Michael Duncan grew up in Cleveland, a long 3-point shot away from Tri-C's Metropolitan Campus. His basketball skills attracted the attention of community college coaches around the nation in 2002. The gifted guard signed with Eastern Arizona College, packed his high tops and headed west. Duncan never considered playing for Cuyahoga Community College, packed his high tops and headed west. Duncan never considered playing for Cuyahoga Community College.

Today, Duncan — now the head men's basketball coach at Tri-C — often shares that story with high school recruits deciding where to continue their education.

“I speak from personal experience, because Tri-C changed my life,” Duncan said. “It put me on a different path than the one I was heading on and brought me stability. Opportunity is available here.”

Duncan just completed his third year as coach of the Challengers. He guided the team to a record of 28-3 during the 2016-2017 campaign and a share of the Ohio Community College Athletic Conference championship.

Tri-C also ascended to No. 2 in the national rankings during the season, which ended with Duncan being named the conference's Coach of the Year. The team reflected its coach, playing a hard-nosed style of ball where everyone contributed.

“Coach is on top of everybody to play hard,” said Wade Lowman, a freshman forward from Philadelphia. “He pushes us with the goal of being in the national championship. He demands the best out of us.”

That mandate for excellence extends to the classroom, too. Team study tables take place three times a week. Skipping one is not an option.

The increased emphasis on studies under Duncan has brought results. In the fall semester, the men's basketball team posted its highest GPA in years while outperforming the overall student body.

“These kids are all about basketball, but they have to understand the ball only bounces for so long for any player,” Duncan said. “They need to succeed in their classes. That has to be their priority.”

Duncan understands the value of a Tri-C education. His year at Metro Campus provided an academic base for the bachelor's degree in sociology he earned from Livingstone College in North Carolina.

He followed that with a bachelor's degree in special education from Notre Dame College in South Euclid, which he put to use while teaching at Apex Academy in East Cleveland.

Duncan is currently finishing work on a master's degree from Notre Dame.

“Never stop learning,” Duncan said. “Academics is key to everything.”

Of course, that doesn't mean there isn't room for hoops.

Winning a national championship while playing at Tri-C still ranks as a life highlight for Duncan. The coach at Tri-C — often shares that story with high school recruits deciding where to continue their education.

Duncan's goal is to add more.

“We proved that winning a national championship is possible at Tri-C,” Duncan said. “I want my players to experience that feeling at the end of a season. I want them to find their greatness.”

Challengers won 11 games in a row to end the 2004 season, capping the run with a 74-67 victory over Mott Community College in the NJCAA Division II final.

Mementos from that season fill a trophy case just outside the Metro Campus gym where the current team practices and plays.

Devon Robinson claimed the Freshman of the Year award and First Team All-OCCAC honors. The guard/forward ranked second in the conference in rebounding with 10.2 per game while also averaging 11.6 points per game for the Challengers.

Two teammates joined Robinson in earning all-conference recognition, with freshman forward Quintin Doe being named Second Team All-OCCAC and freshman center Wade Lowman grabbing Honorable Mention All-OCCAC honors.

For the women's team, sophomore guard Darian Carter made First Team All-OCCAC after scoring 20.4 points per game — second in the conference. She also averaged 6.3 rebounds per game and was second on the team in assists.

She was joined by sophomore center Ebony Young, who was selected Second Team All-OCCAC, and sophomore forward Desies Avery, who was named to the conference All-Defensive Team.

Tri-C's Metropolitan Campus hosted the NJCAA Men's and Women's Basketball NJCAA Region VI Tournament in 2016-2017 seasons.

The Ohio Community College Athletic Conference awarded all-conference honors to six student-athletes from the College following a season of success on the hardwood. The men's team finished the season 28-3, while the women's team went 21-8.

The winning continued even after the Tri-C men's and women's basketball teams completed their 2016-2017 seasons.