDonald's All-American on NBA draft position and if so, to what extent.

Data

The NCAA was founded in 1910 as an institution that would create and regulate competition and eligibility rules for intercollegiate sports. Today, this nonprofit organization regulates student athletes across the nation at different levels of competition. Summary statistics for player statistics and characteristics as well as team characteristics are to follow below. It should be noted that there is a total of 236 observations in this study. Previous studies have indicated what measures of performance have been observed to cause the biggest change in draft position. In this study I will control for player statistics variables such as points scored, total rebounds, assists, turn over, steals and blocks that are all adjusted for per-40-minute performance. These statistics come from the NCAA database. Player and team statistics are available for public use.[1]

Table 1. Player Statistics: Per-40-Minute

Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
236	3.006604	0.7463782	1.222541	6.594701
236	8.598266	3.383509	2.125749	18.09424
236	3.001541	1.876591	0.4509583	10.32595
236	1.484144	0.6146625	0.3943662	3.316239
236	1.473028	1.439673	0	8.207441

Note: Above is a breakdown of the player statistics being considered in the model. The statistics are adjusted to per-40-minute performance because college games are 40 minutes in length and this study is measuring performance on a per-minute basis. These statistics come from the player's final collegiate season because I will only measure the impact of recorded statistics for the year the player is drafted.

Team characteristics such as conference and if they appeared in the Final Four, a proxy variable for post season performance, will also come from the NCAA database. The NBA gathers data for every draft class. Data on draft picks are accessible to the public. I will use player characteristics from this dataset that include: age, class, draft pick and draft year that will come from the NBA's database. Lastly, the MCDAAG keeps track of the alumni from its games. I will use data from the McDonald's All-American game to know who participated in their past games and what position they play.[2]

Table 2. Player Characteristics

MCDAAG	Freq.	Percent
0	169	71.61
1	67	28.39

Note: Shows the distribution of McDonald's All-Americans from the compiled dataset. 1 represents a player who was drafted between the years of 2006-2010 and was a McDonald's All-American, while 0 was a player who was drafted during the same time period, but wasn't a McDonald's All-American.

1 A dataset was compiled by Professor of Economics at Southern Utah University, David Berri, of NBA and NCAA statistics using basket-refernce.com and sports-refernce.com. This dataset was used from the purpose of this study.

2 Data in regards to the MCDAAG was obtained using basketball.realgm.com This data originated from mcdonaldsallamerican.com/content/dam/aag/boys-alumni-list-2018.pdf.

2A Player Position

Pos	Freq.	Percent
Center	33	13.98
GuardForward	46	19.49
PowerForward	67	28.39
Point Guard	46	19.49
ShootingGuard	44	18.64
Total	236	100

Note: Presented above are the summary statistics player position. There is variation in who is being selected in the draft according to their position played. A majority of the players taken in the draft years observed play the position of power forward.

2B Player Class

Class	Freq.	Percent
Freshman	34	14.41
Junior	61	25.85
Sophomore	42	17.8
Senior	99	41.95
Total	236	100

Note: This is a representation of class rank. The distribution of class rank of players being drafted clearly favors college seniors. This does not mean senior players are taken earlier in the draft.

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Age	236	21.14831	1.333384	18	24

Note: This table shows the variation in the age of the observed players. The average player is about 21 years old when they are drafted into the NBA.

Table 3. Team Characteristics

FinFourAPP	Freq.	Percent
0	202	85.59
1	34	14.41
Total	236	100

Note: In this table it can be seen what percentage of the sample appeared in the NCAA's Men's Basketball Final Four. Final Four appearances are only accounted for during the player's final collegiate season. For those player's whose team made the final four during their final collegiate season, they will be classified as a 1.

3A Conferences

Conference	Freq.	Percent
ACC	36	15.25
Atlantic 10	8	3.39
Big 10	17	7.2
Big 12	31	13.14
Big East	44	18.64
Big Sky	1	0.42
CUSA	15	6.35
Horizon	1	0.42
Independent	1	0.42
MAAC	2	0.85
MTNWest	4	1.69
MVC	1	0.42
Pac-10	35	14.83
SEC	30	12.71
WAC	9	3.81
WCC	1	0.42
Total	236	100

Note: This table is a representation of what conferences players are being drafted from. A majority of players come from Power-5 conference schools (Big East, Big 12, Big 10, SEC and Pac-10).

After reviewing the summary statistics for player statistics, player characteristics and team characteristics it can be concluded that there is variation within the data. This satisfies one of the assumptions in determining if the estimations of the model will be biased. Also, there is variation in the outcome variable, draft position due to players being chosen at different spots. Also, another assumption I satisfied is that the sample of players used is indeed the population. Therefore, I do have a representative sample of the population of players drafted from the years 2006-2010. The summary statistics show interesting qualities of the players that are being drafted. Only 14% of players drafted appeared in the Final Four during their final collegiate

season. However, these are selective games and only four teams out of the hundreds of teams across the game are participating in this part of the tournament. After testing to see if this variable is different from zero, it is found that appearing in the Final Four is statistically significant at the 99% level. The frequency of players who were drafted and played in the MCDAAG, which is 28% of players in the observed draft years, is twice that of players that appeared in the Final Four. This is interesting because only 24 players are selected to be All-Americans while usually a college basketball team consists of 15 players on its roster, which means about 60 players are participants in the Final Four. The draft years being examined in this study consists of players who fit into the class rank of seniors. One can assume that seniors are typically older than freshman. Matter of fact, freshman actually made up the smallest percentage of drafted players. However, this does not mean seniors are often times picked earlier than freshmen or other lower class ranks. As can be seen in the summary statistics, drafted players tend to come from the Big East, ACC and the Pac-10. Very few players from mid-major conferences, like the Big Sky or WAC are taken in the draft. These mid-major conferences rarely consist of players who were McDonald's All-Americans in high school.

The independent variable of interest, McDonald's All-American will be dummy variable which is generated based off the data of players who were drafted. If a player was a McDonald's All-American and was drafted he will be assigned a value of 1, if not he will be a 0. It should be noted that international players, unless they are Canadian, cannot be McDonald's All-American. Therefore, these players were removed from the dataset because the independent variable of interest cannot be assigned to them. Even though international players are dropped from the model, the data still includes all other players "true" draft position. Meaning draft position is not adjusted for the removed observations. Also, since I am analyzing the draft years post rule

change of restricting players being drafted straight out of high school, there could be a reduced effect of being a McDonald's All-American in the eyes of decision makers. This limitation will be most evident after controlling for player and team characteristics and statistics from college. This data is only consisting of players who were drafted, therefore players who go undrafted and were McDonald's All-Americans are exempt.

Method

After obtaining the data, the technique of regression analysis will be applied. This will allow for useful calculations to gain a better understanding of what changes the independent variable of interest, draft position. The first model will be a simple regression model that will serve as the foundation to be built upon as more dependent variables are assed.

The first univariate OLS model, Figure (1) will regress Draft position as a continuous variable on the independent dummy variable, McDonald's All-American. This will give us an estimate of the expected changes in draft position if someone has been labeled a McDonald's All-American. Negative coefficients should be viewed as an increase in draft position. Other factors will then be added to the model. This means a series of multivariate OLS models will follow which will measure different variables that are associated with draft position and being a McDonald's All-American. This will attempt to minimize factors that may be within the error term.

$$(1)\ DRAFTPOSITION = ß_0 + \delta_1(MCDAAG) + u$$

Next, a regression controlling for player's per- 40-minute statistics from their final collegiate season will follow, Figure (2). The vector B' contains points scored, total rebounds, assists, turnover, steals and blocks.

$$(2)\ DRAFTPOSITION = ß_0 + \delta_1(MCDAAG) + B'(STATS) + u$$

Then, there will be controls for player characteristics and post season performance, Figure (3). Player characteristics consists of the dummy variables of position and class, with center and freshmen being the omitted variables respectively. Player's age will also be controlled for as well.

$$(3)\ DRAFTPOSITION = ß_0 + \delta_1(MCDAAG) + B'(STATS) + \delta_2(FINALFOURAPP) + \alpha_1(PLAYERCHARACTERISTICS) + u$$

Following this regression, there will be an added fix effect for the conference the player's school was in, Figure (4). This is an important team characteristic because player's that are McDonald's All-Americans tend to go to schools in better conferences and these players are the ones being drafted more often.

$$(4)\ DRAFTPOSITION = ß_0 + \delta_1(MCDAAG) + B'(STATS) + \delta_2(FINALFOURAPP) + \alpha_1(PLAYERCHARACTERISTICS) + \alpha_2(CONF) + u$$

Lastly, there will be a fixed effect for draft year measured, Figure (5). Due to a varying amount of the number of international players in each draft, this control is needed. This will create a group of dummy variables for the draft years that are of interest, 2006-2010.

$$(5)\ DRAFTPOSITION = ß_0 + \delta_1(MCDAAG) + B'(STATS) + \delta_2(FINALFOURAPP) + \alpha_1(PLAYERCHARACTERISTICS) + \alpha_2(YEAR) + u$$

Running these five models will allow for interpretation of how the variable of interest, McDonald's All-American, explains the change in draft position with and without the controls presented above. These models satisfy another assumption that proves unbiasedness, since they are linear in parameters.

Results

Table 4. Regression Results for McDonald's All-American

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
VARIABLES	DraftPosition	DraftPosition	DraftPosition	DraftPosition	DraftPosition
MCDAAG	-12.60***	-12.05***	-3.487	-2.403	-3.639
	[2.355]	[2.190]	[2.259]	[2.378]	[2.275]
Controls for Player Statistics	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls for Player Characteristics	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls for Team Charcteristics	No	No	Yes (FINALFOURAPP)	Yes (FINALFOURAPP and CONF)	Yes (FINALFOURAPP)
Controls for Draft Year	No	No	No	No	Yes
Constant	32.56***	73.58***	-20.27	-2.863	-18.66
	[1.255]	[7.230]	[23.84]	[26.06]	[24.54]
Observations	236	237	238	239	240
R-squared	0.109	0.261	0.463	0.493	0.475
Standard errors in brackets					
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1					

Note: Full regression output can be seen in Appendix A.

Displayed above in Table 4 are the results found after running univariate and multivariate OLS regressions. The results are organized in the order of the controls. Column (2) controls for player statistics, while Column (3) controls for player statistics, player characteristics and Final Four Appearance. Continuing on, Column (4) has the same controls as the previous column, in addition to conference. Lastly, Column (5) includes al previously stated controls as well as a fixed effect for draft year. Without any controls, being a McDonald's All-American decreases draft position by about 13 slots. This means a player who was a McDonald's All-American can be expected to be picked 13 slots sooner in comparison to a player who wasn't. This is statistically significant at the 99% level. However, this coefficient only explains about 11% of the variation in draft position. In the next regression, the coefficient of McDonald's All-American sees a slight but still remains statistically significant at the 99% level after controlling for player statistics. Again, this means a player who was a McDonald's All-American can be

expected to be picked 12 slots sooner in comparison to a player who wasn't. Now with the control for player statistics, the model explains 26% of the variation in draft position. As player characteristics and Final Four appearance are controlled for, the coefficient of McDonald's All-American drops to -3.4, however this isn't statistically significant. With these added controls, the model explains 46% of the variation in draft position. The final two models add fix effects for conference and draft year. There is an increase in the R^2 by about 3% and 1% respectively. The coefficient for McDonald's All-American incurs another decrease to -2.4 in the fourth model, but holds steady to about -3.6 in the final model. Again, the coefficients for McDonald's All-American are not statistically significant. The constant does not provide much meaning for interpretation in any of the models except the first one. Because there is no observed player with zero's for player statistic or characteristic variables. In the simple regression, a player who isn't a McDonald's All-American can be expected to be picked around 30^{th} in the draft. This is statistically significant at the 99% level. There could be cause for concern in regards to collinearity within the model. Players who played in the MCDAAG are likely to play in a bigger conference, which means they have a better chance in appearing in March Madness and the Final Four. As more variables are added in the the model, the R^2 increases due to these added controls explaining variation in draft positon that the variable of interest is not.

Conclusion

The results of this study show that being a McDonald's All-American only has a measurable statistically significant impact before controls for other important variables such as player characteristics and team characteristics. Therefore, players and decision makers should be weary in how much weight they put on high school All-American games. It is hard to predict who will successfully transition from the high school level, to the collegiate level and then to the

professional level. Many high school basketball players are under ranked and “sleepers”. For example, a player like Stephen Curry went to a smaller school and never player in the MCDAAG. Yet, he is regarded as one of the best players in the NBA by a large number of experts and fans.

However, there are limitations to this study. Past research has suggested other variables can explain the changes in draft position. There has been previous research that measured the impact of variables such height, win percentage and post season success on draft position. Height is something that is out of a player’s control. For decision makers though, it can change the way a player’s potential ability is viewed. Post season success could include things like winning the conference title or championship tournament. Greer, Price, and Berri (2019) conclude that decision makers struggle with separating an individual player from the college team that they play for. Their analysis continues on and shows that players on teams who have average to below average winning percentages and do not perform well in postseason tournaments are less likely to be drafted. Players who are drafted tend to come from more successful team. This means that players on less successful teams are not as likely to be drafted. The results of this study reveal that an appearance in the Final Four during a player’s final collegiate season leads to a player being drafted about 6 slots sooner. This was statistically significant at the 99% level. Post season results matter to NBA decision makers. Also, this study has a smaller amount of observations. It would be interesting to compare the change being a McDonald’s All-American had on draft position before high schoolers were no longer allowed to be drafted. This would offer more information because these players wouldn’t have collegiate statistics or team accolades that could influence where they are picked. An adjustment for player statistics in terms of position would also offer some different results as well. Evans (2018) found that the importance of

different player characteristics varies amongst positions and in terms of degree of college experience. For these reasons, this study does have the potential to suffer from omitted variable bias. This could explain why the R^2 is below 50% for all models used. These other observable player characteristics and team characteristic can all be considered in future research. The variable for McDonald's All-American has a positive bias because as more variables were added the coefficient decrease. This means the coefficient's true value is less than the estimated value. It was found that 73% of freshmen drafted played in the MCDAAG for the draft years observed. While no other class was above 50% for MCDAAG participation. There may be needed change to the selection process to the all-star games if the goal of the marketers of the game is to display future NBA stars or players. Through empirical analysis, it can be included that statistically, being a McDonald's All-American does not lead to a player being drafter sooner after controls for other variables are taken into consideration. So, it is important for recruiters and NBA decision makers to recognize the stars of tomorrow may not be the players receiving the most recognition at the high school level.

Appendix A. Full Regression Output for Five Linear Regressions

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
VARIABLES	aftPosition	aftPosition	aftPosition	aftPosition	aftPosition
MCDAAG	-12.60***	-12.05***	-3.487	-2.403	-3.639
	[2.355]	[2.190]	[2.259]	[2.378]	[2.275]
2.Pos1			1.098	0.724	1.226
			[3.790]	[4.035]	[3.829]
3.Pos1			2.403	1.094	2.365
			[3.053]	[3.260]	[3.055]
4.Pos1			16.26***	15.89***	16.71***
			[5.475]	[5.765]	[5.481]
5.Pos1			8.197*	6.738	7.885*
			[4.551]	[4.707]	[4.582]
2.Class1			4.159	4.835	5.325
			[3.898]	[4.079]	[3.959]
3.Class1			1.040	0.873	1.825
			[3.369]	[3.531]	[3.410]
4.Class1			8.866*	10.05**	9.889**
			[4.610]	[4.819]	[4.690]
FinFourAPP			-5.488**	-5.817**	-6.184**
			[2.544]	[2.615]	[2.630]
Age			3.674***	3.171**	3.601***
			[1.167]	[1.244]	[1.200]
TO40		0.881	2.574*	2.253	2.340*
		[1.535]	[1.393]	[1.433]	[1.396]
TREB40		-0.0940	0.747	0.735	0.692
		[0.415]	[0.458]	[0.491]	[0.460]
AST40		-2.345***	-3.279***	-3.492***	-3.426***
		[0.826]	[0.818]	[0.875]	[0.827]
STL40		-3.302*	-3.821**	-4.836***	-2.963*
		[1.861]	[1.702]	[1.823]	[1.759]
BLK40		-4.177***	-3.565***	-4.210***	-3.602***
		[0.966]	[0.918]	[0.990]	[0.926]
PTS40		-1.244***	-1.528***	-1.664***	-1.551***
		[0.260]	[0.236]	[0.259]	[0.239]
Constant	32.56***	73.58***	-20.27	-2.863	-18.66
	[1.255]	[7.230]	[23.84]	[26.06]	[24.54]
Observations	236	236	236	236	236
R-squared	0.109	0.261	0.463	0.493	0.475
Standard errors in brackets					
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1					

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