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UT's Durant: righteous talent

Basketball player seems poised for greatness, but it's his goodness that delights Mom

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By CHIP BROWN / The Dallas Morning News

AUSTIN – Wanda Pratt couldn't care less that her son, Texas freshman Kevin Durant, has already met LeBron James and Michael Jordan. Or that he was the co-MVP of both the McDonald's All-American game and the Jordan All-American Classic at Madison Square Garden this year.

She is more excited about how her son, who probably would have been considered for the No. 1 pick had he been eligible for the NBA draft last June, ran to grab a bag of ice when a Texas basketball manager fell and sprained his ankle in a pickup game recently. Or about how Kevin has chosen to wear No. 35 to honor one of his childhood mentors, Charles Craig, who was murdered at age 35 a few years ago.

"I'm most proud of how humble he is," Pratt said.

From the time Kevin was 8 months old until he was 13, Pratt raised Kevin and his older brother, Tony, as a single mom in Seat Pleasant, Md., just outside Washington. Tony is a 6-7 sophomore swingman at Butler Community College in Kansas.

Kevin's father, Wayne Pratt, reunited with his mother five years ago.

"My wife did a tremendous job with those boys," said Wayne, a police officer at the Library of Congress. "She is the rock and the strength of our family. Without her, Kevin and Tony wouldn't be where they are."

Durant, the No. 2 recruit in the nation last year, will begin his college career Thursday when the No. 21 Longhorns open the season against Alcorn State.

The buzz surrounding him almost seems beyond belief.

Former Longhorn and current Los Angeles Lakers guard Maurice Evans worked out this summer with Durant, who has point guard skills packaged in a 6-9 body with a 7-5 wingspan. Evans called the 18-year-old unstoppable.

Added Texas coach Rick Barnes, "He's the most talented player we've ever had."

Working toward a goal

Wanda Pratt has spent her entire career working for the federal government. She was passed over for a promotion when she was a young mother. At first, she was mad. Then she realized she hadn't worked hard enough.

"I decided right then my kids would never be in the same situation," she said. "They were always going to work hard to get what they wanted."

When Kevin was 11, he scored 18 points in the second half of a tournament final in Florida and led his team to the

championship. It was a defining moment. After that game, he told his mother he wanted to play in the NBA.

"I was addicted to the game," Durant said.

Wanda Pratt and Taras Brown, an AAU coach at the Seat Pleasant Activity Center, asked Kevin if he was serious. Kevin said yes. So they went to work in developing a champion, much as Earl Woods did with son Tiger or Nick Bollettieri did with Andre Agassi and so many other tennis prodigies.

"My first rule was that Kevin could never play in five-on-five pickup games," said Brown, whom Kevin calls his godfather. "Those games wouldn't help him develop. I had him working drills all the time."

While his friends were a couple of courts down at the activity center, shouting, "I got next," Kevin was doing catch-and-shoot drills with Brown. Passing drills. More shooting – off screens, off the dribble. Turnaround jumpers. Three-pointers. Defensive shuffle drills. Full-court crab walks. This went on for six years. After school. On weekends. During summers.

On road trips to tournaments, Brown quizzed him on different aspects of the game, such as help-side defense and the pick-and-roll.

"And if Kevin didn't give his all, he would run," said Brown, who also worked with local stars Dwayne Shackleford, a Southern Cal alum, and Chris McCray of Maryland.

Durant calls it simply "the hill." It measures 50 yards high and is steeper than stadium steps. It looms just outside the activity center. And it became the place where Durant steeled his resolve.

"If I came to practice and saw Kevin not giving his all or heard the least bit of dissatisfaction in Taras' voice, I would double whatever he had to run," Wanda Pratt said.

One night, Durant had to run the hill 75 times.

"I sat in my car, reading my book while Kevin did it," his mother said.

"I couldn't walk the next day," Durant said.

The mother and the coach made a pact. No matter Durant's success, they weren't going to let him know they were satisfied.

"I always let my son know I was proud of him. I always let him know how much I loved him," Wanda Pratt said. "But when it came to basketball, after he would have a great game, I never let him enjoy that moment because there was something deeper he had to grasp for."

Durant remembers scoring 26 points, grabbing 11 rebounds and blocking eight shots in a win as a sophomore at National Christian High School. He also remembers his mother questioning whether he had played hard on defense or involved his teammates enough.

"I can't explain how important my mom is in my life," Kevin said. "I love basketball and she and my godfather made it to where I would always work harder to get better."

"There were days she couldn't see my games because she was providing for me and my brother. She had to work on weekends. Me and my mom are so tight, I just want to work hard and make it in the NBA so she doesn't have to work."

When Durant was a 13-year-old freshman at National Christian, he wanted to quit. Older varsity teammates told him they were never going to pass him the ball.

Durant may be talented, but he's also sensitive. When he was 7, he let the weakest kid on his peewee football team

knock him over in a drill because the kid was always teased.

Jealousy and selfishness overcame Durant's high school teammates, Brown said.

"His mother and I told him he had to work hard and make them respect his talent," Brown said.

Durant did. And after he grew five inches to 6-8 the summer before his sophomore year, his talent was off the charts. He was capable of playing any position on the floor.

Making his way to Texas

Durant transferred to legendary Oak Hill Academy in Virginia as a junior. Oak Hill's alumni include Carmelo Anthony and Mavericks Jerry Stackhouse and DeSagana Diop, among others. Durant was a force and became best friends with guard Tywan Lawson, who was headed to North Carolina. Lawson wanted Durant to go with him.

Texas assistant basketball coach Russell Springman, a Maryland native who had been recruiting Durant since his freshman year, thought he was losing him.

"I was hearing rumors he might commit to another school," Springman said. "I called, and his father said, 'Russ, we gave you our word that we would visit before we made a decision.' "

Durant visited Austin two weeks later with his father.

"The relationship Coach Barnes had with his staff was different from the other schools," Wayne Pratt said. "It was more of a family."

Durant said there were three keys to choosing Texas over North Carolina and Connecticut: a strong connection with Springman and Barnes; strength and conditioning coach Todd Wright (Durant has grown from 206 to 227 pounds since enrolling for summer school); and the chance to help Texas win a national title.

"I wanted to come in and push Texas over the edge," said Durant, who could be one of four freshman starters for the Longhorns this season.

When Durant committed to Texas, Stu Vetter, his coach for his senior year at at Montrose Christian, called Barnes. The two have been friends for 25 years.

"I said, 'Rick, he's going to be the best player you've ever coached,' " said Vetter, a two-time national high school coach of the year. "I told Rick that Kevin's a joy to coach because no one outworks him, and he's fun to be around. His teammates love him because he doesn't act like a star and is very unselfish."

Wayne Pratt credits his son's highly skilled game to Brown.

"Taras is the key," Pratt said. "He took out his own time and personally worked Kevin and added things to his game. Every three months, you would see something different."

A future in the NBA

The stories from practice are already legend among Texas players and coaches.

There was the day Durant led the break, took two steps from the 3-point line and threw down a tomahawk dunk over teammate Craig Winder. Or the day he hit three NBA-range 3-point shots in less than 40 seconds of a scrimmage.

Everyone wants to know if Durant will play at Texas more than one season. He might have been in the NBA already if

not for a new rule stipulating players be one year removed from high school or 19 years old before qualifying for the draft.

Brown sees Durant's departure for the NBA after this season as inevitable.

"It won't be the NBA calling," Brown said. "Kevin's looking to be at Texas for two or three years. But he also knows if he has a good year, the shoe companies will come calling with an offer that makes it impossible not to go."

Wayne Pratt said the decision will come after the season. He said the family will meet with Barnes and discuss whether Durant's ready.

"But there's no timetable," Wayne said. "Kevin is very young. He just turned 18 in September. We don't want to put that kind of pressure on him. He's enjoying college life."

The decision will come down to work ethic, Durant's mother said.

"Of course, the NBA is on Kevin's mind. Of course it is," she said. "We tell him if he continues to work hard, these opportunities will be afforded to you. If you don't, they won't."

"We're not overly concerned about the money and all the things that will come with the NBA. We've lived the way we've lived all our lives. The focus is his love of the game and keeping that pure. Everything else will come."

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Men's basketball opener: Alcorn State at Texas, 8:30 p.m. Thursday (ESPNU, KSKY-AM 660; KFJZ-AM 870 in Spanish)

KEVIN DURANT

School: Texas

Position: Wing

Ht., wt.: 6-10, 227

Class: Freshman

Hometown: Suitland, Md.

Notable: Highest-ranked prospect ever to play at Texas (ranked No. 2 by Rivals.com behind 7-foot center Greg Oden, who is at Ohio State). ... Added 21 pounds during UT's summer conditioning program. ... Durant used to be listed at 6-10 – but that was in shoes. UT players are measured without shoes, so Durant has lost an inch. ... Met Michael Jordan after finishing as co-MVP of the Jordan All-American Classic game in New York this year. ... Best friend is Tywan Lawson, an ex-teammate at Oak Hill Academy and now a freshman guard at North Carolina.