

# West alum Burns living his hoop dream in Europe

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*Hamilton West alumnus Christian Burns soars toward the basket during one of 10 seasons playing basketball professionally abroad.*

**By Nathan Dickinson**

Looking down the halls of Hamilton High School at the turn of the 21st century, Christian Burns would not have been the obvious choice for the school's next basketball star. He just didn't look the part.

"I was just an average height kid in my sophomore year," Burns said. "You know, 5-11."

It wasn't just the height thing, either. When he came to the school in 1999, basketball wasn't his game.

"When Christian came into Hamilton as a ninth grader his sport was soccer," said Nottingham High School coach Chris Raba, who coached at Hamilton West when Burns was there. "He was known in the community as a soccer player... [In basketball], he was just another guard. He always had a good basketball IQ, and he was probably more athletic than the other 5-10 guards at his age, but I wouldn't say that there was anything that stood out at that time."

Little did Raba (or Burns) know, Hamilton would be just the first stop of many in the now-veteran's basketball career. Burns has played professionally in 10 countries in the last 10 years. He's currently training, and looking for a team for the 2016-'17 season.

In 2002, Burns shot up out of nowhere, and stood at 6-6 as an incoming senior at Hamilton. With the ball handling skills of a guard and newfound size of a serious basketball player, he was a force to be reckoned with on the court. Burns quit playing soccer to focus on basketball full time, and as a senior averaged 19.8 points, 15.3 rebounds and 3.2 blocks. He was County Player of the Year and Third-Team All-State in 2003.

Burns went on to play basketball at Quinnipiac University, but didn't do much playing. His sophomore year, he averaged just 4.5 points and 3.3 rebounds and was ready for a change. Burns decided to leave Quinnipiac to play for Herb Magee at Philadelphia University; a Hall of Fame coach who was taking a shot in the dark.

"I had never seen him play," Magee said. "He was going to leave Quinnipiac, and we got a phone call about it. My assistant coach at the time had seen him play in high school and said, 'Coach, we should take a shot at this kid.'

He did, and the shot hit the mark. Burns was in the starting lineup from day one, and in his junior year averaged 16.7 points and 9.8 rebounds at Philadelphia.

"He had no idea how to play basketball," Magee said. "Zero. We had to teach him about the game of basketball; how to play the game... but you could see all the way that his raw talent was going to help us immediately."

Burns kept learning, and his numbers showed it. He broke out his senior year, and 29.7 points and 11.2 rebounds per game later, Christian Burns was the NCAA Division II Player of the Year. Behind Burns, the Rams won a CACC regular season title.

While the best Division I basketball players get drafted and start NBA careers, it isn't always the same story at Division II schools like Philadelphia. To continue playing basketball after graduation, Burns had to veer off the beaten path.

"He didn't really have enough basketball playing experience," Magee said. "He didn't play very much up in Quinnipiac. When he got with us he played all the time, but you have to get on the floor. You have to get playing time to get better at the game of basketball."

Burns played with the Philadelphia 76ers' summer league team in 2007, but didn't get an NBA contract. Instead, he took on a new challenge when he signed with AZS Koszalin, a team out of Poland.

"I had never traveled outside of the States before that," Burns said. "It's scary; especially when you're going to a country like Poland. You don't know what it's going to be like. You're 21 years old. You're going there alone. You don't know what to expect."

Still, Burns and his then-girlfriend Emma (now his wife) packed up and crossed the Atlantic.

Burns never considered himself the traveling type. When he got to Poland, there was an adjustment. The team and coaches spoke English and Burns had a translator, but out in the community he was on his own. There weren't all the luxuries you'd expect from a professional basketball team.

"It was my first year, so it's not like I was playing on a high-level team with a full staff of help," he said.

The living situation isn't great when you start out overseas, either. The team will usually cover housing, but in his rookie year Burns was in a one-bedroom apartment with a small living room and kitchen. It wasn't ideal for a 6-8 basketball player and his girlfriend.

Burns had to adjust to the new culture, but living with non-English speakers was nothing compared to the in-game differences.

“The crowds are different,” Burns said. “In some of the countries I’ve played in there’s fireworks going off in the stands and barrels that are on fire. It’s crazy... If you upset a home court team, things usually happen. You’ve got to be escorted off the court by security after an upset, especially if it’s an important game.”

One of the differences in basketball overseas is most stays aren’t extended; it’s easy for a career to turn into a world tour. Players sign one-year deals and then move on to wherever the next job is. As Burns put it, “money talks.”

One year in Poland led to a year in Portugal, and then from Portugal, he went to Germany. The next year Burns was in Ukraine, and he played the best basketball of his career. He won Player of the Year, Forward of the Year, Import Player of the Year and a spot on the all-league team. It looked like after four years jumping around Europe, he would finally get his shot at the big time. But just when Burns was most ready for the NBA, the NBA wasn’t ready for him.

“Chances of me getting into the NBA were very, very high,” said Burns. “I was playing basketball at a very high level, and then the lockout happened.”

The 2011 NBA lockout lasted 161 days, and ran right through what would have been Burns’ time to showcase himself to NBA teams. With no NBA, there was no summer league, and basketball didn’t even start until Christmas. To add insult to injury, locked out NBA players signed deals overseas and made it harder for Burns to find one of his own.

Burns signed with a team in Israel, and early in the season ruptured his patella tendon and missed the rest of the year. It was a major setback, but Burns says the injury helped him grow as a player.

“This is when I physically became, like, a monster,” he said. “I was so focused and determined to come back stronger than ever that I just kind of lived in the gym and it worked... I think that was the time where I really started to develop my outside shooting because I wasn’t able to do any big time running around.”

That’s just how Christian Burns works. When others might get frustrated, he sees opportunity. When he wasn’t playing at Quinnipiac, Burns took the opportunity to move elsewhere. When the 76ers didn’t give him a chance out of college, he looked to better his game overseas. When one of his best chances at the NBA slipped away, he never lost focus. So when he went down with an injury that was supposed to keep him out for a year, it wasn’t all that surprising to see Burns come back better than ever in just eight months.

Burns played in Italy’s Serie A (one of the best international leagues in the world) after his injury, and was first-team all league. After a year in Russia, he won his first championship with the Czech Republic’s CEZ Nymburk in 2015.

The travel. The unknown culture. The crazy fans. Things like this are too much for a lot of players.

“Some guys play a year overseas and then the next year they’re like, ‘I can’t do that,’” Burns said. “I was just talking to a kid the other day who said that. I think he’s going to retire; he’s like 25.”

It isn’t the life for everyone, but over time Burns has turned into a travelling man. Now, he says he and his wife get uncomfortable staying in one place for too long.

It may not be the one he had in mind when he left Hamilton, but Burns is living the dream. He’s made a career out of the game he loves, and gets to see the world as a bonus. Burns hasn’t gotten his shot in the NBA yet, but now he has more important things to worry about.

"The whole chasing the NBA dream, as I got older, kind of got old," Burns said. "Exhausting, almost. It just kind of didn't make sense anymore."

Even as a man who has lived in 10 countries over the past 10 years, Burns has settled down. He and Emma have two kids, Beyla (2) and Brooklyn (6). Brooklyn was born in Germany, Beyla in the U.S. The family lives in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, and Burns usually comes home to the U.S. June through mid-August. He also recently became an Italian citizen, and hopes he can play the rest of his career there. It may not happen, as he currently is in talks with teams in France and Turkey for the upcoming season.

So, Burns doesn't know where he'll be next and when he'll go there. That's out of his control. All he can do is take whatever opportunity is given to him and give it his all, which is exactly what the Hamilton native plans to do.

"I was blessed with the ability to play basketball," Burns said. "It's how I make my money and how I support my family. It is a job, and I need to do it as long as I can to support my family and set me up for the future, too."



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