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N.C.A.A. TOURNAMENT; Don't Call Me. I'll Call You.

By LEE JENKINS
Published: March 21, 2007

It sounds like a fairy tale.

A stranger walked into the University of Southern California basketball office one day last summer and asked to speak to the head coach. The stranger did not make an appointment. He did not call ahead. Tim Floyd, the U.S.C. head coach, cannot explain why he agreed to see him.

Nine months later, as U.S.C. prepares for the regional semifinal of the N.C.A.A. tournament, Floyd recounted his version of that conversation.

The mysterious man got right to the point. "How would you like to have the best player in the country?" he asked.

Floyd tried not to roll his eyes.

"Have you heard of O. J. Mayo?" the man asked.

Of course Floyd had heard of him. Everyone in basketball had heard of him. Mayo was first mentioned in Sports Illustrated when he was in the seventh grade. He was considered a future lottery pick by the time he entered high school. He once talked trash to Michael Jordan during a pickup game at Jordan's camp.

Mayo was entering his senior season as a point guard at Huntington High School in Huntington, W.Va., but Floyd said he did not bother to call him. He did not even send him a U.S.C. brochure.

What was the point? Major universities had been courting Mayo for four years. Floyd had been at U.S.C. for fewer than 18 months. Besides, Floyd had only recruited two top-100 players in his life. He had no business going after Mayo, the No. 1 player in the country, especially being from a football college that was 3,000 miles away.

"O. J. wanted me to come here today," the man told Floyd. "He wanted me to figure out who you are."

Floyd was desperate enough to play along. His starting point guard, Ryan Francis, had been murdered two months earlier. The backup, Gabe Pruitt, was in academic trouble. The third-stringer, a walk-on, was leaving college.

"Why aren't you at Arizona or Connecticut?" Floyd recalled asking.

The man explained that Mayo wanted to market himself before going to the N.B.A., and that Los Angeles would give him the best possible platform.

"Then why aren't you at U.C.L.A.?" Floyd asked.

The man shook his head. U.C.L.A. had already won 11 national championships. It had already produced many N.B.A. stars. Mayo wanted to be a pioneer for a new era.

"Let me call him," Floyd said.

The man shook his head again. "O. J. doesn't give out his cell," he said. "He'll call you."

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How often do you talk to your kids about important matters, like underage drinking?

Rarely

Regularly

Sometimes

Vote

Floyd remembers the meeting lasting 45 minutes. He learned that the man's name was Ronald Guillory, and that he was an event promoter in Los Angeles who had befriended Mayo. Other than that, Floyd learned absolutely nothing.

"There was no way that kid was going to call," Floyd said. "There was no way."

College basketball recruiting, especially when it comes to the top players, is a famously shady business. Coaches deal regularly with handlers and street agents. When they land a top prospect, they are immediately open to questions and accusations.

Floyd is no different. Hours after he met Guillory, at about 6:30 p.m., Floyd was at home in Santa Monica when his cellphone rang. He gave his version of his second landmark conversation of the day.

When Floyd answered the phone, he heard a teenager's voice on the other end: "Coach, this is O. J. Mayo. I'd like to come to your school."

Mayo had not been on an official campus visit. He had not seen the new arena, the Galen Center. He did not know anything about the current roster.

Floyd did not believe it was possible to get a verbal commitment from a player he had recruited for less than one day, especially when that player was a 6-foot-5 sharpshooter with blue-chip strength, quickness and passing ability.

"I want to be different," Floyd recalls Mayo telling him. "I want to leave a mark."

Mayo said that if he did not go to U.S.C., he would probably enroll at an African-American college. Such colleges are renowned academically, but they do not typically produce pro basketball players.

Mayo's mind was apparently made up. He was already looking ahead. "How many scholarships do we have for next year?" he asked.

Floyd stammered. "After this," he said, "I guess we have three."

Mayo went through the priority list in his mind. "Don't worry about recruiting," he said. "I'll take care of it."

Before Floyd hung up, he asked one more time for Mayo's cellphone number. "No," Mayo said. "I'll call you."

When Floyd put down the phone, he turned to his wife. "This ain't happening," he said. "But we've got to act like it is."

Never has a verbal commitment carried less weight. Mayo is one of those basketball prodigies famous for his large entourage and his erratic behavior. In the past six years, he has moved from West Virginia to Kentucky to Ohio and back to West Virginia. He has been suspended at least three times for fights and other violations.

But every six weeks, Mayo called Floyd to check in. He persuaded one of his friends, Davon Jefferson, to join him at U.S.C.

"O. J. has a lot of people in his ear, but he is just not a follow-the-herd kind of guy," Floyd said. "He never, ever wavered."

On Wednesday, Nov. 15, Mayo faxed his letter of intent to Floyd. It was a bigger story in Los Angeles than U.C.L.A.'s opening game. On Friday, Nov. 17, Mayo finally took his official visit to U.S.C., accompanied by a documentary film crew.

Floyd solicited the help of a coach more familiar with five-star recruits. Pete Carroll, the U.S.C. football coach, gave Mayo his pitch. As usual, it worked.

"It was the craziest thing I've ever been a part of," Floyd said. "I kept thinking, 'Either this kid is nuts, or he's got the biggest vision I've ever seen.'"

Like a true point guard, Mayo saw everything develop a split-second before it did. At the time he faxed his letter of intent, U.S.C. was a mess. Players were still mourning Francis' death. Floyd could not persuade anyone to care about defense. The starting point guard, Daniel Hackett, graduated early from high school so he could fill in.

"We were miserable to watch," Floyd said. "Our guys wouldn't even shake their heads if they threw the ball away or let a guy blow right by them. They would only shake their heads if they missed a shot."

As a high school senior, Mayo obviously could not help the Trojans cover the perimeter and work the ball inside. But Floyd believes that Mayo's signing improved the team's overall attitude. Mayo gave validation to a program that always trails U.S.C. football on its own campus and U.C.L.A. basketball in its own city.

"Now we're getting as much love as those guys are," forward Taj Gibson said.

The Trojans had reason to listen to Floyd before, based on his N.B.A. experience coaching the Chicago Bulls and the New Orleans Hornets. But when he showed that he could sign Mayo, his locker-room credibility rose even higher.

Fifth-seeded U.S.C. will play top-seeded North Carolina in the Round of 16 on Friday in East Rutherford, N.J.. The Trojans have a tough-minded defense and a selfless style. They always had players who could create -- and make -- their own shots. Suddenly, they have players who are willing to do more.

"We understand what it takes now to win games," said Pruitt, who was academically ineligible for the first semester. "We like the results."

This was all supposed to happen next year, with Mayo leading the team deep into the N.C.A.A. tournament and then bolting for the N.B.A. lottery.

Until he shows up for freshman orientation, U.S.C. will have to wonder if Mayo is for real, or if he will skip college entirely and wait the required one year for the draft.

"I used to think about that, but not anymore," Floyd said. "This guy wants to play for it all."