

## **MJ Walker Is The 5-star Basketball Recruit Who Thinks He Could Play In The NFL, Too**

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MJ Walker felt like he had to make a choice. For most of his life, he had let the change of seasons in his native Georgia dictate which sport he would play. In the summer and fall, it was football. In the winter and spring, it was basketball. By the time he entered Jonesboro High School in 2013, he was already considered a commodity in both.

As a freshman, Walker attended summer football camps at Jonesboro packed with college coaches. At that point, it had been two years since he last played a football game, but that didn't stop scouts from daydreaming about his size and athleticism.

Already 6'5 with a body that matured far quicker than his peers, Walker's upside was limitless with a helmet and shoulder pads. Clemson and Miami didn't need to see him play to offer him a scholarship. Florida, North Carolina and Ole Miss weren't far behind.

There was only one problem: MJ Walker didn't pick football. Today, he sits as one of the most touted basketball recruits in the country, ranked as high as No. 8 in the class of 2017 by ESPN and considered a five-star prospect by just about every service.

Walker led Jonesboro to its first-ever state championship in basketball as a freshman. He did it again as a sophomore. As a junior, Jonesboro got back to the state title game but came up short. Now he's dominating the Under Armour Association and gearing up for another run as Georgia's Class AAAA champs.

Along the way, Walker has only played one year of football. An injury in AAU cost him his freshman season on the gridiron before he returned to the field as a sophomore, where he shined as a free safety and wide receiver. That's when Walker made the decision to focus on hoops.

"I think I could have been a really good player," Walker told SB Nation, thinking back to his football days. "I honestly think I probably can still go pro in football if I wanted to."

MJ Walker has played exactly one season of football in the last four years. Everyone agrees he's one of the most coveted shooting guards in America. That's why it was especially strange when Walker went to school one day last year and got a startling bit of news: Jim Harbaugh and Michigan had just offered him a football scholarship. Walker wants you to know the game is starting to slow down for him. For most of his life, it's been so easy to physically dominate peers who didn't mature at the same rate he did. He knows those days are coming to an end as he enters his senior year of high school.

Now it's about making the right reads, becoming a consistent shooter and letting the game come to him. The early results are promising.

At an Under Armour Association stop in Indianapolis, Walker showcased the full package. He dropped 31 points on New Heights on 4-of-5 shooting from three-point range while making all 11 of his attempts from the foul line. He had 26 points in a loss to Earl Watson Elite where he made 4-of-9 attempts from deep. Against WeR1 and Trevon Duval, the country's top point guard, Walker had 16 points and three steals.

Walker can finish above the rim on alley-oops. He loves watching Buddy Hield and prides himself on becoming the best shooter he can be. And the same physical tools that could have made him a star defensive back or wide receiver should translate to the defensive end of the floor, too.

Just because Walker is working on developing his all-around game doesn't mean he's going to shy away from the mindset he's always had regardless of the sport he's playing.

"I love contact," Walker said when asked if dangers of football steered him toward basketball. "I'm a tough dude. Football didn't really phase me. I'm just a physical guy."

Walker is currently the fifth-leading scorer in the Under Armour Association at 18.2 points per game. He's shooting 40.7 percent from three-point range on 54 attempts. Maryland, Florida State and Ohio State are on him hard. N.C. State is getting in the mix, too.

It took a while, but Walker's list of offers in basketball is finally starting to match his list of offers in football. Walker credits a trip last year to Stephen Curry's SC30 Select camp for helping him understand the game better. Unlike most All-Star camps that roll the ball out and let the best players attack each other in a game setting, Curry's camp focuses on skill improvement.

Walker says Curry taught him how to make reads in pick-and-rolls, how to develop his ball handling and how to come off screens. Slowly but surely, a great athlete is turning into a very good basketball player.

If you look hard enough, the remnants of Walker's football days still exist. Walker's ESPN profile as a football recruit remains up, and lists all the offers he bypassed to play basketball.

"I love both, honestly," Walker said. "I just felt like I had to pick one. My passion was more for basketball." Football is well in the rear-view mirror for Walker at this point. You can't blame him if he gets caught taking a look back once in a while.