

# Local stars ready to power Pitt basketball

By Conor Hutchison, Senior Staff Writer

College athletics is a wide and wild world. Coaches travel across the globe to recruit the best of the best. But in Pittsburgh, all men's basketball head coach Jeff Capel has to do is look around — there are Panthers everywhere.

Pittsburgh-produced talent has powered Pitt athletics for decades. South Oakland's Dan Marino brought Pitt football four consecutive top 10 finishes. The Hill District's DeJuan Blair led Pitt basketball to an Elite Eight appearance in the 2009 NCAA tournament and Sam Clancy, whose jersey will hang in the rafters of the Pete in January, finished as the only Panther with over 1,000 points and rebounds.

Next in line for locals to fall in love with are first-year guard Brandin "Beebah" Cummings and center Liam Mignogna. Cummings won back-to-back WPIAL and State Championships at Lincoln Park, a performing arts charter school in Midland, Pennsylvania. Mignogna went to Hampton, a public school in Gibsonia, Pennsylvania, which was the only other school able to compete with Lincoln Park on their way to a Western Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic League Championship and State Championship.

For the last few years, the Petersen Event Center has hosted the WPIAL, giving Cummings and Mignogna a taste of the arena they'd spend their first collegiate year in with their future head coach sitting courtside.

"It was really a dream come true," Cummings said. "Ever since I was a kid, I wanted to play in the Pete, and I wanted to play for Pitt. I wanted to have my family here coming to the games and supporting me. Obviously, I had a lot of success in this gym. It meant a lot to me to be able to come to the Pete, show out for my people, and whoop on Liam a little bit."

Cummings committed to Pitt right before his senior year started. The decision was easy for him.

"My brother played here before I did, so obviously that weighed in," Cummings said. "I have wanted to play here since I was a kid. Also, I feel like Coach [Capel] is the best coach in the country. He has a lot of things about him that I relate to. He knows a lot about basketball. He's the coach I really wanted to play for. Ever since my brother committed, I knew I was going to commit here as well."

Cummings's older brother, Nelly Cummings, transferred to Pitt after graduating from Colgate and helped the Panthers reach the NCAA Tournament in 2023 — the first time they did so since 2016.

Mignogna, however, had a different path to the Pete. The Gibsonia native didn't announce his commitment until a month after his WPIAL championship loss to Lincoln Park.

"I didn't have any other interest at this level," Mignogna said. "[Pitt] offered me a walk-on spot here. It happened quick, but everyone knows the program is on the uprise. The coaching staff is unbelievable. I'm from Pittsburgh, so there wasn't much to it. I knew right away this is where I wanted to be."

Similar to Cummings, family ties weighed into Mignogna's decision to play for his city.

"I had a cousin [Ryan Luther] who played basketball here a couple years ago," Mignogna said. "I've always wanted to go to Pitt and have been a huge fan of the basketball program since I was young."



Jonathan Guo | Staff Photographer

The Oakland Zoo is a spirited student section at Pitt sporting events such as Men's Basketball game.

The two first-year players and former rivals were impressed with each other's abilities in high school and can't wait to see how that talent will translate to big-time college basketball.

"We know if the ball is in Beebah's hands he's hard to guard and he can create good shots for himself. Our game plan was to keep the ball out of his hands. We didn't want to go up and down the court with him. His full-court defense and his ability to create shots will still be a huge problem for other teams in college basketball to try and stop."

Cummings is an elite shot creator, perimeter defender and guard. Mignogna's top-tier skills are on the other side of the spectrum and hold a major advantage in height. Cummings' team had no match for the six-foot-10 Mignogna — the tallest player, Meleek Thomas, a top-10 player in the country in the class of 2025 who has Pitt in his top three schools, only stood at six-foot-five.

"Our big was six-foot-one, his name was Dorian McGhee, and that was Liam's matchup," Cummings said. "I guess our plan was to keep him out of the paint, beat him down the floor, just try to get our defense set, and if he gets the ball in the post just let him shoot it, I guess, and hope for the best. Whenever you have someone as big and strong as Liam, it's hard to gameplan for."

Cummings and Mignogna's skillsets look easily transferrable to the Panthers, but the local stars enter a locker room chock-full of experience and have to test their metal against refined talent. Although everyone is competing for minutes at this point in the season, the locker room is as tight as ever.

"The older guys are so experienced they don't really even have to explain stuff," Cummings said. "They just go out on the court and do it. We get to say, 'Oh, that's college basketball and that's what we have to go out and do.' They do everything they can to make sure we're straight. We look up to them and try to follow in their footsteps to try and be as successful as possible."

Cummings and Mignogna are two of four true first-year players rostered. When the local stars stepped foot in the locker room, they quickly realized everyone is treated equally here.

"From day one it's been a family," Mignogna said. "In the locker room, age doesn't matter. Everyone treats each other great. We're all brothers. On the court, you can tell these dudes have experience."

Last season, Pitt proved anyone can shine no matter age or position. The Panthers rostered Carlton 'Bub' Carrington, the fourteenth overall pick in the NBA Draft — a true first-year guard who had freshly turned 18 before the season.

But that is in the past. The Panthers are looking up and ahead at what they can do differently. After missing an invitation to the NCAA Tournament and declining an invite to the NIT, Pitt crafted a new battle cry to make this season's goal clear.

"We have a slogan. 'Leave no doubt.' Everybody thought we should have been in the tournament," Cummings said. "I certainly thought that. We just want to make sure we leave no doubt this year. Every day in practice, that's in the back of our mind."

Last season, Pitt finished fourth in the ACC but wasn't one of the five ACC teams to make the NCAA tournament — showing that winning the right games matters more than winning in general. The main citation from bracket experts was Pitt's weak non-conference schedule — 340 out of 362 Division I teams — and its performance in that schedule. This season, the Panthers beefed up those non-conference games with matchups against West Virginia, LSU, UCF or Wisconsin, Ohio State and Mississippi State — all on top of the gauntlet that is the ACC play.

Cummings and Mignogna aren't just playing for Pitt, but their family names and the legacies that come with them.

"We can walk down the street and everybody knows who we are. It's so different going places," Cummings said. "We're just regular people, but we appreciate that people look at us like that. Obviously, there's a standard set that we have to go out there and live up to. We're ready for it."

Men's basketball has the task of following up an almost flawless fall sports season from football, volleyball and soccer. Thankfully, Oakland and its inhabitants have made the transition from high school to college easy.

"Watching the other fall sports teams and how great they've been doing — it's the talk of the town, football, volleyball, soccer. It's pretty awesome to see the sports culture here," Mignogna said.