

**Jim Owczarski**  
**Aurora Beacon News.**  
**Sunday January 20, 2008**

## **Everyone's Watching**

*Young gifted athletes like East Aurora's Ryan Boatright face a multitude of pressures. Some handle them well and prosper, while others crumble*

You're 14, sitting in front of the head coach of a Top 25 program, making a verbal commitment to play for that man and his team.

You were just performing at a summer camp, flicking that basketball back, forth and around, and suddenly you vaulted into the national consciousness.

Time Magazine. The espn.com home page. The Dan Patrick Show.

You're 14, not even in high school and a star.

What happens now?

In reality, no one knows. No one will, not in four years, or eight. A theory might develop, but no firm answer. There are models to look at, parallels to draw. But like sunlight through a prism, the whole thing is pliable. New eyes see different results.

What is certain is how the spotlight clutters the path of young athletes, speeds up some processes, slows others down. The end result could be anything, and that 14-year-old could end up anywhere.

But whatever happens, everyone is watching - all the time.

### **The gift**

East Aurora freshman Ryan Boatright was not yet in high school the summer of 2007 when University of Southern California head basketball coach Tim Floyd accepted his verbal commitment to play for the Trojans in 2011.

It doesn't mean anything - it's non-binding for both parties - but it represents something more preponderant: giftedness, and what it means in the athletic realm.

"There's a big problem with giftedness, whether you're athletically gifted or you're intellectually gifted," said Dr. Jeffrey Fishbein, a clinical and sports psychologist based in Deerfield. "The dynamic that occurs is that you experience things at a greater level than the years of life you have permit."

The intellectually gifted, children with an unusual proclivity towards solving math equations, scientific formulas or understanding languages and theories, can be moved up in schooling. And for the most part, they can maneuver through classes without earning more attention than the typical college student.

Boatright's aptitude is no different than Robert Krzyzanowski's, who enrolled at North Central College in Naperville in 2004 at the age of 11.

It's not dissimilar to renowned Chinese pianist Lang Lang's, who began playing at two-years old and rose to global prominence at 17.

Anonymity does not exist when a child's gift is athletic. His or her ability can be seen, and when discovered the young athlete is often tagged a "phenom." It's a label that sometimes is a precursor to greatness.

Tiger Woods was three years old when he first appeared on national television and developed into the youngest golfer to ever win the U.S. Junior Amateur, the U.S. Amateur and the Masters Tournament.

"At the end of the day there are stories, and there's a handful of them out there, where this was a very successful experience," Fishbein said.

### **The curse**

The tag comes with something else as well.

In women's tennis, Jennifer Capriati turned professional at 13, and three years later was one of the world's top 10 players with an Olympic gold medal. Less than a year later she was out of tennis, unable to continue under the pressure.

A caffeinated culture plugged in 24 hours a day comes calling at a time when the athlete's emotional makeup isn't prepared for such exposure.

"You can't expect a 13-year-old to have any kind of emotional maturity because they're only 13," said Dr. Darrell Burnett, a clinical and sports psychologist based in California who is affiliated with the International Youth Conditioning Association in Crystal Lake. "The 18-year-old may still be immature in some ways, but at least they've had a chance to experience things (and) get some feedback."

Capriati lasted a little over three years in the global spotlight before dropping tennis completely, taking a four-year hiatus that included a shoplifting incident and an arrest for the possession of marijuana. It wasn't until the age of 20 that she was able to return to the sport full time.

"(People) are relating to him or her as an athlete who happens to be a kid rather than a kid who happens to be an athlete," Burnett said.

"That's where the danger lies."

Because the athlete is judged solely by the end result, it is not uncommon for some kind of performance anxiety to set in. Earlier this season, Boatright turned down shots to make the extra pass and took time to find his role at East.

"I learned when to try and go fast and when to slow it down," Boatright said. "Before, at the beginning, I was trying to go 100 miles per hour all the time."

But why is there that pressure? Why do national talk shows and magazines converge like piranhas when a 14-year-old makes a verbal commitment to a college?

"The expectation changes when it's something that's so out of the norm," said Fishbein. "That's really, really hard to live up to in that particular situation."

### **A rocky road**

There is no road map through such an experience and rarely do these athletes meet the public forecast, especially when their gift has been in circulation for the majority of their life. [See box 1]

"There's a lot more negatives than there are positives," Fishbein said. "I'm really struggling right now to think of a positive of getting that kind of attention at a very young age."

Damon Bailey is an Indiana University Hall of Famer and was drafted into the NBA. By the percentages, he is one of the most successful men to ever play basketball. [See box 2]

Yet because John Feinstein's best selling book, *A Season on the Brink*, made Bailey a national sensation at 15, his career is considered bankrupt because the Hoosiers never won a national title.

"The kid has everything to lose," Burnett said. "Other kids see the kid as a target, so the pressure's on there."

Resentment can set in, especially at such a young age. Attention from the media, the crowd, the opposite sex and overall population can lead to sense of isolation.

Taylor King was an eighth grader heading into Mater Dei High School in Santa Ana, Calif. when he verbally committed to UCLA.

"I was one of the most hated basketball players in southern California," said King, who eventually signed with Duke. "I went to the best high school who won every year and players didn't like me. It comes with the territory."

The field of play can be treacherous as well, as King and Boatright quickly realized. Elbows fly deliberately. Crowds chant derisively. Media judge severely.

Boatright was indoctrinated early this season, taking shots to the head on drives and forceful forearms off screens. Chants of "U-C-L-A" and

"He's no Mayo" (references to USC's rival and current Trojans freshman O.J. Mayo) have been directed at him, as well as other taunts unsuitable for print.

"I try to block out the negative stuff, but some of it is always going to get to you," he said. "If it does get to me, I just use it as motivation."

### **Family matters**

The most important part in ensuring the gifted athlete is not beholden to expectation is the support structure surrounding them. Tiger

Woods had it with his parents, Earl and Kultida. Former Naperville Central standout and current University of Tennessee All-American Candace Parker had parents Larry and Sara, as well as brothers Anthony and Marcus.

"If you have that, then you've got a good shot," Fishbein said. "But if there are other motives and means, you might be barking up the wrong tree."

Expectably, Ryan Boatright's parents Mike McCallister and Tanesha Boatright were immediately questioned following their son's commitment. Why so early? What's in it for you?

McCallister and Boatright are in lockstep with their response: A free education at a top university is guaranteed. They visited the USC campus, got a feel for the academic regimen required, and pointed to skyrocketing tuition costs.

"I don't see him going to the NBA, but if he does, hey, I'm glad," McCallister said. "But if he gets that degree from USC, that means a lot. That holds a lot of weight."

Ryan Boatright not only has parents who are involved and watchful, but a family tree that includes at least four NCAA Division I athletes, several Aurora prep basketball legends and grandfather Tom Boatright, who ran track and played football at Northeast State in Oklahoma.

Because of his lineage, Tanesha Boatright has been preparing her son for the spotlight since the sixth grade.

"He would have had to survive through this whether he verbally committed or not," she said.

Another source to lean on is his father's first cousin, Jaeh Thomas. Thomas drew the attention of college programs as an eighth-grader before becoming just the third freshman to start at West Aurora under Hall of Fame coach Gordie Kerkman in 2000. His arrival filled the town with expectation for both him and the Blackhawks.

But by the end of his tenure at West, Thomas faced disciplinary issues, was coming off the bench, became a father, and accepted a late Division I scholarship offer to Florida A&M. He left school in his second semester in 2004 and played briefly at Highland Community College in Freeport the next season before tearing an Achilles tendon, ending his collegiate career.

"With Ryan, I talked about the positive things that Jaeh did and then we looked at the negatives," McCallister said. "We had to look at the negatives."

To many, Thomas is an illustration of a gifted athlete drifting to the margins. But his notoriety was largely local. Boatright was the subject of a national news cycle.

So what can happen?

Long-term effects could be depression or dropping out of the sport completely. Adults needing to re-identify themselves are not uncommon either.

There are those who make it through the spotlight as well. They embrace it, succeed in it and psychologically seem no worse for wear.

In reality, no one knows where Ryan Boatright will be in four years, or eight. His family has rallied around him though, believing his athletic gift will propel him to personal success, at the very least.

"I'm not saying he's fabulous," Tanesha Boatright said. "I'm not saying he's the best there ever has been, but my son has worked hard ever since he realized he could do what he could do. I believe that with the proper guidance, he'll only get better. He may not be the best player there ever was, but he'll be OK."