For Lin, Erasing a History of Being Overlooked

By MARK VIERA

Jeremy Lin played high school basketball in a gymnasium across the street from the Stanford campus. But the coaches there did not seriously recruit him. Neither did the coaches from U.C.L.A. The same for the coaches from many Ivy League universities.

“We all felt the same way: we could get better,” said Steve Donahue, the former coach at Cornell.

The story of Lin’s college recruitment illustrates how talent evaluators overlooked his ability even when Lin was young. It is something that was repeated in the professional ranks as he moved from Golden State to Houston to New York, where he has infected Knicks fans with Linsanity, becoming a sensation over five transcendent games.

Lin has scored at least 20 points in five straight games, all of them Knicks victories, becoming an instant fan favorite. He is also the first N.B.A. player to have at least 20 points and 7 assists in each of his first four starts.

All of that would have been hard for some college coaches to have predicted while watching film of Lin as a skinny, average-shooting guard at Palo Alto High School, even though he was a standout for the modest program, leading it to a 32-1 record and an upset of the powerhouse Mater Dei in the 2006 California Division II championship game.

“He was a good student, a good player and, yeah, it’s amazing what he was doing,” Donahue, now the coach at Boston College, said in a recent telephone interview. “But he didn’t look that athletic and he didn’t shoot it all that well. Even after his freshman year at Harvard, you didn’t give it a second thought that we made a mistake.”

It was not that college coaches were entirely unaware of Lin. On the contrary, Lin sent film of himself to programs in the Ivy and the Patriot Leagues. But he has said that only Harvard and Brown showed serious interest in him.

Some coaches have wondered whether Lin, who is of Taiwanese descent, did not receive a closer look by recruiters because of his ethnicity. Coaches have said recruiters, in the age of who-does-he-
Another big reason for the lack of interest might have been because Lin never possessed jump-out-of-the-gym athleticism. That made it hard for recruiters to pick up on his quick first step, his passing skills or his uncanny sense for the game simply from watching him at an Amateur Athletic Union tournament or in a high school playoff game.

“I just think in order for someone to understand my game, they have to watch me more than once, because I’m not going to do anything that’s extra flashy or freakishly athletic,” Lin said in 2010.

However, even for some college coaches who liked Lin’s game enough to speak with him about playing for them, the notion of seriously pursuing him was not a consideration. No Division I program offered Lin an athletic scholarship — the Ivy League does not give them — but he discussed walking on at Stanford, California or U.C.L.A. with the coaches there.

“I said, ‘We can’t give you a scholarship right away,’ ” said Kerry Keating, a former U.C.L.A. assistant who spoke to Lin after watching him in a high school game. “I thought he could have played for us. He certainly could have made an impact for us, looking back on it. But at the time, you never really know. It’s an inexact science.”

Lin first appeared on the radar of the Harvard coaches before his senior year in high school. He had sent his material to them during his junior year, and they watched him in person for the first time at an A.A.U. tournament the next summer in Las Vegas.

The Harvard coaches’ initial impression of Lin was similar to that of other Ivy League coaches: nice player, but too slight for their liking. Lin was perhaps 6 feet 1 inch and weighed no more than 170 pounds. In that Las Vegas tournament, he did little to reveal the N.B.A. potential within.

“He didn’t really stand out,” said Bill Holden, a former Harvard assistant, who was responsible for recruiting Lin. “He was like any other average high school players we might see. When I saw his coach, I recommended he go to a Division III school.”

A few weeks later, Holden stumbled upon Lin at another A.A.U. tournament. This time was different. Lin was playing against top-flight Division I recruits, and he was getting the better of them. Another Harvard assistant at the time, Lamar Reddicks, also liked what he saw in Lin when he compared notes with Holden after that tournament.

Lin suddenly became Harvard’s top recruit. The head coach at the time, Frank Sullivan, flew to Palo Alto to visit Lin’s parents. In addition, Holden attended some of Lin’s high school games.
lived and played so close by, would offer him a scholarship during his senior year. Their anxiety was heightened after Lin scored 17 points — and made a crucial 25-foot bank shot with about two minutes left — to lead Palo Alto to a stunning 51-47 victory over Mater Dei. Yet Stanford did not increase its pursuit. And Lin picked Harvard.

“We were just happy we were getting our top guard,” Holden said. “We thought we were getting a nice future Ivy League prospect. But if I told any other guys on the team that Jeremy’s someday going to play in the N.B.A., none of them would have believed that.”