Coast-to-Coast: How Johnnie Bryant’s Career at City College Landed Him a Job with the Knicks

By Kaiyo Funaki

Former City College basketball star Johnnie Bryant was officially named as the associate head coach for the New York Knicks on Sep. 4, joining one of the most storied and culturally significant franchises in the NBA.

The 35-year-old’s rapid ascension to prominence in the basketball world began in 2003 at City College when he was just a freshman looking to put his name on the map.

Bryant dealt with academic issues coming out of high school that prevented him from earning a scholarship with a Division I powerhouse, but this setback only served as a source of motivation. Thus, he enrolled at City College, hoping to revitalize his career and pursue a coveted athletic scholarship to a prominent university.

Upon his first interactions with the team, Bryant immediately displayed a combination of determination, discipline, and veteran leadership uncanny for an 18-year-old.

“I wanted to prove everyone wrong,” he said. “I’d get in the gym, do exercises, lift weights on gameday … and sleep in the locker room just so I could have an opportunity to go back in the gym and not miss an opportunity to get better.”

Having a player like Bryant was crucial for City College Head Coach Justin Labagh, who had just been handed the reins to the men’s basketball team.

“He brought leadership, he had very high basketball IQ, so he was very easy to coach,” Labagh said. “That was invaluable for me because I was 25-years old and just starting my career. He was kind of a coach’s dream … so he made my life a lot easier.”

Labagh and Bryant forged a bond through late-night film sessions and post-game phone calls, and it ultimately led to the on-court success Bryant worked so relentlessly for.

He thrived in Labagh’s fast-paced offense, averaging 15 points and four assists per game, and his stellar play gave him the distinction of First Team All-Coast Conference Honors.

“Each team, you have your own life, and you see your role,” he said. “It’s just a matter of harnessing the potential of a youthful and talented roster.”

After a one year stint overseas, Bryant returned to the state of Utah and transitioned to player development. He opened the Bryant Sports Academy in 2009, dedicated to the improvement and mentorship of basketball players of all levels.

“I never dreamed of coaching in the NBA, but I always had ambitions to be a part of professional sports,” Bryant said.

His work with former and current NBA players such as Ronnie Price and Paul Millsap caught the attention of the Utah Jazz, who hired him in 2012 as a player development assistant. He worked in this capacity for the team until 2014 when he was promoted to assistant coach.

In his eight years with the Jazz, Bryant helped shape the likes of Millsap, Donovan Mitchell, and Gordon Hayward, who all blossomed under his tutelage.

Asked what parts of his profession appealed to him, Bryant reflected on his journey from City College to the NBA.

“It’s about the relationships that you build through this game. From there, seeing the players that you work with, that you coach, accomplish their goals … that’s the beauty of it,” he said. “Each team, you have your own life, and you have those experiences that you’ll never forget. It’s the relationships that you carry forward that last a lifetime, so that’s the most important part of coaching for me.”

Now coaching in the “mecca of basketball,” the Knicks hope his addition to the staff can harness the potential of a youthful and talented roster.