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Jordan Hill overcomes tough road to reach NBA

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The circle of friends and family surrounding Jordan Hill in the green room at the NBA draft in a couple of weeks might be larger than usual.

When you travel the difficult road that Hill has from emotional heartbreak as a young child to the cusp of your biggest dreams at 21, those who helped you along that way must be acknowledged.

Hill, who blossomed into an All-American during his junior season at Arizona, is projected to be among the top 10 picks in the draft.

It's a quantum leap for a player who wasn't eligible to play on the team his junior year at North Springs High School. And an otherworldly jump when you consider that future NBA players are identified as early as middle school these days.

"It was a tough road," Hill said. "But I had people by my side every step of the way."

People such as Keith Ivy, who became Hill's legal guardian in high school and helped guide him off the court as well as into organized basketball, where he could take advantage of his size and obvious athleticism.

People such as Gary Graham, whose Smyrna Stars offered Hill an avenue outside of high school basketball to showcase his skills to college coaches who missed him because he bypassed the traditional high school/grassroots circuit that future pros usually travel.

And people such as Memphis coach Josh Pastner, who was an assistant under Lute Olson at Arizona when the Hall of Fame coach caught his first glimpse of Hill's raw talent and star potential in a summer-league game.

"Jordan's a great feel-good story for anyone willing to dream and anyone that believes in the power of love and prayer," Graham said.

The youngest of three siblings, Hill's mother, Carol, died from breast cancer when he was 3 years old. He had four residences and six primary caregivers before finishing high school. And Hill still needed a year at the Patterson School, a North Carolina prep school, to become eligible to play at Arizona.

If not for a breakout performance against now-Los Angeles Clippers center DeAndre Jordan at a tournament in Houston with the Smyrna Stars, Hill might not have been seen by Olson and Pastner, who played at Arizona alongside Hawks point guard Mike Bibby.

“He wasn’t ranked, there was no ranking on him [at the time],” Pastner said, emphasizing just how rare it is for a player to come out of nowhere to the top of the NBA draft in three years. “It just shows the importance of evaluating. It’s so much more important than you think. And Jordan gets a lot of credit. He worked so hard. You could always tell the ability was there.

“But who knows what would have happened if he hadn’t hooked up with Gary Graham? Who knows how things might have turned out if he didn’t get that chance or the chance to work with Chris Chaney at the Patterson School?”

Hill said he always loved the game, but with more important things on his daily priority list at 16, he simply didn’t have the luxury of making basketball his primary focus. A top-10 draft pick, though?

“It was absolutely one of my goals,” Hill said. “For me to tell somebody ‘I’m going to be an NBA player’ wasn’t even realistic because nobody knew who I was. I just always had the heart for the game. I was going to work hard. And I knew if the opportunity to play at the next level came my way I was going to do whatever I had to do to make it.”

Graham saw the tools when Ivy brought Hill to the gym in Smyrna years ago. And even though Hill came to him later than usual, Graham said he saw more than just a 6-foot-9 kid who was a dunker with loads of potential.

“I started calling college coaches and telling them I had this kid that was way under the radar because of his situation,” Graham said. “Jordan was a hard worker. He could really shoot the ball and could run the floor, too. You could tell then that once he developed and came into his own he had a chance.”

A chance to stand out in college. A chance to take advantage of a Division I scholarship. And now a chance to turn his life around and take care of his family.

“When you’ve got a kid that’s 6-10 and can shoot the ball and can run and jump, the sky is the limit,” Graham said. “A lot of kids at that age haven’t really developed their skills yet. He had it. You could see that part of it. God just worked it out.”

Hill eased into his role for the Wildcats, playing 14 minutes a game off the bench as a freshman. Hill averaged 18 points and 11 rebounds for an Arizona team ravaged by injuries and defections as a junior. Along with good friends Chase Budinger and Nic Wise, Hill led the Wildcats to a surprise Sweet 16 appearance.

Early draft forecasts had him projected to go as high as the third pick to Oklahoma City. He’s still mentioned prominently anywhere from fifth to tenth.

“Jordan’s just an unbelievable kid,” said Pastner, who recently replaced John Calipari at Memphis. “And he’s going to be a very good NBA player. He’s a good person. He’s grounded, and he tells it like is. Most important, though, he has good family and good people around him.”

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