

Sunday, April 17, 2011

Long way from home

KU's Selby not where he was, but not yet where he wants to be as he prepares for the NBA draft.

By J. BRADY McCOLLOUGH
The Kansas City Star

BALTIMORE | The men standing at the corner of East Lanvale and Barclay remember Josh Selby well. The kid always had a basketball in his hands, always wanted to be the best at something. But one day he was gone, and they wouldn't see him or hear his name again for years.

Kirk Fonseca and Devin Currie grew up here with Selby. Just after noon on a recent Friday, they drink beer out of bottles covered in black plastic bags and smoke thin cigars. A car approaches, and the driver rolls down the window. "I got this," another man in the group says, disappearing with the car around the corner.

Fonseca, 25, is here because he got kicked out of prep school as a teen. Currie is closer to Selby's age. He's here, surrounded by boarded-up row houses in this abandoned East Baltimore neighborhood, because he got locked up for selling drugs in high school and couldn't stay away.

"It's hard," Currie says. "A lot of us don't stay in school."

Fonseca and Currie are proud of Selby. This year, they caught some of Kansas' games on TV, saw Selby on the court in faraway lands.

"If he didn't play ball," Fonseca says, "he'd probably have been caught up out here."

Fonseca and Currie acknowledge the reality: Selby made mostly good decisions. They made mostly bad ones. He had a support group led by a strong-willed mother. They didn't. So they're here with a future as uncertain as the next sale, staring across the street at a mural that paints a sad picture.

A fallen angel lies on a tombstone marked R.I.P., two crosses on either side. Above are small white clouds inscribed with names. Nineteen names are sketched in black ink. Three clouds are empty, waiting for the next tragedy.

This is the place that Selby told you to visit, the place that's captured on his cell phone, the place that he can't let go of even though he left it behind years ago.

"He's one of the young ones that made it through," Fonseca says.

Soon, a persistent rain begins to fall, and the men scatter in every direction. Before Currie runs off, he asks that a message be delivered to Selby.

"Tell him to stay strong," Currie says.

III

Today, and for the foreseeable future, Josh Selby will need all the strength he can summon. On Thursday, he announced via Twitter that he'll forgo his last three years of college eligibility and enter the NBA draft.

It was not a popular decision by the 20-year-old. His freshman season was so disappointing that it seemed a foregone conclusion he would return to school, if for no other reason than to regain the respect he had a year ago, when he committed to KU as Rivals.com's top-rated recruit for 2010.

Selby missed the Jayhawks' first nine games this past season because of an NCAA suspension for accepting impermissible benefits from his mentor, Robert "Bay" Frazier. Once on the court, however, he started his career on fire, scoring 21 points and hitting the game-winning three-pointer against Southern California. But he injured his foot in January, and that hindered his explosiveness the rest of the season. After all of the build-up, he averaged just 7.9 points per game.

KU fans and observers were quick to rip his decision to leave Lawrence so soon from their Twitter accounts.

One fan said Selby "is not ready for the NBA." Another told him, "Good luck in the D-League and Europe next year." Former KU forward Scot Pollard tweeted, "I think you made a mistake young man, but I wish you luck, and I hope you prove me wrong!" CBS basketball analyst Seth Davis was less kind, tweeting, "I never wish ill on a youngster but the GM who drafts Josh Selby should have his head examined. Kid wasn't even a decent college player."

Selby's response from Las Vegas, where he has been training with Impact Basketball the last two weeks, was just as brazen as his decision: "All this negative energy is creating a monster," he tweeted. "Y'all light the fuel up inside me."

Selby has never lacked fire. He has always overflowed with energy, and it's been hard for him to stay in one place too long. This year in Kansas was always supposed to be just that -- one year. So what if he started the season projected as a lottery pick and finished it as a likely late first-rounder? What about his dream? And, most importantly, what about his mom?

"To be honest, I worry about her more than she worries about me," Selby said in a recent interview with The Star. "She can sleep at night. I can't sleep at night because I want her to have everything in the world. I just stay up all night, till about 3 or 4 in the morning, just worrying about, 'What do I gotta do to make sure my mom has everything she wants?' Because she deserves it."

Selby found Kansas to be a great place to play basketball but never really immersed himself in the college experience. His mother, Maeshon Witherspoon, had moved to Lawrence from Baltimore, and he spent most nights at her apartment instead of his dorm room at Jayhawker Towers. Selby didn't go out on the town very often, even though he would have been the main attraction if he did. He would rather go bowling or watch movies with his mom.

No, this year has not gone according to plan. But Selby has been on this track for so long that he couldn't turn back.

III

Josh Selby was 12, his mother just 29 and jobless. They were borderline homeless, moving from spot to spot. His father had never been involved in his life.

Selby would get in fights all the time, he says. Walking home from school one day, he saw a close friend pistol-whipped.

"One more time, he would have died," Selby said. "I was about 12. After that, I got crazy. To see that at that age, I was losing it. I'm not gonna lie. I was really losing it, being disrespectful to my mother, just doing anything I wanted, like a little thug."

They were living in West Baltimore then, and Selby was often picked on because he was from the east side. But the pettiness faded during pickup basketball games on the concrete court at Beechfield Elementary. Regulars there started calling him "Little Future" because he'd play against the adults and take their best shot.

"By my actions on the court, the way I played, I really didn't get messed with," Selby said. "It was like all the old people, the older thugs and old hustlers, they were kind of (looking after) me ... 'Nobody mess with him. He got a bright future. Leave him alone.' Basketball took me a long way."

But it would only take him so far in his current living situation. He and his mom were staying with an acquaintance, thankful for every meal they got.

"I felt embarrassed," Witherspoon recalled. "I felt humiliated, less of a parent. This is really not how I want my kid to live."

Her breaking point came when Selby failed seventh grade. Witherspoon began to notice a change in her son. She decided to move in with her mother and take Josh away from the drug- and crime-infested neighborhood of Irvington they'd called home for about a year and a half.

"It's either pride, or you're going to lose your son," Witherspoon said. "So I swallowed my pride and went home."

Witherspoon enrolled Selby at Golden Ring Middle School, where he repeated seventh

grade. It turned out to be a fateful move, because the principal at the school, Scottie Bowden, ran an AAU program called Baltimore Select. Bowden took an interest in Selby and spent hours after school helping him with his homework and working with him in the gym.

Selby says the turning point came during his eighth-grade year, when he found a good influence in friend Dwayne Wheeler, who was two years older. Selby watched the way Wheeler fought only when he had no other option and sought to emulate him. He didn't want to get swept up in the violence like so many others he knew.

"In one year, I had about six people close to me get killed, all gunshots," Selby said. "Seeing stuff like that wakes you up. You want to be dead or you want to be something? I want to be something. I want to see my mother happy. I'm tired of seeing my mom crying at night worrying about if her son is gonna live, go to jail. I had to change my life around."

III

Selby's life changed quickly once he went national on the AAU basketball scene. By the end of the summer after eighth grade, he was regarded as one of the top prospects in the country.

He had a real future to protect now, and that meant every decision had to be handled the right way. First up was where to attend high school. Witherspoon and Bowden knew one thing: It was not going to be in the city of Baltimore.

Selby still had four years in front of him, with temptations at every turn, and Witherspoon was going to put him as far away from trouble as she could. She enrolled him at John Carroll High, a Catholic school 30 miles northeast of Baltimore, working nights so she could bus him to and from school. Because of the commute, Selby barely had time to get distracted back in Baltimore each night.

Instead, he became consumed by basketball. Even after he graduated from Golden Ring, he continued to work with Bowden almost every night at the middle-school gym. Eventually, Bowden, who had kids of his own, just gave Witherspoon the keys.

"You know the story: Every kid says, 'I'm gonna be a pro basketball player,' but 99 percent of them don't understand the willpower it takes," Bowden said. "This kid worked at his craft. I'm telling you, you've never met anyone more determined."

After his freshman year at John Carroll, Selby transferred to prestigious DeMatha Catholic High in Hyattsville, Md., a suburb of Washington. Selby was surrounded by a world of privilege, and he did his best to fit in by continuing to progress toward his goals on the court.

DeMatha coach Mike Jones has coached countless college stars and professionals. But he said Selby was unique.

"He is rare because it is seldom that you can find a kid so talented and so motivated to just do everything as well as he can," Jones said. "You have determined kids and you have talented kids, singularly, but having both qualities is very rare."

After a year and a half at DeMatha, the long commute began to take its toll. He was leaving for school before 6 a.m. and sometimes didn't return until 10 p.m. Selby wanted to return to Baltimore to finish high school, a request his mother eventually granted.

Selby enrolled at Lake Clifton High, two miles from the corner of East Lanvale and Barclay. Lake Clifton coach Herman Harried, an East Baltimore native who played at Syracuse, gave him no special treatment, making Selby run cross country in the fall.

"He's a guy that doesn't want to lose," Harried said. "If you don't want to lose, you do anything not to lose. You'll almost kill yourself not to lose."

Selby stayed committed on the court but walked a fine line off of it. Witherspoon kicked him out of the house in September 2009 because he was coming in past curfew too often. He was going out to clubs and living the life of a McDonald's All-American.

"That was the best time of my life," he said. "I was playing for my city; where I grew up at, where I was raised, where I got tough at was right down the street. They didn't see me since I was young. I've been on the move because of basketball."

He visited his old corner but had no plans of staying there.

"I'm smart," Selby said. "I'm street-smart, period. I never got in with the wrong people. I knew what our focus was. If I went on the street, I was either gonna be dead or in jail. I knew if I played ball, I'd have a chance to take care of my family and see places I'd never seen before and people in my hood have never seen before."

"It was either hell or heaven. If you've got a choice, you ain't gonna go to hell."

Selby became a Baltimore sensation. Strangers came to Lake Clifton to see him play, and he committed to Kansas in April 2010.

When Selby's name was called at Lake Clifton's graduation, he was given a standing ovation. KU fans rejoiced, too, thinking Final Fours and national championships were in their immediate future.

III

To Selby and Witherspoon, it was a major accomplishment for him to make it out of Baltimore.

Last July, Witherspoon attended the funeral of 15-year-old John Crowder, one of the top young players in the city. Crowder had spent a year in Texas and a year playing for a suburban school before moving back to East Baltimore.

Not long after, he was murdered.

"He was very talented," Witherspoon said. "Potential unlimited."

Witherspoon was relieved that her son was safe in Kansas. The family was just one season away from realizing an NBA payday, but until then, Selby was going to give everything he had to the Jayhawks, just as he did at John Carroll and DeMatha and Lake Clifton.

From the moment he signed with KU, he was expected to fill the void left by the graduated Sherron Collins. But before the season started, news broke that his relationship with Frazier was being investigated by the NCAA. In November, the NCAA handed down a nine-game suspension.

By the time of Selby's debut, KU was already rolling along at 9-0, and it was clear that twins Marcus and Markieff Morris were the stars of the show. Selby had never played with big men so good. He made it clear he was going to defer to them.

"As good as he is," Harried said, "remember, he's still learning the system, and he's playing with some guys that were the man before he got there -- the twins."

Selby's foot injury derailed the rest of his season anyway. He didn't score in double figures in his last 13 games, struggled with ball-handling and often got lost defensively. He was not what he was made out to be, which irritated an entire fan base.

Next year, playing alongside Tyshawn Taylor and Thomas Robinson, Selby would've had the chance to prove that he could be a great player in college.

But being a legendary Jayhawk was never his end game. His mission has been, and continues to be, fulfilling a destiny laid out for him not far from the corner of East Lanvale and Barclay.

"I opened the door for kids who've been through the same thing I've been through," Selby said. "Now, they have faith they can make it. When kids ask me on Facebook, 'What do you do? I want to be like you,' I tell them, 'No. You're gonna be better than me.' I give them confidence."