

[The impossible rise of Cooper Flagg](#)

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By Sam Canfield

Hailing from a rural Maine town of no more than 3,200, a 16-year-old kid is playing basketball at a level nobody from the state has before.

Newport native Cooper Flagg was a Maine state champion and the Gatorade Player of the Year as a freshman in early 2022. Less than a year-and-a-half later, he has earned the title of [consensus No. 1 prospect nationwide](#), and recently had a high-profile first official college visit — to UConn, winner of the 2023 NCAA championship.

The 6-foot-9 teenager is expected to choose between UConn, Duke and Kansas in the next couple months, play a season of college ball in 2024-25 and then, if recent history is any indication, be a lottery pick in the 2025 NBA Draft.

The last five No. 1 prospects, Marvin Bagley III, R.J. Barrett, Anthony Edwards, Cade Cunningham and Chet Holmgren, all had successful one-year college careers and were drafted by NBA teams with top three picks.

But what's so unprecedented about Flagg, compared with those before him, is the improbable nature of his rise to prominence.

Despite its deep basketball culture, Maine is one of two states to never produce an NBA player, and its flagship school in Orono has never qualified for the men's NCAA tournament. Against all odds, Flagg has emerged as the sport's most exciting prospect, at a time when participation in youth sports is at a statewide low, and COVID-19 took away his eighth-grade year of basketball.

"You can't predict anything like it," said Earl Anderson, Flagg's coach at Nokomis Regional High. "It's like a Hollywood movie."

Anderson coached Nokomis' first ever state championship team, which Cooper and his twin brother Ace led to glory during the 2021-22 season.

“There were a lot of wild moments with him on the court; his ability was uncanny,” Anderson said. “I can’t tell you how many kids would line up for autographs.”

Flagg’s predecessors are few and far between.

There are Maine Basketball Hall of Famers Skip Chappelle and Andy Bedard, the York-born Miami Heat shooting guard Duncan Robinson and Bangor-born big man Jeff Turner who played on the ’90s Orlando Magic.

But neither Chappelle nor Bedard ever played a minute of NBA ball, and Robinson and Turner spent most of their childhoods in New Hampshire and Florida, respectively.

Moreover, UMaine’s men’s basketball team has not been particularly inspirational as of late, failing to reach .500 since the 2010-11 season and compiling a dismal 88-259 record since then.

Yet Flagg is a Newport product through and through — and he could be a top pick in the 2025 NBA Draft.

“This area will always consider him a Nokomis kid, and he will embrace that,” Anderson said. “That championship team was a very close group; they had all played together as kids.”

The Flaggs have lived in Newport for multiple generations, and both of Cooper’s parents played basketball at Nokomis. His mom, Kelly, ended up being a standout post player at UMaine, and his dad, Ralph, played at Eastern Maine Community College.

“Of all their high school memories, that Nokomis championship will always be number one for them,” Flagg’s personal trainer Matt MacKenzie said of Cooper and Ace. “They’re both very family-oriented and proud of their Newport roots.”

MacKenzie runs Results Basketball and the Eastern Maine Sports Academy in Veazie, and also was an assistant coach on Flagg’s Maine United AAU team that went on an unexpected second-place run at the Nike Peach Jam this July.

Maine United shocked everyone by winning its first six consecutive games, including a 73-65 victory over tournament champs NightRydas Elite in pool play, with Flagg averaging a mind-blowing 25.4 points, 13.0 rebounds, 5.7 assists and 6.9 blocks per game.

“Nobody else believed, and we said, ‘let’s go make some noise,’” MacKenzie recalled. “Cooper could have played anywhere, but he wanted to play with his boys — to wear ‘Maine’ across his chest.”

With his ridiculous blocks and putback dunks, Cooper ended up on dozens of YouTube and Instagram highlight reels with thousands of views, posted by sports media outlets like [Overtime](#), [Ballislife](#) and [EliteMixtapes](#).

“There are kids from all backgrounds — the inner city — looking up to a kid from Maine,” MacKenzie said. “We’re just starting to see the impact he could have.”

Anderson and MacKenzie are optimistic that Flagg could even help reverse the declining participation rates in Maine youth sports.

Due to a large decrease in the population of high-school-aged Mainers in the past decade, combined with the pandemic, youth sports participation in Maine is [down 12 percent from 2013](#).

But Flagg is dedicated to being an ambassador of the sport, and has worked at Results Basketball’s youth camps during his summers off from school. MacKenzie says participants have been ecstatic to train with him.

“The energy has shifted from playing with counselors like NBA champion [Brian Scalabrine] of the Boston Celtics to Cooper,” MacKenzie said. “Everyone wants to see him.”

Flagg is now back finishing his final year at Montverde Academy in Florida, where he helped lead the Eagles to a national title game last season. He recently reclassified to the Class of 2024, meaning his college decision is weeks away — the ultimate step in any basketball career before declaring for the NBA draft.

It’s unclear how Flagg will fare when he moves on to college or even the pros, but his intangibles make people around him want to believe in his future.

“He impacted every part of the game — he made everyone else better,” Anderson said. “He’s very coachable, very grounded and a great teammate.”

“It is rare, but to me his success is not an accident,” MacKenzie said. “He has a blue-collar work ethic and was taught from a young age that success is earned, not given. He genuinely loves the game, loves to be coached and absolutely lives to compete. It’s scary how special he could be.”

