

How new Suns coach Jordan Ott went from small Pennsylvania town to the NBA



By **Doug Haller**

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PHOENIX — As Jordan Ott advanced through the NBA, his old college colleagues visited him along the journey, popping in to watch, often at Ott's invitation.

In 2014, then-Michigan State assistant coach Dwayne Stephens traveled to the University of Georgia, where the Atlanta Hawks worked in preseason training camp. Ott had left Michigan State, where he worked as video coordinator the previous year, to work the same position for Mike Budenholzer and the Hawks.

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Stephens noticed how Ott interacted with Atlanta players, and the respect they showed for someone so young. Stephens, who considers Ott among the smartest basketball people he's met, was struck by Ott's comfort, how he looked perfectly in place. "That's probably when I first realized that this dude has an opportunity to be one of the premier coaches in that league," he said.

In 2017, then-Navy coach Ed DeChellis welcomed Ott and the Brooklyn Nets to the U.S. Naval Academy for training camp. After three years in Atlanta, Ott had joined coach Kenny Atkinson's staff in Brooklyn. DeChellis had first gotten to know Ott during his time at Penn State, where Ott had served as an ambitious student manager. But this was his first time seeing Ott work up close in the NBA. "I was thinking, 'Yeah, this is going to work out pretty well for Jordan,'" DeChellis said.

In 2021, former Michigan State assistant Mark Montgomery traveled to Las Vegas to watch Ott coach the Nets' summer league team. He attended film sessions, practices and games. Montgomery was struck by how seasoned Ott looked. How he no longer looked like an NBA newcomer. "What was it like?" Montgomery said. "I was proud. I was really happy. Because I knew where he came from. As we always say, dream big, now all of a sudden, holy s—, it can be done."



Jordan Ott talks with Caris LeVert during a Nets game in 2017. The 40-year-old Ott will take the reins as the Phoenix Suns' new coach. (Nathaniel S. Butler / NBAE via Getty Images)

On Wednesday, after a search that stretched seven weeks, [the Phoenix Suns hired Ott as head coach](#), a significant move for an organization in the first stage of a rocky transition. After failing to make the playoffs with the league's biggest payroll, owner Mat Ishbia and [new general manager Brian Gregory](#) promised an identity makeover. Ott, 40, will lead the charge.

A first-time head coach, he has spent 12 years in the NBA. After working in the video room with the Hawks, Ott worked as an assistant in Brooklyn. From there, he worked two seasons on Darvin Ham's staff with the Los Angeles Lakers. Last season, he re-joined Atkinson in Cleveland, helping the Cavaliers win 64 regular-season games, best in the Eastern Conference.

On Wednesday, *The Athletic* talked with 10 people who have worked with Ott or grew up with him. They described the Suns' new coach as a grinder. A strategic and creative thinker. A communicator. A basketball junkie.

"He came up the hard way," DeChellis said. "There's no silver spoon with that dude."

"He earned it," said Jon Perry, Navy's new head coach, who worked with Ott while Ott was a student manager at Penn State.

"Nobody will outwork him," former Michigan State assistant Dane Fife said.

Ott already holds one distinction. Having grown up in McConnellsburg, Penn., which sits a short drive from the Maryland border, no current NBA coach has come from a place so small. According to the 2020 census, McConnellsburg has a population of 1,150. The town features two stoplights and a McDonald's. Visitors have to stay out of town because there's no hotel. The nearest Walmart is 26 miles away.

Kenny Welsh, the athletic director at McConnellsburg High School, has lived in the small town his whole life. He knows Ott's parents — John, who once ran a store that sold tractor equipment, furniture and appliances; and Pam, a school librarian. On Wednesday, Welsh said the faculty was preparing for graduation, 75 seniors, one of the school's bigger classes. The Ott news provided a jolt of excitement.

"You can probably name in the history of this community — and when I say 'community,' I take into account like three school districts — you can probably count on two hands how many Div. I athletes we've actually even produced from here," Welsh said. "It was big when Jordan got on with the Cavaliers, and it was big when he got on with the Hawks, everybody was talking. But this is just — Wow."

Like Oklahoma City Thunder head coach Mark Daigneault, Ott didn't play basketball in college. Instead, he worked as a team manager for DeChellis at Penn State. The coaching staff had him fill in on the scout team, running the opposition's plays. But where Ott made his mark was in the film room. This was back during the days of small staffs. Penn State didn't even have a full-time video coordinator, but Ott figured it out. And his responsibility grew.

From there, Ott went to Michigan State, where he first worked as a graduate assistant and then as video coordinator. This part of his journey will get the most attention because [Ishbia and Gregory also have Michigan State backgrounds](#). Ishbia was a walk-on guard for the Spartans from 1998 to 2002, while Gregory had two stints as an assistant coach on legendary coach Tom Izzo’s staff. The Suns have downplayed the Michigan State connections, but the discussion likely will not end anytime soon.

Kevin Pauga, a Michigan State associate athletic director, shared a condo with Ott. At the time, Pauga was Michigan State’s director of basketball operations. On Friday nights, he’d be home working on schedules, while Ott would be designing basketball plays. Pauga said back then it was clear that Ott would coach. Maybe in college, maybe in the NBA. Ott was great at limiting distractions, great at staying focused.

He has a presence, but it’s different, Pauga said. If he walked into a room, Ott may not have everyone’s attention within five seconds. “Like some people, you walk into a room and within the first sentence, just the booming voice or that level of presence, that’s not necessarily what we’re talking about (with Ott),” Pauga said. “But you get five minutes (with him), you’re like, ‘Oh, this guy is smart as hell.’”

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Among those interviewed, there was confusion as to whether Ott is offensive- or defensive-minded. Montgomery, the former Michigan State assistant who today is head coach at Detroit Mercy, said Ott would send the staff creative offensive cut-ups of Kentucky or Florida or of NBA teams. He also said every Michigan State coach leaves with Izzo’s principles of defense, toughness and rebounding. “You come from something so successful, why defer from it?” Montgomery said.

Travon Bryant didn’t even entertain the offense/defense question.

“I would say Jordan is just a hell of a basketball coach,” said Bryant, who worked alongside Ott for three years in Brooklyn. “Offensively, he does have some things that he has an eye for, and it’s the same thing defensively. He’s just a really good coach. He has a really good lens on both sides of the ball.”

season, praised Ott’s developmental work. Bryant said Ott in Brooklyn was instrumental in helping shooter Joe Harris become more of a complete player. Mays said Ott in Los Angeles helped boost the confidence of guard D’Angelo Russell.



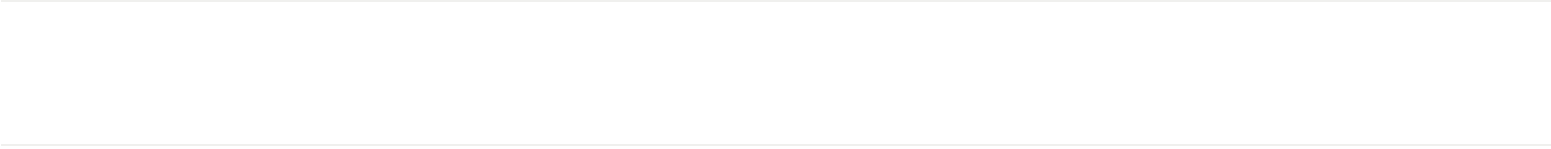
“He’s more than deserving and he’s paid his dues,” said Mays, a guard now with the Iowa Wolves in the NBA G League. “I’m glad that he’s getting a shot at this type of role, with a team that a lot of people are interested in what they’re going to do. I know he’s got his work cut out for him, but I’m sure he’s built for the job.”

The Suns aren’t done. They’re expected to pursue trade options for star Kevin Durant, possibly before the June 25 NBA Draft. Bradley Beal, a three-time All-Star, also could be moved. By the time Ott coaches his first game, the roster could look much different. Regardless, those close to him insist he will be ready.

“Here’s what I’ll tell you: He is who he is,” said Drew Washabaugh, a magisterial district judge in McConnellsburg who grew up riding his bike to Ott’s house to play basketball. “He’s got to where he is through hard work. That’s who the Suns are going to get. It won’t be for a lack of effort and trying. He’s a guy who’s just put in time.”

(Top photo of Jordan Ott with the Cavaliers during the 2024 NBA Summer League: Candice Ward / Getty Images)

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Doug Haller is a senior writer based in Arizona. He previously worked 13 years at The Arizona Republic, where he covered three Final Fours and four football national championship games. He is a five-time winner of the Arizona Sportswriter of the Year award. Follow Doug on Twitter [@DougHaller](#)

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