

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

By Kaiyo Funaki

kaiyo.funaki@gmail.com

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.

“He just allowed me to be me,” Bryant said about Labagh. “That was an opportunity to unlock some things I didn’t know I had just because of the free-flowing offense that we played in.”

Though he suited up for the Rams for just one season, that was all it took for Bryant to leave a lasting impression on everyone who watched him play.

Former teammate and close friend Juma Kamara emphasized the level of effort and leadership Bryant brought to the team day in and day out.

“He was always communicating with us, instilling confidence, and just always trying to motivate us to bring it to every practice and game,” Kamara said

Bryant’s demeanor and work ethic were clear indicators to Men’s Athletic Director Harold Brown that he would be triumphant in any career that he wished to pursue.

“He was on a different level than everyone else,” Brown said. “You could tell that Johnnie was going to be successful.”

The traits that defined Bryant at City College proved to be the foundation of what was to come.

He eventually earned a scholarship to the University of Utah and redshirted his first year there. He then went on to achieve consecutive honorable mentions as an All-Mountain West Conference player and firmly established himself as a sharpshooting floor general. Bryant even left the program as the leader in career three-point percentage.

Despite going undrafted by the NBA in 2008, Bryant remained undeterred and traveled to Germany to play professional basketball for the Telemotive Muenchen.

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.



CCSF basketball Head Coach Justin Labagh huddles with the Rams during a timeout on January 29, 2020. CCSF defeated visiting Las Positas College 110-74, one of 30 wins during their 2019-2020 undefeated season. Photo by Kevin Kelleher/Special to The Guardsman



Juma Kamara (center) lights up his virtual portrait session calling in from Portland, Oregon where the former City College forward and Bay Area native now lives. September 16, 2020 - San Francisco, California. Photo by Kevin Kelleher/Special to The Guardsman.



Former CCSF guard Johnnie Bryant returns to campus—quarantine-style—all the way from Manhattan for a virtual portrait shoot with Kevin Kelleher (lower frame right of phone). Bryant is already starting his first-year work as Associate Head Coach for the New York Knicks. September 16, 2020 - San Francisco, California. Photo by Kevin Kelleher/Special to The Guardsman.