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## Former Brewster Academy coach Jason Smith on the ground floor of a reshaped prep basketball landscape

By Alex Hall Union Leader Staff  
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**Jason Smith**

Jason Smith never envisioned leaving Brewster Academy — until a longtime rival reached out.

After 26 seasons as the head coach of Brewster’s national powerhouse boys basketball program, Smith has accepted the same role at the soon-to-open Masters Academy International (MAI) in Stow, Mass.

Smith, who grew up in Boscawen, will work alongside John Carroll, MAI's director of basketball operations. Carroll coached against Smith's Brewster teams in the New England Preparatory Athletic Council (NEPSAC) league while guiding Northfield Mount Hermon from 2001-22.

Carroll started talking to Smith about MAI last spring.

MAI, which will open in September, is a private, \$83.8 million sports academy that will have students spend half their school days on their respective sport and the other half on academics. There will be an upper school for grades 9-12 and post-graduate students and a middle school for grades 6-8.

"I was very content (at Brewster) and I love coaching this age group," Smith said. "Having kids come here with goals and dreams and aspirations and achieving those goals that they set forth and going off to have tremendous careers. ...I think what's exciting about Masters is the opportunity, facilities and commitment to do even more."

Smith led Brewster, which is in Wolfeboro, to seven National Prep Championships (2010, 2012, 2014, 2015, 2017, 2019, 2020) and seven New England Prep Tournament titles. The Merrimack Valley High School and New Hampshire College (now SNHU) graduate won more than 700 games and coached 25 players that went on to play in the NBA.

### **'IMG of the North'**

Smith, 52, was drawn to MAI because it will offer more time to work with his players than he can at a traditional prep school. The sports half of students' school day will focus on areas like skill and individual development, leadership training and strength and conditioning.

"We're trying to create the IMG Academy of the North," MAI founder Peter Masters told the Boston Globe last July.

IMG Academy, which is in Bradenton, Florida, is arguably the most predominant sports-focused academy. It draws some of the nation's and world's top high-school aged athletes.

MAI's managing director, Rich Odell, was the head of school at IMG from 1999-2016.

Smith said MAI's dedication to athletics will appeal to top high-school aged prospects not just in New England but around the country and world as well.

When he started at Brewster in 2000, Smith said top basketball prospects typically chose to attend a prep school in either New England or Virginia.

With the rise of sports academies like MAI over the past two-plus decades, even top prospects from New England like Newport, Maine's Cooper Flagg have chosen that option over a local prep school. Flagg, the No. 1 overall pick in last year's NBA draft by the Dallas Mavericks, attended Montverde (Florida) Academy.

Of the first four or five potential boys basketball players that have visited MAI's 312,000-square-foot campus, each of them are "100% all in," Carroll told Smith.

Between MAI's scholastic (high school) and prep (post-graduate) boys basketball teams, there are 22 available roster spots.

### **Time on their side**

"Kids are going to see just the sheer amount of time that you're devoted to working on your skills and your craft (at MAI) is far greater than even a traditional boarding school or, certainly, a public or private school," Smith said. "Unfortunately, there are restrictions in the NHIAA or even NEPSAC in terms of when you can officially start practice or what you can do out of season. We won't have those restrictions at Masters at all."

Smith said his most successful players while at Brewster were the ones who put in the most time.

More than 200 of his former players played NCAA Division I basketball, including Nashua's Ebuka Okorie. A freshman at Stanford University, Okorie led the ACC in scoring (22.8 points per game) and was named an Associated Press All-America honorable mention this season.

Cleveland Cavaliers guard Donovan Mitchell, who is from Greenwich, Connecticut, is among the 25 NBA players who Smith coached at Brewster.

"The Donovan Mitchells of the world were the kids that were disciplined – to be in the gym at 6 a.m. before classes," Smith said, "doing their own regimen or in the weight room on top of what we were able to do as a team in the afternoon after school."

### **Growing trend**

Smith expects more MAI and IMG-like sports academies to open in the near future.

Prospects and their parents alike are looking for the best chance to reach the collegiate level, especially in the new lucrative NIL (name, image, likeness) landscape, he said.

“In this part of the country, we have a lot of different ski academies,” Smith said. “It’s really no different than what’s been done in that sport but I think that you’re going to see it become more and more popular in the upcoming years.”

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