

M.J. Walker Decides To Specialize In Basketball

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M.J. Walker's basketball prowess was well-known before he entered high school at Jonesboro High four years ago. He was sort of a local legend in middle school and already ranked among the top basketball players in freshmen class.

After helping lead Jonesboro to the first of two state titles on the Class AAAA level, Walker seemed destined to specialize in being a one-sport athlete on the high school level.

However, the spring of his freshman year, Walker decided to give football another try. He missed played football his freshman year because of an injury.

He was a multi-talent quarterback/defensive back in middle school. At 6-foot-4, 200 pounds, he had the talent to play on the varsity level.

He had three college offers from ACC and SEC schools even before he played in his first high school football game. "M.J. is extremely unique" said David Boyd, a retired high school basketball coach with six state championship. "It is something special to be that good in both sports."

Walker decided a year ago to give up football and just specialize in basketball.

It wasn't an easy decision for him and his family.

After another injury going into his junior season, Walker decided to just concentrate on basketball. He recently returned from helping the USA U-18 Team win a gold medal and has several college offers, including one from Kansas.

"It was definitely a tough decision because I wanted to play football," Walker said. "It was getting harder to recover from those injuries, so I felt like I made the right decision."

And the coaches and players at Jonesboro have been very supportive.

"M.J. is a special kid that plays both sports at a high level," said Jonesboro assistant coach Nate Wardlaw, who coached Walker in both sports. "Injury was the reason as opposed to just giving up football. We told him once he made the decision to go all out in basketball and he has done that. We just didn't want him to have any regrets about not playing football any more."

Walker said he hasn't fully closed the door on football but spends his time now working on basketball, where he is ranked in the top-5 in the country.

"I'm not saying that I will not play anymore, but right now it's all about basketball," Walker said.

Walker's parents - James and Jackie Walker - both played basketball in college. Jackie Walker played on a national championship team at Hampton University in Virginia.

"It was his decision because we didn't want to put any more pressure on him," Jackie Walker said. "It sort of played out the way it did. We knew at some point he had to make that decision."

Both Walkers agreed that playing multiple sports is good and has helped their son become better in basketball.

“He had coaches come after him hard in both sports,” James Walker said. “I encourage kids to play multiple sports because you never know what your niche is going to be. At a certain age you start to see what direction you will go in but when you are young, you need to keep playing as many sports as possible.”

NCAA research shows that many of its student-athletes regret specializing in a sport at a young age. NCAA’s research also found that 30% of elite athletes are specializing in the sport by age 12.

M.J. Walker waited until his junior year to make that decision partly based on injuries. He said he is comfortable with his decision.

“There are no regrets,” he said. “I get some kidding from my classmates but they have really been supportive.”