

Before Kobe Bryant, Kevin Garnett, and LeBron James made the leap from high school to the NBA, and even before Michael Jordan could leave college early as an underclassman there was Spencer Haywood.

In the summer of 1969, at just 20 years old, Spencer Haywood felt he was ready to join the NBA.

In the previous calendar year alone, he had led the gold-medal-winning USA Olympic team in scoring before leading the NCAA in rebounding in just his sophomore year.

The only problem? The NBA's rules. The league stipulated that incoming players must be at least 4 years removed from finishing high school to join a roster.

So Haywood found another route to the pro ranks: he joined the ABA instead as a member of the Denver Rockets, becoming the first ever underclassman to make the jump. He went on to win both Rookie of the Year *and* Most Valuable Player, further cementing his professional basketball resume.

Following his rookie season, Haywood signed a contract with the NBA's Seattle Supersonics, setting off a tenacious legal battle: Haywood vs. the NBA. The case, regarding his eligibility, made it to the Supreme Court, which ruled 9-0 in his favor. This later became known as the Hardship Rule allowing underclassmen and high school students to play professionally.

Haywood paved the way for others to follow in his footsteps and secure their future professional careers in the NBA.

Spencer Haywood found his frontier. How will you?