

Even Kobe Bryant realized this new high school sports venture had local roots (and potential) | Mike Jensen

Overtime Elite, which plans to pay high school basketball players \$100,000 a year, believes it already has its audience.

by [Mike Jensen](#)

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After brief pleasantries, the first sentence from this potential investor took Dan Porter by surprise.

“So, you’re from Ardmore.”

Porter knew he’d grown up in Ardmore. He just didn’t expect Kobe Bryant to know it, to have taken the time to research his background.

“He was more prepared for me than, like, 90% of the investors ever,” Porter said recently.

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For a group planning a new basketball venture, this potential investor could offer far more than money. A Kobe Bryant stamp of approval? Instant validation that their path offered up for high school-age basketball players was legit, even logical.

Would Kobe himself have at least considered it back when he was 16 years old at Lower Merion High? Who knows. Those years were good to Kobe. But this new Overtime Elite startup, which is guaranteeing \$100,000 a year for worthy high school players, provided they give up their high school and college eligibility, has gained the attention of a sport.

Overtime Elite, starting up in September, has two local co-founders. Porter graduated from Friends Central, Zack Weiner from Penn.

"It was a year ago January," Porter said of the meeting with Bryant. "I got this call from somebody who I thought could really help us. ... I flew out to L.A. I was super nervous about this meeting."

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It lasted about an hour at Kobe's creative studio in Costa Mesa. The two of them, plus three or four people from Kobe's creative team and his investment fund. Casual dress. No food or drink.

"We talked about Lower Merion," Porter said. "He was like, 'You would have gone to Haverford High School.' I said, 'I actually went to Friends Central.' I was totally blown away. We had this great conversation. We talked about watching his dad play. I was like, 'He's going to take us to the next level.' It was four days before he died."



Kobe Bryant took a meeting with the Overtime Elite days before he died. Chris Carlson / AP

Kobe had kept his cards close to the vest leaving the meeting, Porter said, merely saying he loved the idea of it and they should talk more.

What was the origin story for the Overtime Elite league itself? Porter had been working at one of the big global talent agencies, William Morris Endeavor, became its head of digital. When the agency bought IMG, that brought Porter more into the sports side of his business.

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"It became very clear inside that there was a big concern about the [overall sports] audience -- about the age of the audience," Porter said. "The fact that young people were not watching cable TV. They were not watching live games."

Not just an American thing. Porter related how a "very famous" English Premier League soccer coach told him and Weiner on a trip there that he was concerned about the league's future audience, that the stands might be half full in another decade because young fans domestically and worldwide weren't as connected in the same way, more into highlights than true fandom, weren't watching live games.

"To me, that was kind of like ... I just didn't know that," Porter said. "Now, it's like a media trope, and everybody talks about it. But at that time, it was really on the inside. ...

"By the way, that wasn't me. I'd watch the Eagles game on a big TV. All of that type of stuff. I had every birthday party at the Phillies game in the '70s and everything else like that."

So it was presented to him that he should bring in Influencers and YouTubers to make sports cool. But even doing such things, at its core, Porter said, there was something missing, which, to his thinking, presented a "crazy opportunity."

"Sports is a very hard business to get into," Porter said. "There's rights issues. It seemed like a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, except, you know, at that time, I was in my late 40s. I was like, somebody is going to build essentially the ESPN for the next generation. And they're going to do it in a digital-first manner, and they're going to tell stories that resonate, and they're going to reshape everything."

One hitch, he felt. Porter wanted a younger partner from the generational era he was trying to reach. He began asking around and was told about this guy from New York, Stuyvesant High graduate, who went to Penn -- three-time Ivy League chess champion, which isn't a bad credential to bring into any conversation.

Weiner had another resume line, his own sports media startup while an undergraduate at Penn. College students writing about sports. It got traction, but didn't really fill a void.

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The Overtime brand, however, now advertises itself as "the leading brand for the next generation of sports fans with a community of over 50 million followers that generates 1.5 billion video views each month."

Wider audience

For the first year they worked to get this enterprise up and running, Porter said, people were confused.

"They said, 'Oh, you must love high school basketball,'" Porter said. "We're like, we started this to go after a certain audience. There was nothing in this in the beginning where we wanted to change high school basketball. It was completely driven by the audience. Investors didn't see that. They were immediately like, is this for parents so they can watch footage? We were like,

no, no, no, we're trying to build a global media company that serves 75 million people under the age of 25."

Of those 50 million followers over different accounts, Porter said, "It covers a lot of things. But a big portion of that is basketball. I think that we're looking at it ... we're covering a lot of these players. ... We only do video. We don't do criticism. It was clear diving into the data that there were high school superstars who were much bigger than NBA players in their followings."



Zach Weiner (left) and Dan Porter are co-founders of the Overtime Elite League. Courtesy of Overtime Elite

Question that? You shouldn't. Porter isn't talking about NBA superstars, more the journeyman bench players.

"It truly is the first generation of players who grow up with social media from the get-go," Porter said. "We understood early on. Way, way back, we would try to do more regional stuff. Can we get Friends Central on here? It was clear that three videos of Zion Williamson would do more views than videos of 200 local schools."

No, they weren't trying to "cover" high school sports. Better to have a YouTube highlight headlined BEST DUNK EVER!!!

"So now you're watching Trae Young or Michael Porter Jr. and Zion and LaMelo [Ball] and these other guys," Porter said. "It was funny early on when we thought we were going to be super local, a lot of kids were like, 'Why are you even making a video of me? I'm not even that good.' It was clear, people love these YouTube stars. They're giant. The only reason these 25 stars are not like that is they can't run down the court and film themselves at the same time."

"The more we stripped away information, the bigger we got," Porter said. "We started off early on ... we were like, he's 7-2 and he's got an 8-foot wingspan and he shoots 30% from here and he goes to Roman Catholic and this and that. The more we told you about him, the less people were interested. 'I don't know what high school that is, I don't know what a wingspan is.' We're like, 'Here's Zion Williamson. This kid dunks like no one else.' Nobody knows what their record is, anything like that, and that's very counter to what sports has been traditionally. We kind of flipped a lot of things on their head to make them widely applicable to our audience."

This league, Porter said, same thing. They believe they have a built-in large audience, and have to do the same thing.

"We can't fall into the trap of, 'Oh, it's the middle of the season, they're seven games back, they're this and that,'" Porter said. "Those things are appealing to me. But they shrink the size of the audience because they telegraph that you don't know what's going on. Whereas when it's widely accessible ... you can drop in anytime. 'That kid's hair is crazy. You see the way he plays? I'm in.'"

"This big huge expansion of streaming videos -- all sorts of potential businesses will be looking for value in that," said Joel Maxcy, a Drexel sports business professor. "There are going to be so many changes because of these new platforms."

Media entities providing their own programming is hardly a new idea. (One sports example: ESPN owns a lot of bowl games.)

One obstacle for the new league: As it recruited young ballplayers, Porter said, one of the narratives put out there was, why give up the exposure of big-time college ball? The answer: Jalen Green went to the G League, didn't play on television for the last year. Yet he has a [partnership with Drake](#) and is going to go in the top three of the draft.

"Even further than that, during March Madness, there were a couple of times when a player would do something, be on TV, and they would literally gain no followers," Porter said. "To the players, that's the currency. You take those followers everywhere you go with you in life. We would post them on Instagram ... Did you see what happened? He gained 20,000 followers in an hour."

Their big pitch: What is important exposure? For people who are never going to buy your sneakers or jersey and are just there for the advertisers? Or in front of young people who are going to follow you and buy your stuff?

"That was a really different narrative," Porter said.

He points out that they have three of the top 12 in the class of 2023 in one ranking. (No players from Philly right now.)

One way Overtime is showing stability is in its staffing. Former Connecticut coach (and Sixers player) Kevin Ollie is head coach and head of player development. Head of basketball operations Brandon Williams also had worked in the Sixers front office. President Aaron Ryan had worked for the NBA for 22 years.

"Our instinct is that people want a choice, that the current system is an imperfect system," Porter said, pointing out that international players come to the NBA from a club system, not a school system.

"Six percent of active NBA players are investors in Overtime at this point," Porter said, adding that five USA Olympic players are investors, including Kevin Durant, Khris Middleton, and Devin Booker.

A facility with three NBA-size courts is being built in Atlanta, part of the \$80 million in funding raised. Their "full package" education pitch includes direct instruction, with a 4-to-1 student-to-teacher ratio. Also, full health care and disability insurance. They don't intend to get into bidding wars for players at this point. They are offering up to \$100,000 for players to receive for college tuition if they don't go pro.

"They'll compete against other prep teams and also international teams," Weiner said, with about half the committed players coming from overseas.

"It's about options," Porter said, pointing out that as the son of Penn and Bryn Mawr College professors, the educational end of it isn't just lip service. More than two decades ago, Porter did a turn as president of Teach for America.

Have they detected they've been noticed by the NCAA?

"For sure, I think they're obviously paying attention," Porter said, noting that the NCAA has said high school players who play against Overtime teams would not have their college eligibility impacted.

"I think that at the end of the day, the concern is bad actors as much as it is protecting a business model that might not be protectable forever," Porter said of the NCAA. "We're obviously a good actor. ... I think people thought it was going to be acrimonious with the NCAA. We're just a little -- it's coming from so many different places to them."

New name, image, and likeness policies might make prospective players think about which is the best option. That's why Porter is pitching his audience as a more targeted one.

This much the Overtime Elite folks are sure of: Kentucky coach John Calipari knows who they are. NBA commissioner Adam Silver knows who they are. So did Kobe.

"We had covered his daughter a bunch on our women's basketball account. He had followed us and a bunch of our talent," Porter said. "He was just listening. But his business partner told me, the last conversation that he and Kobe ever had about their fund was about what we were doing."

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