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Making the Leap: Basketball Player phenom Jeremy Tyler's tumultuous journey from high school to the Israeli Premier League

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1j52r0f2

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Publication Date
2010-05-08

Supplemental Material
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1j52r0f2#supplemental
Take one look at Jeremy Tyler's body — a 6-foot-11-inch amalgam of fast-twitch muscle fibers and seemingly-endless limbs — and you would think that he was built to stand up under the pressures of life as a teenage trailblazer. His shoulders stand worlds apart, supporting a tattoo-bearing and quickly-hardening chest that's more befitting of a 30-year-old welder than an 18-year-old kid. His arms dangle unnaturally low, nearly scraping his knees, and each leg — part tree trunk, part pogo stick — confirms what the rest of his body suggests: this guy was made to play basketball.

Not born, mind you, but made. The formation of Tyler's body was a collaborative effort, equal parts nature and nurture. Genetics supplied the towering height. But his genes also gave him a slow metabolism and a voracious appetite, and just a few years ago, he was known not as a basketball prodigy, but as an overgrown fat kid.

Now, no one calls him fat. But ever since he made the unprecedented decision to skip his senior year at San Diego High School to sign a $140,000 contract with Maccabi Haifa of the Israeli Basketball Super League, that's one of the few labels he hasn't been given. When Tyler announced his decision to turn pro last April, columnists and commentators rushed to weigh in on the decision. To some, he was an empowered young athlete seizing the reins of his own career, refusing to yield control of his destiny to NBA and NCAA officials. To others, he was a valuable specimen being thrust into a high-stakes experiment. Tyler has been watched closely not simply because of who he is but because of what he represents: a challenge to the current American system that funnels elite basketball prospects to college campuses, where they often spend only one year before moving on to the NBA, which currently prohibits players from entering the draft until a year after their high school graduation. In 2008, top-ranked point guard Brandon Jennings went to the Italian league for a season amid questions surrounding his academic eligibility at the University of Arizona, where he had committed to play. But by leaving before his senior year of high school, Tyler represents the next step in what could be a growing diaspora of American teenage talent.

"I have to face reality," he says, legs stretched out while sitting in a food court at an Israeli mall, four months into a career that has so far been most notable for its struggles. "Everyone is
looking at me to see what’s going to happen. They want to see if I’m going to succeed or fail. They’re curious. I’m curious too. The only difference is that I get to control what happens.”

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Tyler’s journey from pudgy middle-schooler to high school phenom to Israeli League basketball pro has been swift and, at times, rocky, pushed forward by his own talent and ambition, as well as by the bevy of influences that have leapt into his life. Six years ago, he was shy, insecure, and as his father James puts it, “kind of dumpy.” But when a pubescent growth spurt helped give Tyler the height to become an elite basketball player, he dedicated himself to the sport. Quickly, he transformed. A scouting service ranked him as the best eighth-grade player in the country. “That’s when I realized that I had what it takes,” he says. The next three years were filled with all of the hype and a dash of the tumult that often surround prep basketball stars. A filmmaker began shooting a documentary about his life. Several of his games at San Diego High School were broadcast on ESPN. He started dating Erin Wright, the daughter of late rapper “Easy E” and the star of an episode of MTV’s “My Super Sweet 16.” And in February of his junior year, his coach Kenny Roy was fired over allegations that he violated California Interscholastic Federation rules by recruiting players. Jeremy was not among the players alleged to have been illegally recruited, but he was devastated by his coach’s dismissal. The next month, his team was eliminated from the sectional quarterfinals in a 59-52 loss to Torrey Pines, a game in which Tyler felt he had been “blatantly cheated,” because officials did not call multiple fouls against him. Facing a disappointing end to a season in which he had dominated on an average team facing mediocre competition, Tyler wanted to move on.

“It was just guys who were a lot smaller than me constantly fouling me on every play,” he says. “I wasn’t getting better. I was developing bad habits. I wasn’t having fun.”

So shortly after that game, he made the flippant remark that would change his life.

“I’m sick of this, man,” he joked. “I’m fixing to just leave here and go to Europe.”

“Actually,” his father James said, “if you want, we can make that happen.”
Unbeknownst to Jeremy, his father had been researching overseas options for months. Inspired by the stories and abilities of foreign teenagers Jeremy had faced at the Nike Global Challenge, James had wondered if his son would benefit from a system in which teenagers can play professionally, focusing on their game full-time without the restrictions faced by NCAA student-athletes. Having watched Jennings’ journey from Compton to Rome to the NBA’s Milwaukee Bucks, the elder Tyler contacted Sonny Vaccaro, the man who brokered Jennings’ Italian contract.

Vaccaro told James that if his son wanted to go overseas, there would be options available. James never told Jeremy about his talks with Vaccaro, at least not until Jeremy jokingly referenced the possibility of going to Europe himself.

“I never brought it up with Jeremy because I didn’t want to try to force him in any direction,” says James. “But Sonny said it was doable, and then after his last game, when he was so upset, we discussed the possibility.”

Tyler had committed to attend the University of Louisville, and the Cardinals’ coaching staff urged him finish his high school coursework during the summer so that he could arrive on campus a year early. Tyler considered the possibility, but once presented with the chance to focus on basketball full-time while playing overseas he thought it was too good to pass up.

“I could have finished high school and gone to Louisville, and I probably would have had the time of my life,” Tyler says. “But you can go to college any time. There’s a time and place for that. But, I mean, I’m in Israel right now. I’m doing something that no one else has ever done.”

“It’s very important that Jeremy get his education someday,” says James, a small business owner. “But he only has so many years where his body will be at its athletic peak. Right now, basketball is his job. It’s his best opportunity. College will still be there down the line.”

Weeks after his high school team’s elimination, Tyler met Vaccaro at a California Pizza Kitchen in Santa Monica to discuss his options. In April, he announced his intentions to go overseas. By August, he had secured a one-year, $140,000 contract with Maccabi Haifa, a team that finished second last year in the Israeli SuperLeague. Later that month, he left for Israel, alone.
He missed his first flight, because he didn’t know he needed his passport. When he left home, he cried. When he arrived, he was shocked. He had been told that one of the reasons Israel would be such a good fit was because everyone would speak English. Haifa, situated on a hillside overlooking the Mediterranean, would be just like San Diego. Tel Aviv, Haifa’s more urban big brother located just a couple of hours to the south, would be just like L.A.

These were the things he had been told, and in many ways, they’re true. Most Israelis do speak English. Haifa’s beauty does rival San Diego’s, and in its heart, Tel Aviv pulses just like Los Angeles. But upon arrival, the similarities were overshadowed by cultural differences. When strangers spoke, they defaulted to Hebrew, not English. When he looked at restaurant menus, he had no clue what they said. And if Tyler wanted to find people his own age, he needed only to look for the machine guns. All Israelis serve a mandatory term in the country’s armed forces, and as most 18-year-olds go about their daily business, they carry weaponry in hand. And while Tyler got along with his teammates, they rarely hung out off the court. “He gets along with everyone,” says Haifa guard Richard Roby. “But he’s still a kid. We’re all at least 24 or 25. We’re at different stages in life.”

No, Haifa could not be mistaken for home. Home was a crock-pot and a deep-fryer, big meals cooked up by Jeremy and served to his family. Tyler’s mostly-bare apartment had just a basic oven and a stove, both measuring temperatures in Celsius, neither cooking meals for anyone but Jeremy himself. Home was early-morning workouts on the beach. In Haifa, there is a beach, but Jeremy never saw it, as he relied on a team staff member to drive him everywhere he went. Home was a house filled with friends. Here, most days passed without Jeremy speaking to a single person until 4 p.m., when morning would dawn on California. And then, home came to Israel, but only via webcam. When he wasn’t practicing, playing, or talking to friends, he spent his days thumbing through the Bible, wearing out the handful of XBOX games he’d brought along, and indulging in one of his favorite time-passing activities, sleep.

“There was a shock,” he says. “You walk around and you don’t understand anything. Everybody’s looking at you like you’re some kind of freak, because they’ve never seen anyone your size before. So yeah, it’s shocking.”
Tyler wasn’t the only one shocked upon his arrival. His coaches couldn’t believe that such a highly-regarded and obviously-talented player would possess as few fundamental basketball skills as Jeremy had.

“He didn’t play defense,” says Maccabi Haifa assistant coach Elad Hasim. “He just stood there and waited for a chance to block a shot. He didn’t box out. He just tried to jump over people to get every rebound. He didn’t rotate, or run the pick and roll or do anything that we expected him to do.”

Having never consistently played against high-level high school competition, Tyler had never needed to master the fundamentals of the game. He needed only to rely on his size and athleticism to dominate against inferior opposition. And while he was still the most physically-gifted player in his new setting, his physical gifts were no longer enough.

“These fundamentals of the game, it wasn’t like he knew what to do and he just didn’t do it,” says Ashkenazi. “It was like everything we were telling him was brand new.”

And in this way, Tyler was nowhere near as prepared as Jennings had been when he went to Italy in 2008. Not only had Jennings graduated high school when he went overseas, but he had already played against elite competition, going to school at Oak Hill Academy, the top prep basketball program in the country, and playing for an elite-level AAU team.

“The whole reason why Jeremy went over there is also the reason why he’s struggled,” says Vaccaro. “He felt like playing in San Diego wasn’t going to prepare him for the pros. Well guess what? He was right. He went over there because he wasn’t playing against good competition. He wasn’t practicing. Practice? Come on; he never had to practice. But he gets over there, and all they do is practice. And all of a sudden, he’s playing against really good players. And it’s tough. It’s something no one could prepare him for. Until he witnessed it, he had no clue.”

But Tyler’s biggest problems revolved around his behavior off the court. He showed up late for practices. He was fined $1,000, the largest fine in the team’s history, for being late to an interview. And the New York Times’ published a story quoting teammates and coaches as calling Tyler “lazy,” “immature,” and “naive.” When the story was published, Tyler was devastated. That
night, he was ejected from a game for head-butting an opponent. And with that, an already tumultuous ride finally reached rock bottom.

“`I think it was a story that was supposed to infuse Jeremy, and it did,” says James Tyler. “He got more committed. He focused. It was a bad thing, but it was also a good thing.”`

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Five weeks later, Tyler sat silent near the end of his team’s bench, watching the clock tick down and the score roll up as Haifa put the finishing touches on a blowout victory over Irony Ramat Gan, a team that had yet to win a game all season. One week ago, Tyler had endured the first “Did Not Play: Coach’s Decision” game of his basketball-playing life, and three-and-a-half quarters into this game, he had yet to leave the bench. “I’m fixing to lose it,” he told teammate Jesse Pellot-Rosa. “I can’t take this.”

And then, fifty feet away, the fans started singing.

There were dozens of them, the teenagers and twenty-somethings that comprise Maccabi Haifa’s most rambunctious cheering section, crowded together in the first few rows of the 3,000-seat arena’s balcony. Some were shirtless, while others were clad in Maccabi Haifa green. Some beat drums, while others pumped their fists to the rhythm. Some jumped. Others danced.

But all of them sang.

“Jeremy, Jeremy Tyler,” they cried, their pitch rising on the second word before dropping on the third. “Jeremy, Jeremy Tyler.”

With little more than four minutes remaining, Ashkenazi summoned Tyler from the bench and put him into the game. Almost immediately, Tyler had an impact. He blocked a shot on defense, then drew a foul on offense, going on to sink one of two free throws. Minutes later he was fouled again, the Ramat Gan defenders unable to handle him in the post. These were the things he had always done. Block the shots of the guards who dared enter the paint. Grab rebounds over undersized centers. Use his strength to create mismatches down low. But now, he was also doing some of the little things — setting high screens and rolling to the hoop, effectively fronting his opponent while
guarding the post, hedging on picks before returning to defend his man — the things he’d been
criticized for not doing just weeks before.

But still, there were mistakes. After receiving a pass in the post, he held the ball low,
allowing it to be knocked away by an opposing guard. After losing the ball he was slow to get back
on defense because he was appealing to an official to call a foul. He was out of position on a couple
of rebounds, and while he was an imposing presence in the lane, he had momentary lapses on
defense. And then, it was over. Final score: Haifa 80, Ramat Gan 69. Having barely gotten the
chance to break a sweat, Tyler walked off the court, his only game action of the last two weeks now
complete. On his way to the locker room, he stopped to wave to the fans who had sung his name. “It
just felt so good to get that support,” he would later say. “I just wished I could say ‘Thank you’ right
then while they were singing.”

Now nearly halfway through Tyler’s season abroad, flashes of dynamic play and level-
headed maturity continue to be accompanied by moments of frustration for both Tyler and his
coaches. The consensus among coaches and teammates is that Tyler is steadily improving, even if he
has not yet earned consistent playing time. In practice, there are moments when Tyler looks like the
best player on the court, tipping in dunks in transition and swatting the shots of guards and big men
alike. But still, the mistakes persist.

“Things are getting better — a lot better, actually,” says Ashkenazi, commending Tyler for
practicing hard in the days immediately following games when he barely plays. “But he hasn’t
earned the right to play 20 or 25 minutes a game yet.”

So with his minutes limited, practice remains Tyler’s best venue for impressing his coaches.

“It’s really hard for him to improve right now, because he’s not getting much playing time,”
says Richard Roby, a former University of Colorado star who joined the team immediately after
Tyler’s head-butting incident. “But you can see how much he wants to improve, and as time goes on,
he is improving.”

Young players — particularly young Americans — usually start slowly when first playing in
European-style leagues, which feature a more perimeter-oriented style of play and reward polished
skill sets over dazzling athleticism. Jennings averaged 17 minutes per game during his stint in the Italian league, but one year later he has emerged as a Rookie of the Year candidate in the NBA. Last year, Davon Jefferson — a former USC standout who declared for the NBA draft after his freshman year but was not selected — languished on Maccabi Haifa’s bench for the first half of the season. But he slowly earned more playing time down the stretch, and this season, he has been Haifa’s leading scorer and one of the best players in the league.

“It’s always hard for anyone playing in a new country,” says Haifa forward Moshe Mizrahi, an Israel native who also played professionally in France. “And Jeremy has so much ability — I’ve never seen anyone like him. But mentally, he’s not there yet.”

For Tyler’s part, he thinks he’s further along than he gets credit for. “The coach has made it harder than it needs to be because he doesn’t have any faith in me,” he says. “If he just gave me a little confidence, said something to me in practice, it would make a big difference. But he doesn’t. He doesn’t even get onto me. He just ignores me.”

Most of Haifa’s players lack the physical talent to reach the NBA, making them long-term fixtures in the Israeli League. For these players — both Americans and Israelis — the pursuit of an Israeli championship and the continued collection of a low six-figure salary are their primary goals. But because Tyler appears destined to make the NBA, he doesn’t fit within Haifa’s long-term plans.

Ashkenazi says that he expects that Tyler will be prepared to play meaningful minutes in the last several weeks of the regular season and into the playoffs. And for now, earning more time is Tyler’s primary focus. His cousin moved in with him in January, and in February, his father is finally moving to Haifa, as he had planned to do long ago, before the opening of his new restaurant was delayed. James hopes that the stabilizing presences will help Tyler to focus on improving his game. Because for now, his future is unclear. “Just based on stats and playing time, Jeremy hasn’t earned a spot with Maccabi Haifa next year,” says Jeff Rosen, the team’s owner. "If he makes considerable improvement in the second half of the year, I’m very open to it. I anticipate that he’ll improve, but so far, he hasn’t earned it." If Tyler doesn’t return to Haifa — whether it’s his decision or the team’s — he will consider other destinations in Europe, or perhaps even the NBA Development League. Tyler
is still holding out some hope that he can become eligible for June's NBA draft (He turns 19 on June 1).

Although his team's owner may be frustrated with Tyler's progress, NBA scouts remain intrigued, both by his talent and by his experience abroad. "There's no red flag that's gone up over anything that's happened for him so far," says an NBA front office executive who spoke on condition of anonymity because he can be fined by the league for speaking about players who haven't declared for the draft. "Everyone knew it was going to be a struggle. That's expected. That's good for him. The key this year is just to watch and see how he develops and matures as a man. He's not ready for the NBA yet, but he's not supposed to be ready for the NBA yet."

The executive, who believes that going overseas is a great option for young players, thinks that Tyler's NBA draft stock will rest on his performance next season, wherever he ends up. "That's when I'll go see him play and check on his skill level," he says. "Then he should be getting 15 to 25 minutes a game and really making a contribution. If so, then he'll be fine. If not, there will be some concerns."

But one thing that is guaranteed is that while Tyler may be the first player to leave high school to play overseas, he almost certainly will not be the last. Rosen wants to position Maccabi Haifa as the preferred destination for elite high school players looking to skip the country, and in the future, he will handle things differently than he did with Tyler.

"I think we need to do a better job really digging and finding out who these players are, doing a full psychological profile to find out whether or not they're cut out for this kind of experience," he says. "Not everyone can handle it. Next time, we'd like to look at a group of four or five players, and out of that group, maybe pick one or two."

If the NBA increases the age limit when the current collective bargaining agreement expires in 2011, as has been speculated, more prospects will have incentive to skip the country.

"What Brandon proved, and what Jeremy can still prove, is that this is a path that can get you to the NBA," says Vaccaro. "And the kids and their families are smart. They're paying close attention to this collective bargaining agreement. They understand their options."
And so this is the trail that Jeremy Tyler is blazing — one rife with culture shock and hard-learned lessons, an around-the-world ride that can be taken only by those who possess an otherworldly talent. It is not right for everyone. Many people don’t even think it’s right for Tyler. But in all of the attention paid to what Tyler represents, it’s sometimes easy to miss out on who he is — an 18-year-old boy living the life of a man, someone whose talent is still unpolished and whose attitude is still being refined, a teenager who has spent months trying to figure out how to live in a foreign country with no family, no close friends, no reliable means of transportation, and no real grasp of the culture or language. He still says things he shouldn’t. He still does things he may someday regret. But while the rest of the basketball community watches the test sample in the hoops world’s latest experiment, Tyler lives it, day after day after day. “If I make it, then it will show people, this is what you need to do,” he says. “If I don’t make it, then it will show them that this is what you shouldn’t do. So either way, yeah, it’s a sign of being a trailblazer. And no matter what, it will always be the greatest story to tell.”

It started as a crazy idea. Someday it will make a heck of a story. But for now, it’s just real life.