



## Outside the Lines: Eligibility for Sale

Here's the transcript from Show 112 of weekly Outside The Lines - Eligibility for Sale

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**BOB LEY, ESPN** - The best high school basketball players in New York City who can't make the grades at their own school often take classes at this tiny for-profit private school, and just like that they have NCAA eligibility.

**Host:** Bob Ley, ESPN  
**Reporter:** Tom Farrey, ESPN  
**Guests:** Tom McMillen, former NBA player; Terry Holland, Special Assistant to the President, University of Virginia

**TOM FARREY, ESPN** - Did you ever know any basketball players that did fail?

**DWAYNE JONES** - No.

**KITWANA RHYMER** -The lowest mark I've seen they probably give is a "C." They won't give you an "F," though.

**LEY** - But the school's principal says it's not that simple.

**ROBERT DONUS** - In any academic situation, grading is subjective.

**CHRIS LINDSLEY** - If you put me on a lie detector test, I will swear that he changed grades. He passed kids that I failed.

**LEY** - A policy of changing grades that's left a paper trail.

**JONES** - I feel there should be some sort of an investigation done.

**FARREY** - Have you or any of your teachers ever served any jail time?

**LEY** - Today on "Outside the Lines," a school where for top recruits there's eligibility for sale.

**ANNOUNCER VOICEOVER** - "Outside the Lines" is presented by State Farm Insurance.

**BOB LEY, HOST** - This morning's story would seem to be part of a natural progression, after all, academic fraud at the University of Minnesota attracted the attention of federal prosecutors. There are currently similar allegations involving LSU. And the recruiting wars are full of tales of high school players having other people take SAT exams in their name.

But NCAA eligibility for young athletes now rests more and more on high school grades. Thirteen core courses, and that number may be rising to 16 this fall, the better grades players achieve in these courses, the lower the SAT score they can live with and still play as college freshman.



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So there's a premium on not only passing, but doing well in English and math and history and the like. Just get the grades. As Tom Farrey discovered in his five-month investigation, it doesn't matter where those grades come from.

**TOM FARREY, REPORTER** - NBA players Lamar Odom, Kenny Satterfield and Erick Barkley went there. So did a long list of college players that includes University of Massachusetts center, Kitwana Rhymer; St. John's forward, Eric King; and Providence guard, Abdul Mills. As well as top high school player, Lenny Cook, who recently declared for the NBA draft.

In the past decade, perhaps more basketball talent has gone through this school than any high school in the country.

**KITWANA RHYMER** - I mean, we got basically superstars in one whole school that was like a box.

**FARREY** - Its name is Christopher Robin Academy, but you've never seen any of these players in a Christopher Robin jersey. That's because the tiny run down school in New York City doesn't have a team and most players are only part-time students anyway.

There's the high school they attend most of the year, the one they play for, and then there's Christopher Robin, which they quietly attend on the side. The main reason? To get the grades necessary to play college basketball.

**LAMAR ODOM, NBA PLAYER** - I took - there's a couple of core classes down here to get done. I didn't get down there at all at Christ the King Regional High School. I just took care of all my business there.

**FARREY** - Lamar Odom went to Christopher Robin with the permission of his regular high school, Christ the King. He went during the summer to replace poor grades.

**FARREY** - What kind of grades did you get there?

**LAMAR ODOM** - You know, I passed.

**FARREY** - Other players go during the school year on Saturday's or on weekdays after their regular classes.

**TOM KONCHALSKI, HIGH SCHOOL BASKETBALL RECRUITER** - It's a way to circumvent the initial eligibility requirements of the NCAA.

**FARREY** - Tom Konchalski runs a New York based high school basketball recruiting service.

**KONCHALSKI** - I know that every good player in the New York area who is not a good student in the last 10 or 15 years has found his way to Christopher Robin, which is sort of like the last helicopter out of Saigon for at-risk student athletes.

**RHYMER** - Yeah, you can basically - yeah, that's your last hope right there. If you're not catching that one, then you might as well just get a bullet.

**FARREY** - The man behind the for-profit school is Robert Donus, who says players are sent to him by a network of high school and AAU coaches.

**FARREY** - I mean, do you like being sort of this go-to guy in New York for basketball players - academically troubled basketball players?

**ROBERT DONUS, CHRISTOPHER ROBIN SCHOOL** - Sure I do. When you can enjoy the satisfaction of catapulting some of these minority high school students into some success, you have to be satisfied.

**FARREY** - But should the NCAA be accepting credits from Christopher Robin? An ESPN investigation has learned that the school exaggerates and, in some cases, flat out lies about its credentials.

In its brochure, the school cites six organizations that would seem to vouch for the quality of its education, including membership in the prestigious National Association of Independent Schools. But in a letter to ESPN, the NAIS says Christopher Robin is not a member.

The school also claims to be accredited by something called the Northeastern Conference of College Preparatory Schools.

**DON PETRY, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR PRIVATE SCHOOL ACCREDITATION** - I've never heard of that organization.

**FARREY** - Don Petry would know. He's the head of a national group that certifies accrediting bodies to help the public avoid schools with bogus credentials.

**PETRY** - There's a certain amount of deception going on to the general public if, in fact, they are not members of the groups they say they are members of, they're not accredited by viable groups. There's deception going on.

**FARREY** - Says you are accredited by the Northeastern Conference of College Preparatory Schools.

**DONUS** - Yeah.

**FARREY** - Do you know it even exists?

**DONUS** - Never bothered to look.

**FARREY** - But you own the company.

**DONUS** - Never bothered with it. It was never important to us.

**FARREY** - You own the company and it's in your literature, but you've never bothered to look?

**DONUS** - That's a minor issue.

**FARREY** - Bottom line, Christopher Robin operates largely unchecked by any outside body. That includes the state of New York, which says it has little authority to regulate private schools or take their registration away.

In this vacuum, questionable academic practices appear to thrive.

**DWAYNE JONES, LASALLE** - I feel there should be some sort of investigation done.

**FARREY** - LaSalle's Dwayne Jones is from Toronto. He came to New York in the summers of 1997 and '98 to get exposure to college scouts and to pick up a few quick credits at Christopher Robin.

But he eventually stopped going to the school because, he says, he wasn't learning anything.

**JONES** - The level and quality of the education that you would receive at Christopher Robin, it wouldn't compare to that of a normal school. The level was rather low.

**FARREY** - And the grades, he says, were artificially high.

**JONES** - Let's just say if you needed a little bit of extra help somewhere and didn't really have time to make that up through homework or assignments where you fell short in your marks, then they'll give you a little boost.

**FARREY** - Did you ever know of any basketball players who did fail?

**JONES** - No.

**RHYMER** - I mean, if anything, they'll give the lowest mark I think they'll probably give you is a "C." You know, they won't give you an "F," though.

**DONUS** - That's not true. It's the kind of situation where we will accommodate an individual. Remember in any academic situation, grading is subjective. There is rarely anything exceptional about the grades.

I'd say these grades are pretty commensurate with what they usually earn.

**FARREY** - Not in the case of Kitwana Rhymer, the UMass center. Brother Frank Byrne, until recently, was principal at Saint Raymond's, Rhymer's full-time high school when he attended Christopher Robin in 1996.

That would be the last time that Saint Raymond's would accept grades from Christopher Robin.

**BROTHER FRANK BYRNE, FORMER PRINCIPAL, SAINT RAYMOND'S** - They were a little bit too high for what I was considering as a proper grade for summer school.

**KITWANA RHYMER, UMASS CENTER** - I think it was math and English I took.

**FARREY** - Math and English?

**RHYMER** - Yeah, I got an "A" and a "B" in that.

**BYRNE** - I just was pretty much looking at the grades and decided this was not going to be a school we were going to send students to anymore after that point.

**FARREY** - The NCAA has also detected suspicious grading patterns at Christopher Robin. Two NCAA sources who review high school transcripts told ESPN that they've never seen a failing grade from the school.

One of the officials said he's never seen anything less than a "B."

**FARREY** - It's the kind of school that won't fail basketball players. Is that accurate?

**CHRIS LINDSLEY, FORMER CHRISTOPHER ROBIN TEACHER** - They won't fail anybody. It doesn't make a difference who it is.

**FARREY** - Chris Lindsley taught many of the high school courses in the early 1990s when Christopher Robin was gaining popularity among players. The former teacher said he felt compelled to inflate grades because Donus made it clear he did not like teachers to flunk students. That it was bad for his \$600,000 a year business. Failing students likely wouldn't return to the school and pay more tuition.

Lindsley showed ESPN one of his grade books. He says that in the left-hand column, written in red, are the grades his students deserved. In the

right-hand column are the grades he gave them. In some cases, more than 30 points higher than what they earned.

**LINDSLEY** - Even then at that point, it seemed that the students that I failed, especially in my first year, they graduated or they would graduate to the next grade. And I thought that was impossible because I failed them and they were failed three or four courses.

How could they possibly make up all those courses over a summer? It just doesn't make sense.

**FARREY** - Lindsley is one of three former Christopher Robin teachers who told ESPN that Donus would personally intervene to prevent students from failing.

**LINDSLEY** - You put me in a court of law and I will say, and I will swear under oath, that he changed grades. You put me on a lie detector test and I will swear that he changed grades. That he changed grades. He passed kids that I failed.

**FARREY** - Donus denies that he has ever changed the grade of any student and he says academically troubled basketball players do well at his school because of its teaching methods.

**DONUS** - We give them a lot of tutoring, a lot of close attention. We spoon-feed it to them. It's as simple, as simple as that.

**FARREY** - Lindsley says he doesn't know if any students who received grade changes were basketball players, but he says that the athletes had to be aware that, one way or another, they weren't going to fail as long as they paid their tuition.

Full-time students pay \$4,700 a year and part-time students pay \$250 per class.

**LINDSLEY** - I'm sure these young aspiring basketball players know this, give Donus the money and you get the passing grade. That gets you into college. It doesn't make a difference about whether they are basketball players or not, it's about him receiving his payment.

**FARREY** - This is not the first time Donus has been accused of improper business practices. In 1999, he went to prison for illegally selling hundreds of student visas, for \$25 to \$50 each, that the prosecutor says were used to keep foreigners in the country.

Have you or any of your teachers ever served any jail time?

**DONUS** - No.

**FARREY** - You didn't go to jail, didn't go to federal prison three years ago?

**DONUS** - No.

**FARREY** - An immigration case?

**DONUS** - That's absurd. That's absurd. I don't know where you would have gotten information like that.

**FARREY** - What is this, a case of mistaken identity? I mean, how many Robert Donuses run organizations called Christopher Robin Academy?

**DONUS** - It's just not true.

**FARREY** - But it is true. Court and prison records show Donus pleaded guilty and served one year in a federal prison.

Now, you might think the NCAA would be concerned about accepting any credits from a school and principal with such a dubious record. When presented with ESPN's findings, the NCAA said it will not cross Christopher Robin off its list of approved high schools.

**DIANE DICKMAN, NCAA DIRECTOR OF MEMBERSHIP SERVICES** - There are almost no scenarios under which the NCAA would begin to police this secondary school or any secondary school in terms of whether we would accept core courses or not. It's an inappropriate role for us to play.

**FARREY** - How much checking do you do into the quality of a particular high school?

**DICKMAN** - It is not the role of the NCAA to look at the quality of education delivered. Again, that's the role of the State Board of Education, the State Department of Education, the high school community.

**FARREY** - In fact, the NCAA will take credits from any high school. Accredited or not.

**LINDSLEY** - This is not a school. It's an academic joke.

**FARREY** - But he says he's doing a favor to these basketball players by helping them get into college.

**LINDSLEY** - That's not doing the kids a favor -- to not have any education isn't doing them a favor. So he's not helping these basketball players. I don't see how he's helping them out to anything.

He's helping him line his own pockets.

**FARREY** - Donus says the only real wealth he's helped created has been for the occasional player who's gone on to the NBA, like Lamar Odom.

**DONUS** - I understand he went to the University of Rhode Island and then he was recruited by the Clippers, got a \$10 million contract. So we like to drop his name.

**FARREY** - You proud of that? That he got a \$10 million contract?

**DONUS** - Of course. That's beautiful. It's a beautiful thing.

**LEY** - Is there an agency that can or should be overseeing this school? The New York State Department of Education says it has limited ability to regulate private schools. The Department told "Outside the Lines" it could only advise private schools.

Joining us to consider this story and its implications, Tom McMillen. He played in the NBA for 11 seasons. A little before the age of \$10 million contracts. He was also an Olympian, a Rhodes Scholar, and, for three terms, a US Congressman from Maryland. He joins us this morning from Washington, DC.

Good morning, Tom.

**TOM MCMILLEN, FORMER NBA PLAYER** - Good morning, Bob.

**LEY** - In a real world sense, day to day, not even looking at broad reforms, who is responsible for a situation like this?

**MCMILLEN** - Well, it's really a failure at the state regulatory level, but it should be authority to legitimately accredit a school like this and say, "Hey, disclosure is the great disinfectant. This is a bad school. Everybody should know it."

But it's also a failure on the NCAA side, that they do not draw the line on accepting bogus students from these kinds of schools. And so, I think it's a failure on both sides.

**LEY** - Well, you have a core curriculum requirement at the NCAA, and we'll talk about that a little later on as far as the NCAA reaction to that. But what's amazing to me is the way the basketball community, and you know it, the basketball culture can find something like this school and use it.

**MCMILLEN** - Well, this is an aberration of the whole for-profit model. You know, where there is for-profit, it will run to money. But the bigger issue here is that, you know, we've created a superhighway through our schools to the pros.

We're the only country in the world that's done this and we are, you know, compromising integrity of our high schools and our colleges. And we're not going to throw that system out so we either have to regulate it and try to structurally make adjustments.

And it's a very difficult problem, because money is ruling the NCAA and money is now starting to permeate into our high schools.

**LEY** - OK, we'll pick up on that point in just second. We will have more with Tom McMillen as we continue. We will also be joined by the man who coached one of basketball's great freshman sensations who now says the answer to this problem is simple, no freshman eligibility.

**ANNOUNCER VOICEOVER** - "Outside the Lines" is presented by State Farm Insurance. Like a good neighbor, State Farm is there.

**LEY** - Twenty-four years later, it may be hard to overstate the attention that followed Ralph Sampson as a freshman to Virginia in the fall of '79. He led the ACC in rebounding as a freshman and took his team to the Final Four as a sophomore.

Terry Holland coached Ralph Sampson and that Final Four appearance was one of two in his coaching career. He is now the Special Assistant to the President of the University of Virginia, and he joins us on commencement day from Charlottesville. And Tom McMillen continues with us as well.

Terry, good morning. As an old coach who's been through the recruiting wars and has heard all the tales, anything in that report surprise you?

**TERRY HOLLAND, SPECIAL ASSISTANT TO THE PRESIDENT, UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA** - Well it ends up being a caricature of the very worst of what good intentions can at times create. These are unintended consequences. I don't think there's any question about that.

But we have created by trying to do our job, in terms of creating a standard, we've actually created a demand for this type of institution. And while this is an extreme example, I think there are a lot of others out there that you could have done a story about that are suspicious, that are not quite as obvious as this particular situation.

**LEY** - Well let me pick up on the point that Tom made earlier about the NCAA and you heard their spokesperson in our report basically saying it's not our job to take a look at the quality of high school educations. Is it or should it be or whose should it be?

**HOLLAND** - Well, originally when the Clearinghouse was created, the Clearinghouse did have the ability to do those things. But again, when you try to create a one-size fits all standard, you run into all sorts of problems because you're denying opportunity and you're going to end up in the courts.

And what you heard from the NCAA was what is being created by the legal system. And so, the NCAA has no ability to regulate high schools.

**LEY** - So Tom, where do they fit into the solution to this?

**MCMILLEN** - Well, I've offered a proposal over the last 10 years, basically, if you took all the money in college sports and you didn't give a dime of it away for winning or losing but you gave it away for academic performance and graduation rates and gender equity, you change the incentives, you didn't pay coaches millions of dollars, you'd have a system that wasn't built on profit.

And the problem is the NCAA is built on profit. It can't get away from that model. And so, everything you see is a result of that impetus, basically.

**LEY** - Well, the NCAA is not just a building in the center of the country, though, Terry. It's made up of people like you and leaders in the field. What would a proposal like that do to your budget? What are the chances of administrators and college presidents blowing this up and starting from scratch, which is basically what Tom just suggested.

**HOLLAND** - Well, I have to agree with Tom. It would be great if we could start from scratch and I would fight for that if we really had a chance to make that happen. In other words, let's reward schools based on graduating players in four years.

**LEY** - Well let's be realistic though, is that going to happen?

**HOLLAND** - It's not going to happen, but I do think there are some messages that we can send. Very clear ones. This all started because schools were taking advantage of players by playing them and then not graduating them.

But if you bring in a young man and give him the opportunity for that first year to prove whether or not he or she can do the work at your particular institution, I think that's a fair assumption. In other words, you can prove to us you can do the work regardless of what your high school grades may have been if the institution is willing to take them.

And what we've done as institutions is, because of our concern about admissions and our inability to make our own admissions decisions, we try to turn it over to first the Clearinghouse and now it's been turned over to the high schools and that's a tremendous amount of pressure to put on the high school teachers and the high schools to develop this standard. And they're going to do everything they can to help a young man or young woman qualify for this standard.

**MCMILLEN** - Bob, can I make a point?

**LEY** - Please do.

**MCMILLEN** - If you have 40-some coaches making a million dollars and a young college player can't even hire a lawyer without being declared ineligible, that's what the coaches -- that's what the courts are going to throw out. Players are someday going to get the right to get paid in college.

When that day happens, and I don't want to see it come, college sports will blow up. Because then, the women are going to demand proportionality and the whole system blows up. And then what happens is they're having to go

to the United States Congress and say, "Help us. Help us."

And so I do think the day of reckoning will come because you can't have a system where so many people make money and so many of the players make nothing.

**LEY** - Well, if you take freshman off the board though, especially in the sports now that you know well, basketball, won't you simply drive more kids into the draft as high school seniors?

**MCMILLEN** - I think it's a very good theoretical approach to it, but unfortunately as long as the system is driven about money, they're not going to put freshmen on the sidelines. You know, I think there is a lot of merit to it.

If you are restarting from scratch again, it makes a lot of sense, but I don't see it happening under the present circumstances.

**LEY** - So Terry, is that blue sky or do you really think there is a chance somebody's going to seriously consider this?

**HOLLAND** - Well, I agree with Tom. We're heading for a day of reckoning. So sooner or later we can wait till scandals continue to occur.

I mean, let's take for example, you remember Tulane and San Francisco eliminated their basketball programs because of scandal. Yet, this latest scandal at the University of Michigan is 10 times that. In other words, the tremendous amounts of money involved, organized crime, gambling involved.

I mean, think about that type of scandal and we've hardly even talked about that in the NCAA at this point. So maybe we're becoming desensitized to scandal, but sooner or later it's going to chase us down.

**LEY** - Each one of you can take 15 seconds. Take me two or three years out. Chances for meaningful reform, Tom?

**MCMILLEN** - I think the system has to have the day of reckoning. I think that there will be a presidential commission. You'll blow it up. You'll start over.

College sports is good, but if you took a lot of the money out and put it into the right incentives, you'd change the whole system. And I think it can be done. It won't happen overnight, and college sports can exist and be a very popular part of our institutions.

**LEY** - Chances of that happening, Terry?

**HOLLAND** - It will take a scandal. It will take, as Tom said, the Presidents will have to get together ...

**LEY** - How many more scandals? We've had plenty.

**HOLLAND** - ... we're just not going to take any more. I agree. I think we're ready. I'm willing to say, let's blow it up and start over.

**LEY** - All right guys. Thank you very much. Tom McMillen. Terry Holland. Thank you very much for joining us this morning.

Next up, the Charlotte Hornets, may they rest in peace; it's on to New Orleans. But not before we check your feedback from last week's look at why they've left Carolina.

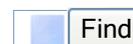
**LEY** - They are the New Orleans Hornets now, but last Sunday's look at how and why it all went south for the Hornets in Charlotte, sparked a number of reactions to our e-mail in box.

"Why would the league shut down what is consistently a strong market in Charlotte? Ticket sales - until this year - have been at the top of the league in one of the smallest markets....shame on the NBA for letting this happen. Shame on all the owners who voted for moving the team."

And from Charlotte, "The media blamed the Charlotte fans, but the simple truth is, the greed of the ownership and the apathy of the city trapped the fans in the middle of a rock and a hard place."

All our Sunday morning programs are online at ESPN.com; the keyword is "OTL Weekly" and typing that keyword this week will also bring you to Tom Farrey's expanded online series on Christopher Robin Academy and the issue of eligibility for sale. We invite your thoughts on the issue; our e-mail address is [otlweekly@espn.com](mailto:otlweekly@espn.com). Thanks for being in touch.

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