

# Lindy Waters III and how to make the most of a second chance

Lindy Waters III's journey to becoming a Big 12 starter was nearly derailed by an unfortunate teenage decision. William Purnell/Icon Sportswire

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STILLWATER, Okla. -- Less than a week after his entire world was turned upside-down, [Lindy Waters III](#) woke up three hours from his home in an unfamiliar boarding house on the outskirts of Wichita, Kansas. The small suburban college preparatory school, Sunrise Christian Academy, was pleasant enough and the facilities were, in fact, quite nice, but it wasn't where he wanted to be. He'd told his parents as much before they visited the well-appointed campus, that something about it just didn't feel right. It was then that his father reminded him of the cold truth: *No one else will take you.*

Waters' plan -- to graduate from Norman North (Okla.) High School, take a prep year at the prestigious Brewster Academy in New Hampshire to get bigger and stronger, and then start his career as a Division I basketball player -- had gone off course. It was all happening so fast now, like he'd taken a wrong turn and was sent careering down a steep cliff. He tried to treat his time at Sunrise as if it were just another weekend basketball tournament, but he knew better. He knew he wasn't returning to his family and friends on Monday, and he knew exactly why.

He could tell himself it wasn't fair, that it was all a big misunderstanding and an even bigger overreaction. He could say it was a careless prank that was supposed to stay among friends and instead broke into the open. He could blame it on a lack of due process. When his mother, Lisa, got the call saying he was no longer welcome at Norman North, there wasn't much of a conversation. "OK. ... All right. ... Thanks," is all Waters overheard her say before hanging up. Rather than receiving a three-day suspension as they'd imagined, she informed her son he was suspended the fall and spring semesters of his senior year. In effect, he'd been expelled.

All of this because of a bet over a game of "NBA 2K"? Waters played with the Bulls, his friend the Trail Blazers. He lost by five, and as a result, he had to take a photo holding an Airsoft gun and share it on Snapchat. His face out of the frame, he sent it to four friends and didn't give it another thought. It was Monday and he was excited to visit Brewster the following day. They had the rest of the week off for fall break.

When he landed in Detroit the next day to catch a connecting flight, his phone regained a signal and a tidal wave of notifications lit up his screen. *Where are you? Everyone is looking for*

*you!* Panicked, he asked why, wracking his brain for what he might have done. The response was a gut punch: There's a picture of you with a gun.

He couldn't believe it and slowly put together the puzzle: Someone took a screen-grab of his Snapchat and shared it; traced the AAU jersey he was wearing back to him; and although the black plastic Airsoft gun had an orange tip, it was mistaken for being the real thing. And it all was tied to a message written on a bathroom stall that Monday warning of a school shooting. It was crazy how the cops and helicopters descended on campus. The entire school went on lockdown.

From the airport, Waters called the principal to explain. He hadn't made any threats. It was all a big mistake, he said. He thought the conversation went well and it would blow over. But it kept picking up steam.

"It was a little overwhelming," Waters recalled. College coaches such as Tony Bennett and Travis Ford, who were recruiting him, called his father to try to get to the bottom of what happened. How could this kid with offers from Harvard and Yale get expelled? This son of school administrators? And what was the deal with the gun?

When Waters' mother told him he'd need to find a new school, he went into shock. He couldn't lift himself off the couch for hours. Brewster wasn't planning on him coming for another year and didn't have a scholarship available. Other schools wouldn't allow him to enroll in light of the incident. It took a one-on-one conversation with Sunrise's president to get the all-clear to go there, and even then Waters wasn't thrilled with the possibility.

"This is what my life is now," he told himself. "I need to move on."

At Sunrise, he would be shut off from the world. Books and ball; that was it. They weren't allowed to use their phones during the day, and they couldn't leave. But the siloed nature of the academy focused him. He gained confidence going against better competition on the basketball court. He matured off it.

"It made me grow up extremely fast," he said. "If it had been a real gun, if I had been on campus -- I was 18 and could have been charged with something. I came to the realization that I need to be careful -- who I'm around, what I'm doing, think about how it's going to impact my future."

A few months later, Norman North rescinded his suspension and he returned home. After sitting out several games, he was allowed back on the basketball team and helped it make a run all the way to the state title game. He no longer needed a prep year, he thought. Inadvertently, he'd already gone through that experience. He was ready to go to Oklahoma State.

He had no idea the surprises in his life weren't over, his journey from cautionary tale to role model of the Native American community only beginning.

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It's not that Waters didn't embrace his Native American heritage. That was never the case. According to his father, it was "critical" he did. So he was raised in it and grew up knowing where he came from. That he was of Kiowa and Cherokee descent. That his great-great-great-grandmother was an Irish captive in the 1800s, and how his great-grandparents had their native languages beaten out of them in grade school.

As a kid, he'd visit tribal lands, attend powwows and stomp dances. Back home, his father, who worked for more than a decade in Native American outreach at the University of Oklahoma, would take him to cultural events at the Lloyd Noble Center on campus.

But while Waters enjoyed the music and dancing that took place -- he often found himself humming along -- he shied away from actually participating himself. He was just like his father, Lindy Jr., when he was younger. If you wanted to find the former NAIA All-American power forward on the reservation, the first place to look was the gym.

It was there -- not back home at Norman North with teammates such as [Trae Young](#), but on the road playing with his fellow Native Americans -- where Waters' hobby and heritage began to intersect. It would teach him a type of basketball he didn't know existed -- "rez ball" -- and help elevate him to a platform he didn't realize was possible.

Waters was in the seventh grade when he was invited to his first Native American basketball tournament. His father saw how nervous his son was during that long drive to Henryetta, Oklahoma. He'd never been around so many Native Americans, and when they got there the other kids mockingly called him "white boy." (Waters' father is a full-blooded Native American, and his mother is of both Cherokee and white heritage.) They were the same taunts he got when he played in the city, and every time he wanted to correct them.

He'd just hit a growth spurt to reach 6-foot-4 by then, but was still only 140 pounds. To him, everyone on the court looked like a grown man. And right away, things got chippy. The first shot he attempted, someone took his legs out from under him. The next time down, a defender hit his elbow. Neither drew a foul.

It was then, after a teammate was practically tackled attempting a layup, that the competitor in him took over.

**"I think for the most part they acknowledge me because I acknowledge them back. I talk about it. I express it. I tell everyone how important it is to me. I go to clinics. I help Native American kids, teach them basketball, answer any questions. I'm a part of them."**



Lindy Waters III on his relationship with the Native American community

"I'm like, 'All right, you want to play like that? I'm just here to play basketball, but if you want to get physical, we can,'" Waters recalled. "And then I start using my sweep move."

As an accurate midrange shooter, it wasn't uncommon for defenders to crowd him. So he used an old trick his father taught him to create space. Holding the ball with both hands, he would lean forward and move it in a circular, sweeping motion up above his head and back down to his chest. That way if the defender was cheating in too close, they'd catch a face full of elbows. It was legal as long as he kept his elbows tucked in.

The first sweep move in the tournament made contact and nearly broke his defender's nose. A scuffle had to be broken up. It got more physical after that, and the game eventually ended in a brawl.

"Technically, the rules are the same," Waters said of rez ball. "Technically."

"I still point to that time in his basketball career when his basketball IQ went through the roof," Lindy Jr. said. "Everything changed with him. He got more aggressive."

A few years later, at an AAU tournament in high school, that newfound edge helped him when he went head-to-head with [Dennis Smith Jr.](#) and held the future NBA first-round pick to roughly 10 points. Waters, meanwhile, scored more than 20. Soon after, the Ivy League and mid-major schools offered him scholarships. Power 5 programs such as Oklahoma State followed. Waters wasn't a mega-watt recruit, per se. ESPN ranked him as a respectable three-star prospect and the third-best player in the state, just ahead of an undiscovered Trae Young. His hometown university, Oklahoma, slow-played his recruitment enough to prop the door open for in-state rival Oklahoma State to eventually gain his commitment. But when the largely anonymous guard arrived on the Stillwater campus in 2016, it was as if the entire Native American community stood up and took notice of him.

Ever since his freshman season, the website [NDNSports.com](#), which covers Native American athletics exclusively, has attended Waters' games, written feature stories on him and filed regular updates on his progress. The response, according to one of the site's founders, Brent Cahwee, has been overwhelming.

As one of only seven Native American Division I basketball players last season, Waters has become a role model in the community. And, more importantly, he has embraced the opportunity because he knows there haven't been many athletes historically for Native Americans to look up to. He'd grown up with antique photos of Jim Thorpe to hang on his wall. When the [Oklahoma City Thunder](#) wanted to honor Native American basketball players before a game in 2010, his

father was one of only three people asked to appear -- one from the '50s, one for the '70s and one from the '80s. You couldn't help but think: Was there really no one from then until now? So when Native Americans reach out to Waters, he takes care to respond. When they want an autograph, he signs whenever it's possible. Last May, he and his father hosted basketball clinics for Native American kids, teaching them the game and answering questions.

"It was wild," Waters said. "My first day we had two camps -- one in the morning and one in the afternoon. The first one there were 30-40 kids, and then the next one we were in a high school gym with 150 kids. We didn't have enough basketballs. It was just eye-opening."

Cahwee heard about those camps through the grapevine and points to acts like that as being the real difference-maker. Waters is a solid Big 12 player -- not quite a star -- but the reason he draws such a strong response from the Native American community is, as Cahwee put it, "He embraces his heritage."

In August, the American Indian Exposition took the extraordinary step of naming him -- a 21-year-old college basketball player -- "Indian of the Year." At the parade an hour west of Norman, he was blown away by the response. He looked out and saw a sea of Oklahoma apparel. "Just crimson everywhere," he said, "and a little bit of orange." And yet they were all there for him, blurring party lines.

"It didn't matter who we cheered for, we were all Native Americans coming together," he said.

When asked why they gravitate toward him, he said he thought basketball played only a small role.

"I think for the most part they acknowledge me because I acknowledge them back. I talk about it. I express it. I tell everyone how important it is to me. I go to clinics. I help Native American kids, teach them basketball, answer any questions. I'm a part of them."

His is an eminently relatable story. He made a stupid mistake when he was young and has learned from it. He encountered obstacles along the way and persevered.

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Lindy Jr. remembers his son showing up at home unexpectedly during the summer of his freshman year. He was crying and wouldn't say why. Then, after a few hours, he composed himself and told his parents how his teammate, Tyrek Coger, had died earlier that day.

Not just that, Waters was there when it happened. When Coger collapsed in the middle of a workout, Waters was the one asked to pump the CPR mask delivering oxygen while emergency personnel tried in vain to resuscitate the 21-year-old Coger, who had recently transferred to OSU.

If the incident with the Airsoft gun didn't make him grow up, seeing Coger die before his eyes from what was later deemed to be an enlarged heart did. Although Waters doesn't talk about it much -- same for his tumultuous senior year of high school, which many of his teammates don't even know about -- both instances made an impact on him, Lindy Jr. said.

There was a scripture passage the family had come to identify with that would later find itself written inside Waters' sneakers. The passage is Philippians 3:13, which is about moving on for a higher purpose. But the specific phrase that has become a mantra for both father and son is, "I press on."

As it turns out, his time in Stillwater would demand the patience and perspective he picked up along the way.

During his freshman season, Waters suffered a concussion and a fractured foot that caused him to miss significant time. And even then -- even after he helped the team reach the NCAA tournament -- came more bad news when coach Brad Underwood left unexpectedly for Illinois after being hired at OSU only a year earlier. A few months later, when Waters was sitting in class, another flood of notifications hit his phone. The team's group message wouldn't stop pinging. "What's happening?" read one text. Another said, "I don't know yet. Let's have a team meeting."

At first, Waters thought it was just a couple of his teammates having a one-on-one conversation in the group chat that he could ignore. Then he got a call from his parents. Then his coaches.

"They're like, 'Coach Lamont is in trouble,'" Waters recalled. "The FBI was at his door."

Lamont Evans, an assistant coach, was arrested that September as part of a sweeping federal investigation into corruption within college basketball. He was charged with accepting bribes, later pleading guilty.

The team limped to a 21-15 record that season, but the next season was supposed to be better. Waters was one of a handful of veterans stepping into leadership roles, and there were a few underclassmen who looked to have potential. One of them, sophomore guard [Michael Weathers](#), started off hot, averaging 9.2 points per game.

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Oklahoma State coach Mike Boynton, on Lindy Waters III

But then, in mid-January with the team hovering around .500, Weathers and two others were dismissed from the program after allegedly committing acts of vandalism. OSU was left with only nine players on the roster, including a walk-on.

So, yes, there have been plenty of opportunities for Waters to throw in the towel -- to give up or straight up leave. But he shrugs it off.

"My senior year of high school I had to do a big change really quick," he explained. "And then I was there for a little bit, came back to North for a couple of months, go to OSU, change, Coach Underwood one year, change. Everything was changing so fast that I got used to it. New coach, new year, everything is fine."

He has had to adjust, of course. When it felt as if half the team had been suspended, he vowed to do what he had to in order to get through it. Coaches asked him to shoot more, to be more aggressive. Now he's playing everything but the center position, and much of the offense is flowing through him.

Coach Mike Boynton says Waters is the most versatile player on the team now, which is a good thing when you barely have enough players to field a team in the first place. Boynton called him a "stabilizing force."

"Hats off to him to have the courage to say that things don't look perfect and that's OK, this is going to be a learning experience that I'm going to be better for in the future," Boynton said. "I've got a great admiration for his ability to take things in, to shoulder some responsibility for his opportunity here in making it the best possible, regardless of the circumstances surrounding him.

"I've never felt any hesitation from him that this is where he wants to be."

Boynton, who was an assistant with Underwood, has seen Waters' progress up close over the past three seasons. As a freshman, he shot 71.4 percent from the foul line and averaged 5.7 points per game. This season, as a junior, he's up to 94.6 percent, missing just three of his 56 attempts. Through 21 games, he's averaging 12.4 points, 4.8 rebounds and 2.8 assists per game.

At 6-foot-6 with a point guard handle, he's a mismatch. He's a solid defender and knows how to play physical basketball. "He's got an edge," Boynton said. In other words: There's a lot there to like. The only missing piece seems to be belief.

Talking to Boynton and Lindy Jr., there's the sense that Waters is still coming into his own, still learning, still maturing on and off the court. Being so calm and introspective has helped him weather so many storms, but now he needs to turn the corner.

"He needs to start thinking of himself as an elite player," Boynton said. "Because he has that ability. I don't know that he thinks of himself in that regard because he's so unselfish, because he wants everyone to share in that success. But sometimes you need a guy to step up and feel like, 'Yeah, I'm the man here.'"

Maybe he'll get there. Then again, maybe he won't. His story is already compelling enough as it stands.

With his senior season rapidly approaching, Waters said he wants to go as far as basketball will take him. He's not ready to give up playing competitively anytime soon.

But there is a plan whenever that part of his life comes to an end. He got the bug hosting those basketball clinics last summer and wants to see where that goes. His goal: start a nonprofit organization and help Native American kids.

He knows better than most what it's like at that age -- the possibilities and the pitfalls. He can show them how to play basketball, but he can teach them so much more.