

Double Dip

A bona fide NBA prospect as a freshman, ASU star [James Harden](#) wants to make a lasting impact in college by staying for a second year — and maybe more.

BY MICHAEL CRAIG

PHOTOS BY TRACY RASINSKI

Last year's Pac-10 conference was absolutely loaded with freshman talent, guys who have come to define the modern-day "one-and-done" player who heads to college with every intention of staying just one year before bolting for the NBA. UCLA's Kevin Love. USC's O.J. Mayo. Arizona's Jerryd Bayless. All one and done, and all officially in new tax brackets, too.

But then there is the case of Arizona State sophomore sensation James Harden, whose silky left-handed jumper is smooth enough to rock you to sleep. Like the aforementioned players, Harden could have easily departed for the NBA after last year's freshman campaign, and the NBA would have certainly welcomed him with open arms and a gigantic paycheck. He's that good. But unlike those other guys, Harden came to ASU to do more than use it a stepping stone to higher places. As the first McDonalds All-American to come to ASU straight out of high school in the last 24 years (since Chris Sandle in 1984), James came here to help change the face of the program. And although he's happy with the strides the Sun Devils have made, he's not completely satisfied. He wants more. And so, much to the delight of every Sun Devil fan, coach and booster, he's back for another year.

"That's the main reason I came back," says Harden. "We think we can do some really good things this year."

There was also a specific reason James chose to come to Tempe from his native Southern California. And again, it centered around leaving a lasting mark on the program.

"UCLA and those type schools, they're always going to have the big names," says Harden. "They're going to recruit heavily. But Arizona State doesn't get as many of those big names, and the last ten years or so they haven't done so great. So I just wanted to come here and see if I could help make an impact. I want to help turn this into a powerhouse program."

He's well on his way.

The prevailing sentiment is that ASU got robbed of an NCAA Tournament berth last season, twice beating U of A, which did secure an invitation to the dance, not to mention some of the other fringe teams that were awarded berths. And the tournament is at the top of James' list for this upcoming season.





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“We want to not only get into the tournament, but we want to do some damage,” says Harden. “Our ultimate goal is to get to the Final Four and win a National Championship. We know that takes a lot of hard work and dedication, but we’re willing to do that. And we’re not the under-the-radar team anymore. People know about us. So they’re going to be coming after us a little more, and we have to be ready for that.”

To prepare for the upcoming year, during this offseason Harden took part in a few skills camps that are reserved for premium talents. The camps were headed by a couple fellas you may have heard of — Celtics star Paul Pierce and living legend LeBron James.

“I met both those guys, and actually LeBron worked out with us,” James told *POST*. “It was a crazy experience to play wit those guys and to have NBA scouts watching the whole time. We really learned a lot from that experience.”

Pac-10 coaches are tossing in their sleep as we speak. Surely every one of them besides ASU coach Herb Sendek was hoping Harden would turn pro so they’d never again have to deal with him. No such luck. And then to boot, the guy goes off and spends the summer playing with the likes of LeBron and Paul Pierce. Improvement is seemingly inevitable from your freshman year to your sophomore year. But now, this might get out of control. James Harden is the type of player who can single-handedly put opposing coaches in the unemployment line.

Aside from basketball, which is obviously a major reason for James’ returning to school, there were a couple other factors that contributed to his decision — namely getting another year to be a 19-year-old kid in college. And in case you didn’t get the memo, Arizona State isn’t exactly a dull place to spend your college years. The NBA is great, sure, but coming back for another year at ASU isn’t the toughest sell in the world.

“I really enjoy just hanging out with my teammates and relaxing. Although we don’t have too much free time,” says James, who, like any other ASU student, also loves getting into the other sports. “That’s part of the college experience.”

And he’s not the only one who’s getting to experience it. James’ mother has a house in Phoenix and gets to watch her son do what he loves. And the same goes for the rest of his family. They’re no different than the rest of us — they just enjoy watching James play.

“They’re just really happy for me,” says James. “Not very many people get to play college basketball at this level. They tell me they’re proud of me all the time and are always supporting me.”

Apparently, James’ family members aren’t the only ones supporting him. In addition to leading ASU to 13 more wins than it had the previous year — which was tied for the best turnaround in the country — ratings for *FSN Arizona* were up 196 percent from the previous season. Now either not very many people could afford basic cable two years ago, or James Harden had yet to arrive in the desert. Which one makes more sense to you?

I’m going with Harden. He’s as good as it gets on the hardwood and a class act on top of it. And he has big plans for Arizona State Basketball. Sun Devil fans may very well look back on the Harden era as the time when ASU catapulted into the realm of the elite programs in the country. And if he does this in two years, just think if he stayed for all four.

Okay, let’s not get ahead of ourselves. 

