

Avery Youngest Player to Commit to 'Cats

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To hear Howard Avery describe it, Kentucky coach Billy Gillispie knew nothing of his son when their paths happened to cross at a recent AAA basketball event.



As fate would have it, though, that chance encounter led to a scholarship offer from the Wildcats and perhaps the earliest verbal commitment in the history of college basketball's winningest program.

Michael Avery, a 6-foot-4 eighth-grader from Lake Sherwood, Calif., says he will play for the Cats. Now on with the business of finding a high school.

"That's the funny thing," Howard Avery said with laugh. "We've got our college. Now we need our high school."

Avery currently attends Ascension Lutheran School in Thousand Oaks. He recently came east to interview with a private school in Culver, Ind., that he is considering attending next year. During that trip, the coach of Culver's upstart basketball program introduced the family to the Indiana Elite AAU staff, who subsequently invited Avery to play with their team in the King James tournament in Akron, Ohio.

According to Avery, Gillispie was scouting the event when the young player caught his eye.

"The second game we played, coach Gillispie was there watching a couple of other players that he may have had an interest in," Avery said. "There was a 7-footer from Africa, a 6-10 player and a 6-8 player, so there were a lot of talented players at that game. I don't even think he was aware of Michael before this game.

"Michael came off the bench each half and had a good game against some really good competition. From what I understand, he displayed a total skill set and the basketball IQ to know when and where to use that skill set within the context of the game. I think that's what really impressed coach Gillispie."

Rules prohibit college coaches from initiating contact with prospects and their families at events like the King James tournament, but word was later filtered through the Indiana Elite staff that Gillispie was very impressed with Avery.

"So what I proceeded to do was make contact with coach Gillispie," Avery said. "I got a contact number for him and left him a message, but didn't hear back from him. I started wondering, does he really like my son? When I got in Los Angeles Monday morning, I decided to try again, and he answered the call. He told me he remembered my son, and that he was really glad that I called. He explained that he wasn't allowed to call me back, so it had to be me that initiated the call.

"We talked for a while and he said, 'I like your son. In fact, I like him so much I want to offer him a scholarship here at Kentucky.' I was like, 'You're joking, right?' He said, 'Nope. I'm serious. I really love the way he plays.'"

When he told his son about the UK scholarship offer, the first official offer Michael Avery had received, it was difficult to restrain the excitement.

"I think Michael wanted to commit right then," Avery said. "But this is all so new to us, and I'm aware of the unusual nature of an eighth-grader giving a commitment to a college. I wasn't really sure how to react to it at first. A lot of people will say it's too early in the process, but after talking to some people who know coach Gillispie, we decided it really can't get much better than this opportunity.

"It's a dream school for any kid who grows up wanting to play basketball. There's only a few of them out there: Kentucky, North Carolina, Duke, Indiana back east; UCLA out here. If you've got an opportunity to play for one of those schools and get a great education, why not? We don't need a hundred offers; we just need one great program and one great coach."

Avery had also been getting early interest from USC, who according to his father had invited him to the Trojans' elite camp this summer. Several other programs were just beginning to inquire about him.

Family ties could make it easier for Avery to see himself playing in this part of the country. His mother is from Indiana, and his grandmother still lives near Indianapolis.

The elder Avery said he is not a diehard fan of college basketball, but his son is. "Michael's a student of the game. When he's not playing or studying, he's watching basketball. That's his life. He's really passionate about it. He must have watched about 12 Kentucky games last year. He knew all about them."

And what does the family know about Gillispie and his coaching style thus far?

"We just know that he's been really, really successful no matter where he's been," Avery said. "The turnaround at UTEP and the turnaround at Texas A&M... they speak for themselves. He's got a tremendous track record, and everyone we've talked to about coach Gillispie have nothing but great things to say about him. We know he's a coach who can develop Michael's game and get the most out of his ability."

Much can change in a player's body and physical development between the eighth grade and his senior year of high school. Avery could end up being much taller and developing into another position, but his father said the UK staff envisions him as a combo guard at this point.

Rivals.com does not rank players at such an early age, but some services list Avery among the top 10 players in his class.

"He was ranked third in the U.S. Elite Camp at Baylor," Avery said. "And he was ranked eighth at the Junior All-American Camp."

"But, you know, I don't think coach Gillispie was aware of any of that. He just saw my kid play. There's something to be said for that. He's not going based on what anyone has told him or where some website has Michael ranked. He saw his ability and potential himself. I really respect it."

The Averys have not made a final decision on his high school future. If he does not come to Indiana, he will likely play for Crespi High School in the L.A. area.

"No matter where he is, he's got a lot of motivation now," Avery said. "He's going to be working really hard to improve his game because he knows a lot will be expected of him when word gets out that he's going to a school like Kentucky."