

Breakfast Club at Harvard leaves everyone with food for thought



By CL Brown (/author/cl-brown/) 3h ago



CAMBRIDGE, Mass. – Plates filled with cinnamon cranberry French toast levitate down the tables, passed from hand to hand. And the rest of the breakfast follows. Scrambled eggs. Hash browns. Bacon. Even the red flannel hash, a New England dish that makes many of those from outside the region do a double-take before asking what it is, gets scooped up. The plates and bowls eventually settle in one spot, as does the conversation. It has the feeling of a family dinner table at Thanksgiving, except no one walks away from these discussions angry. This monthly meeting of the minds spearheaded by Harvard basketball coach Tommy Amaker is equal parts think tank, classroom, networking social event and barbershop — with the spirited banter to match.

Welcome to the Breakfast Club.

It all started as a small gathering of academic and community leaders who wanted to help Amaker get acclimated to Harvard when he arrived on campus 12 years ago. Now it's grown to where more than 30 people — with a cross-section of backgrounds and professions, some with no connection to Boston at all, attended this month's event. It's held in a private dining room at Henrietta's Table, where a sliding door secludes them from the main dining area and four tables are positioned in a square so that everyone is facing each other. Amaker introduces his players in attendance at the beginning of the breakfast and speaks about their upcoming schedule at the end. During the time in between, which covered about 90 minutes, the conversation goes where the room takes it. And in a room that can include people who have advised U.S. presidents, those topics can be just about anything. "I know I consume a ton (from the Breakfast Club) and that's why I brought our players in because I'm learning and gaining from it," Amaker says. "I don't want to be viewed specifically as just a basketball coach. That's always been important to me wherever I've been. But I don't think I've previously had the opportunity to craft and create these situations and moments because this place has so much to offer."

Amaker cycles his players through the monthly gatherings. At the first meeting of every new school year, he introduces the Crimson's freshman class to the Breakfast Club. Senior guard Bryce Aiken says the players have come to love being involved. "That's part of the Harvard experience, that's something you're committed to," Aiken says. "You're getting more than just the basketball. That's what Harvard embodies. It's amazing; it's eye-opening. You see more to life than just basketball." Justice Ajogbor, a 6-foot-9 center in the Class of 2020, said as much when he committed to the Crimson last week. Ajogbor was pursued by major programs such as Wake Forest, Vanderbilt and Maryland but said he couldn't pass up the opportunity that Harvard presented. The top-60 recruit is the highest-ranked player to commit to Harvard in the recruiting service era.

Ajogbor is the fifth four-star recruit in the last five years for Harvard, a group that includes Aiken (a team-high 22.2 points per game last season) as well as Noah Kirkwood (11.1 points) and Chris Lewis (10.4). The Crimson added top-100 wing Chris Ledlum in the Class of 2019. He joins a team that won 19 games last season and beat Georgetown in the first round of the NIT, and a program that has over the last decade been a huge part of a revitalization of Ivy basketball in a conference whose champ can (and has) won NCAA Tournament games.

Amaker likes to describe his team as “scholars and ballers.” Although he doesn’t always invite special guests, this month he brought in living examples of both in the persons of CBS college basketball analyst Clark Kellogg and former U.S. Congressman Tom McMillen. Kellogg joked he may be more known by the current generation not for playing at Ohio State and his work at CBS, but for being a voice on the NBA2K video game franchise. Amaker explained while introducing McMillen, who starred at Maryland and had a 12-year NBA career, just how big of a deal it was in 1970 for him to make the cover of Sports Illustrated as a high school player. Because both have a background in college hoops, the discussion hovered around whether college players should be paid. People gave their opinions on the subject, but it was less a debate about right or wrong and more of a nuanced discussion about why it hasn’t happened yet and the ramifications if it does. Kellogg was so eloquent, he was asked if he was running for office in Ohio. McMillen, who campaigned for office during his final season in the NBA, shared with the players something he was told by former NBA star and U.S. Sen. Bill Bradley: people will lend an ear because they’re athletes, but they better have something to say.

Fletcher “Flash” Wiley says the more intense discussions usually center around race in America. He says one of the talks he remembers the most came after incidents such as when George Zimmerman used Florida’s “Stand your ground” law to avoid being convicted in the death of Trayvon Martin or after several police shootings of unarmed black men. Wiley says the talk was probably the same one their parents have had with them. “That even though they’re highly revered for playing basketball, some people will still view them as suspects,” Wiley says. “If they walk down the street, they have to understand how to protect themselves and avoid being caught in bad situations.”

Wiley was the first black football player at the Air Force Academy. He and his wife, Benaree, attended graduate school at Harvard and made their home in Boston. Bennie, as she is known, serves on the Board of Trustees at Howard University. Her sister, Sharon Pratt, was the first black female mayor of a major city and the third mayor of Washington, D.C. The Breakfast Club is packed with people of similar pedigree. Dr. Gus White was the first black graduate of Stanford’s medical school. Dr. Harris Gibson participated in the Montgomery, Ala., bus boycott and says he helped raise funds for the women arrested for not moving to the back of the bus before Rosa Parks made a stand.

When Amaker was named coach in 2007, he was the only black head coach at Harvard. Renowned lawyer and Harvard Law professor Charles Ogletree wanted both to introduce him to the black community in Cambridge and let him know he had a support system in place should he need one. Ogletree founded the Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice at the Harvard Law School. He championed civil rights through law, taught Barack and Michelle Obama during their time at Harvard and represented Anita Hill during the Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings. When he put his name behind a project, people tended to follow him. Ogletree along with former Harvard Business School Dean John McArthur helped build the foundation for the group. McArthur, who was white, died in August. Ogletree no longer attended after learning he had Alzheimer's. But the spirit of what they set out to accomplish continues. "We made a practice of reaching out to all the black folks that we could here," says Wiley, one of the original members of the group. "Boston, you may have heard, is a tough town for black folks."

In the beginning, the Breakfast Club was an all-male group, but after a couple of years of just being the coach's inner circle, Amaker expanded it to include his players and a more diverse section of participants. "More than anything, more people started to hear about it and wanted to be included," Amaker says. "That was a pretty cool thing. It's not that we advertised or said, 'Let's go get more people.' "

A mentor passed along word of the club's existence to Zeita Merchant and suggested she attend. Merchant is serving a one-year fellowship at the Kennedy School in the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, is a commander in the Coast Guard and is the first black woman to command a marine safety unit. "That was the first type of engagement I had (at Harvard) where I really saw a group of people that looked like me come together for common good," Merchant says. "It's just an extremely powerful room. I admire Coach Amaker for starting this."

Ron Christie, a former policy adviser to vice president Dick Cheney and a special assistant to President George W. Bush, was a fellow at the Institute of Politics at Harvard Kennedy School when he heard Amaker speak of the Breakfast Club. He has been a faithful attendee ever since, even though he moved on to teach at Georgetown. Christie's commute each month from D.C. is an exception. The rest of the group is coming from across campus, like women's tennis coach Traci Green, who was hired shortly after Amaker in the summer of 2007; or across town, like Boston University women's basketball coach Marisa Moseley.

Former Massachusetts Gov. Deval Patrick didn't have a formal invitation the first time he visited. He just walked into the room unannounced and said he'd been hearing about the meeting and wanted to experience it for himself. He was met with the affectionate jeers of a familiar face in a room full of friends. Massachusetts Gov. Charlie Baker, Boston Mayor Marty Walsh, civil rights activist and sociologist Dr. Harry Edwards and Hall of Famer Kareem Abdul-Jabbar are among those who have stopped by.

Amaker says other coaches have asked him for pointers on how to create their own versions of the Breakfast Club. Truthfully, it just may not work the same at other colleges because the Harvard brand is part of what makes it successful.

Gibson, a retired cardiothoracic surgeon, says he didn't know how much the Breakfast Club meant to the players until a recent exchange. "I was walking with my son on campus, and a former player on the team starting running toward me," Gibson says. "He just wanted to say hello, and he was so glad to see me." Gibson remembers when the player was a precocious freshman, but now he was speaking fluent Mandarin and had traveled the world.

Those are the kinds of stories that convinced Amaker the Breakfast Club has been well worth the time. "This is part of our fabric of what we do, what the players have come to expect while they're here," Amaker says. "We're not doing these things because we won. We think we won because we do these things."

(Photo of Tommy Amaker: Brad Rempel/USA Today Sports)

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