

Riding his coattails

by Brent Schrotenboer

Jeremy Tyler is being followed.

At school. At basketball practice. In the locker room. Even into his house.

For most of the past two years, a Los Angeles filmmaker has been tracking Tyler with a video camera — interviewing him, his relatives and his coaches at San Diego High.

The documentary project started during his sophomore season in 2007. Tyler was 16.

Andrew Gallery, the filmmaker, said he got the idea for it after seeing a monster dunk by Tyler on YouTube.

"We said we should try to talk to this guy and do something with him," Gallery said.

That seems to be a popular plan these days. Tyler, 17, is considered one of the top five national college basketball prospects in his class. As his fame has increased, so have the efforts to cash in on him.

A sports apparel company. Out-of-state tournament promoters. Television sports marketers from Illinois. Players from outside San Diego trying to join his team to get noticed. Even his high school coaches, according to a report by the San Diego Unified School District.

"This is sports capitalism at its finest filtering down to the high school level," said Richard Southall, director of the College Sport Research Institute at the University of North Carolina.

All of it can be linked to the 6-foot-11 prized recruit. Tyler, a junior who has accepted a scholarship offer from Louisville, could be worth untold millions of dollars by the end of his college freshman season in 2011. Tyler has already told his father that if he's "offered a job" in the NBA after his freshman year, he will turn pro.

The San Diego Union-Tribune reviewed hundreds of court and school district records regarding the San Diego High School basketball program since January, in addition to conducting interviews with several of the key figures. Together they tell the story of a most unusual high school basketball season in which the growing hype surrounding Tyler seemed to fuel a runaway enterprise. By the time it was over, two coaches were fired, three players were suspended and two games were forfeited.

THE TEAM

Four top players have transferred to San Diego High in the past two seasons, including two from Oklahoma and one from Washington. That prompted the San Diego Section of the California Interscholastic Federation, which prohibits high school coaches from recruiting players, to hire a private investigator, Chris Jensen of ESI International.

Jensen said that Tyler "was dissatisfied with the talent on the SDHS team and threatened to transfer out of the district," according to a 56-page report on the Cavers program by the San Diego school district.

Jensen stated in the report that Patrick McCollom, a 6-foot-3 guard from Washington state, was "brought in (in 2007) ... in order to keep (Tyler) at San Diego High School.

"The investigator reported that once (McCollom) transferred into the district, (Tyler) was happy because he had another superstar to play with, but began talking about transferring again when (McCollom) graduated," the district report states. "The investigator indicated that the SDHS coaches brought in three new transfers to give (Tyler) a surrounding team of superstars, like he wanted."

Tyler said this isn't true.

"Those players want to play with me, knowing their talent level and my talent level can win a state championship," Tyler said. "Honestly, from my view, Coach didn't have anything to do with that."

His coaches also have denied recruiting players. Head coach Kenny Roy said the program "recruits itself" because of its success and the presence of Tyler. But the school district didn't believe him. The report said evidence suggests "that the coaches used their (summer league) club connections to bring nationally ranked basketball players to San Diego High School."

The district fired Roy and his top assistant, Jerome Sherman, in February.

THE PLAYERS

McCullom's transfer was cleared, making him eligible to play for the Cavers. The team went on to win the Division I section title during Tyler's sophomore season. But then McCullom graduated, leaving a talent void around Tyler.

That void appeared to be filled in September 2008 when three transfers joined the team for Tyler's junior season, all of whom had attracted recruiting interest from Division I colleges.

But the section ruled all three were ineligible because of undue influence by the coaches and questions about their residencies.

"It seems to me somebody was trying to build a super team," said Dino Buzunis, an attorney for the section.

Zechariah Smith, a 6-foot-10 junior from Oklahoma, moved to San Diego to live in a condo leased to his father by a company headed by James Warren, who served on the board of directors of a summer club team coached by Roy and Sherman. The section said it asked for documentation on rent payments, but none was given. Smith's father, Reid, wrote in an e-mail to his son's previous school district in Oklahoma that they were unhappy in Oklahoma and liked the spotlight at San Diego High.

"UCLA, USC, KU, UK ... and multiple other colleges have been to see Zech practice since transferring to San Diego," Reid Smith wrote in the e-mail. "They have one of the top picks in the nation (Tyler) playing there, but just the exposure has been great."

Another transfer from Oklahoma, 6-foot-5 senior Terrence Boyd, is rated the 50th-best prospect in the nation by Rivals.com. His mother moved to San Diego without a job and was provided with \$6,600 in rent and a security deposit by one of Roy's associates, Clayton Williams, to live in a downtown condo, according to court documents. Williams didn't return phone or e-mail messages seeking comment.

Boyd had been ruled ineligible in his home state the year before as well, for similar reasons: allegedly receiving "improper monetary benefits from a third party" while he played at Oak Hill Academy in Virginia as a sophomore.

He has accepted a scholarship offer to play next year at Western Kentucky.

THE GEAR

In August 2008, Tyler played in the Elite 24 Classic in New York, which annually selects 24 of the best prep players in the country.

The founder of the event, Kris Stone, now works for Under Armour, a sports apparel company. He approached Tyler at the event.

"He really liked me and said he'd contact my coach and see if we can get you guys some stuff for your team," Tyler said.

San Diego High soon had some of the swankiest uniforms and sweat suits in prep basketball. Stone said Under Armour provides gear to only about 20 prep basketball teams in the nation.

"We identify where the elite high school teams and elite high school kids are," Stone said.

It's an old game: Shoe and apparel companies trying to build relationships with rising stars in hopes that it will pay off some day with a lucrative professional endorsement.

Stone previously struck up a friendship at his all-star game with Brandon Jennings, who signed a contract with Under Armour worth a reported \$2 million.

But that might not sway Tyler. His summer league team, the California Supreme, has been outfitted by Nike for about three years.

"I like Nike. I like Under Armour, but I will pick Nike over Under Armour any day," Tyler said.

The district's report on SDHS said Roy may have been "self-dealing" by selling uniforms from his summer

club team to his high school team. The Union-Tribune requested San Diego High's contracts with Under Armour and received a form that showed the school purchased \$3,307 in uniforms from Roy's club team, the San Diego Magic.

"The details of this transactions are still unclear," the report said.

Roy didn't return calls seeking comment.

TV And Tournaments

On Jan. 23, the Cavers played in a nationally televised game on ESPN2 against Los Angeles Fairfax, which is led by another national prospect, Renardo Sidney.

It was one of only 15 regular-season high school basketball games broadcast this year by ESPN, which hopes to attract teenage viewers by showing elite high school teams and college prospects. The network started televising high school games in 2002, when it broadcast a game featuring current NBA star LeBron James.

The Paragon Marketing Group from Illinois arranged the deal with ESPN. Paragon didn't return calls seeking comment about what it received as part of the contract. For its part, San Diego High was to receive \$1,000 from Paragon.

Fairfax beat the Cavers that night at Jenny Craig Pavilion 86-47. During the game, Tyler was his usual self, scoring 27 points.

He has grown accustomed to a big stage. While most high school teams only travel to regional games by bus, the Cavers flew to games last season in Hawaii and Ohio. The promoter for the Ohio tournament paid \$9,000 for air fare and lodging for SDHS. The San Diego school district later said it would reimburse him for those expenses.

In choosing which teams to invite, tournament promoter Eric Horstman said he considers "whether they have marquee players or a marquee team."

The marquee matchup there featured Tyler against Columbus Northland High and Jared Sullinger, an Ohio

State recruit. It drew a standing-room-only crowd of about 4,200. An all-day pass to the event cost \$10.

The Magnet

Almost everywhere Tyler and his father turn, somebody wants a piece of them. James Tyler said at one point he had to change his phone number almost every week because agents and recruiters kept calling him. Fortunately for him, it quieted down a bit after Tyler committed to Louisville last October.

"People don't realize how difficult it is for me to have a son like that because a lot of the stuff they offer," James Tyler said. "It's real tempting to a lot of people."

Asked what he's been offered, he said it's never specific, just "whatever you need."

He said he doesn't take the bait, and neither does Jeremy, because it could hurt his college eligibility. NCAA rules forbid special benefits for its athletes.

"You can't accept anything like that because this is his career you're talking about," James Tyler said.

Gallery, the filmmaker, has become good friends with Tyler in the course of shooting his documentary. Asked if Tyler would be compensated if the film sold some day, he said they've researched NCAA rules.

"We're not going to do anything to compromise any of that stuff," Gallery said. "If it's against the rules for them to receive any financial compensation because the film is doing well, then they won't, period. We all know that. If 10 years from now, it's OK, then yes, of course, there would be without a doubt."

Jeremy Tyler said his father doesn't allow direct contact from anyone outside his inner circle of family and friends. He said this helps guard him from solicitors and helps him focus on his dream of playing pro ball.

He laughs at allegations he has threatened to leave San Diego High because the rest of the roster wasn't up to par.

When the three transfers were ruled ineligible, he said he told Roy, "Let's just go with the guys we've got and make them better."

Tyler averaged 28.7 points per game this past season. His team finished with a disappointing 15-11 record, including two games the Cavers had to forfeit because of another rules violation: ineligible transfers participating in scrimmages.

Tyler said it wasn't fair to punish his teammates.

"I'm pretty good and I have a lot of stuff going for myself and those guys don't, so I just want to help them out and make sure they can go to a good college," Tyler said. "Anything I can help them with, I help them with. I'm like a big brother to them."

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