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SPORTS

April 28, 2005

Meet the next, next, next big thing **Too young to be courted?**

Indy's Kevin Ferrell is the No. 1 player in the nation in his class. He's 11 years old.

By Jeff Rabjohns
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It's Saturday morning, a little before 9 o'clock.

The No. 1-ranked basketball player in the nation in his class is lacing up his orange game shoes, among the many accessories his summer team receives free from its sponsor, Adidas.

He pulls on his warm-up top and heads to one of six courts at The Fieldhouse in Fishers for a spring-league tournament game.

His name is Kevin Ferrell.

He's in the fifth grade.

Think a lot of attention has been showered on high school phenoms like Lawrence North's Greg Oden? That's the tip of the iceberg.

Today's search for moneymaking basketball talent isn't for the next LeBron James. It's for the next preteen star who could become the next Greg Oden who could become the next LeBron James.

Not only are grade-school children being ranked by nationally known scouting services, by the time they're in fifth grade, they've become full-fledged cogs in the basketball machine, complete with national travel and, increasingly, shoe company sponsorship.

Last year, Adidas started a national, invitation-only camp in San Diego for fifth-, sixth- and



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Branding at 11: Athletic apparel firms offer free gear to a select group of young teams, including one featuring Kevin Ferrell that played in a recent tournament in Fishers. -- Joe Vitti / The Star

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seventh-graders. One of the reasons to attend, its Web site says: "Top college coaches in attendance." Other shoe companies are also targeting younger children.

Big-time college coaches are showing interest in kids before they enter high school.

Demetrius Walker, of Fontana, Calif., an eighth-grader recently profiled in Sports Illustrated, received his first recruiting letter in sixth grade and one from Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski in seventh. It's not uncommon.

Clark Francis, publisher of The Hoop Scoop, a Louisville, Ky.-based scouting service that has pushed the envelope on ranking young players, last spring pushed it to its lowest point yet: fourth-graders.

Kevin Ferrell, then a 10-year-old, 4-foot-10-inch point guard from Lakeside Elementary in Warren Township, has a crossover dribble, can hit a running jumper in the lane and snaps off one-handed bounce passes that hit teammates in stride.

He topped Francis' national list. And soon the pressure began.

Kevin's father, Kevin Sr., received a call from the Adidas camp. "They said they wanted him to come to the camp, but what they wanted me to do was send \$575," Ferrell said. "I said, 'I'm going to have to pass.'"

"What they're saying now is that if he doesn't go to the Adidas camp, he won't be on the rankings page."

The entire process of probing grade schools for future talent has many stunned.

"I think it's ridiculous. What it does is sell books, recruiting publications and magazines at the expense of someone's loss of innocence," said former Utah coach Rick Majerus, a television analyst.

"I've never heard of (ranking fourth-graders). I think it's sad. It's just sad, almost reprehensible."

Sitting on the metal bleachers in Fishers, Ron Hunter, men's basketball coach at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, shook his head as the players left their personalized equipment bags near their parents. His son, R.J., plays on Kevin's team.

"I tell my son all the time," Hunter said, " 'I have an Adidas contract and you have more Adidas stuff than I've got.' "

The bounce of "The Next"

Other sports, notably tennis and swimming, have national age-group rankings. But in no other sport does being the Next Great Player carry the cachet or potential financial windfall of basketball.

More and more players are jumping straight from high school to multimillion-dollar

Preteen phenoms

Here are the top 10 fourth-graders in the nation, as published March 12, 2004, by Clark Francis, editor and publisher of The Hoop Scoop. (The players are now in fifth grade.)

1. Kevin Ferrell; 4'10"; point guard; Indianapolis
2. Jaron Reese; 5'3"; point guard; Houston
3. Drew Davis; 4'8"; point guard; Stockbridge, Ga.
4. Xavier Turner; 5'5"; center; Indianapolis
5. Xavier Horne; 5'2"; point guard; Washington, D.C.
6. Terry Ellis; 5'6"; center; Wichita, Kan.
7. Jacob Walker; 4'10"; shooting guard; Prince William, Va.
8. Jalen Williams; 4'11"; point guard; Fort Washington, Md.
9. Kameron Jackson; 5'3"; power forward; Los Angeles
10. Taylor Aker; 4'10"; shooting guard; Orlando, Fla.

contracts in the pros, and many of those have even more lucrative shoe deals. James, at 18, scored a \$90 million endorsement from Nike before he scored his first professional basket.

If players go to college, they're worth millions at big-time programs, which depend on men's basketball to fill arenas and garner television contracts. CBS has an 11-year, \$6 billion deal to broadcast the NCAA men's basketball tournament. TV deals for all other college sports postseason tournaments combined don't come close to that.

"This isn't girls field hockey," Francis said. "This is big business."

Francis, a 45-year-old IU graduate, travels the country watching players and relies on the opinions of a network of associates to develop his rankings. Like most scouts, he doesn't have a cold numerical percentage system for ranking players but takes into account primarily athleticism, size and shooting ability. And, of course, potential.

"It's better to know in eighth grade whether or not you're the next LeBron James than at 20 or 21, and it's better for college coaches and NBA general managers," Francis said.

Daren Kalish, sports marketing manager for Adidas Grassroots Basketball, said his company has "a handful" of programs that provide gear to teams with players as young as fifth grade. "We want to be involved with elite-level players at all levels of basketball," he said. "It legitimizes your brand if the top players at all levels are wearing it."

While that marketing strategy has proved effective for shoe companies, there are plenty who see the issue from the opposite view and ask a different question:

Is it good for 10-year-old kids?

"It's certainly more of a problem than a benefit," said Peter Roby, director of Northeastern University's Center for the Study of Sport in Society. "Kids at fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh grade are not at a point where anybody should be declaring them head and shoulders above anybody else or recruitable material.

"In the meantime, parents get all wide-eyed and create these expectations, then put enormous pressure on the kids."

The chances of reaching the NBA are minute. Only 0.03 percent of high school seniors will play in the NBA, according to NCAA research, and Roby said his group has studies showing nearly 70 percent of youth athletes quit sports by the age of 13.

"Is it too much pressure to rank a kid when he's in sixth or seventh grade?" Francis asked. "My normal answer is: The kid can handle it, but the parents and coaches can't.

"The kid knows if he's going out and tearing it up. If there is a problem, it's the parents, the coaches, the counselors or whoever is in his life to say it's too much too early. . . . If parents put the kids out there, they're fair game."

Xboxes and chores

The Ferrells live in Warren Township, and it's a full house: Kevin Sr., wife Lydia, an anesthesiologist, and their four kids: Kevin Jr., 11; Kaleb, 9; Kelsey, 6; and Khloe, 3.

Kevin Sr., 35, used to run a janitorial service but now is a stay-home dad. "I have a very supportive wife," he said. "I'm very blessed."

He never played high school basketball, but in his early 20s he played with a traveling team out of Fort Benjamin Harrison that was allowed to have civilian players.

Kevin Jr. is known as Yogi to his family and friends. He was recently accepted at Park Tudor, one of the city's most prestigious private schools.

One of his favorite places is his parents' conversion van, recently purchased for travel to basketball tournaments. It has a flat-screen television, DVD player and Xbox video-game system. He'll take on anyone in College Basketball 2K5.

Yogi is every bit a kid. He has chores: Keep his room clean. Do the dishes. Take out the trash.

"And one more?" his dad asks with a playful smile.

"Play basketball?" Yogi responds hopefully.

"Cut the grass."

"I like cutting the grass," Yogi says.

His parents are proud and concerned. When the No. 1 ranking was posted on the Internet, they printed it out and had it laminated.

Call Star reporter Jeff Rabjohns at (317) 444-6183.

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