

## Persistence pays off for trainer with growing list of star clients

Kevin Armstrong - Sports Illustrated

ELIZABETH, N.J. -- Six years ago, Stu Vetter was not sold on Alan Stein.

Then a 26-year-old former basketball player, Stein had placed calls to Vetter, preparing each time to pitch how he, a basketball-oriented strength and conditioning coach, could better Vetter's Montrose Christian basketball program in Rockville, Md., a perennial national power. Having played point guard for Elon College, a Division I school in North Carolina, Stein shopped his wares incessantly to the two-time national coach of the year.

"Alan phoned for a good two years before we really heard him out," Vetter says. "I don't let just anyone get involved with our program."

By chance one afternoon in 2002, Montrose assistant David Adkins, who had been charged with overseeing the strength and conditioning program for the next season, answered the office phone. After listening to the energetic Stein outline his system, Adkins invited him to train a few players. For one workout, Adkins brought Linas Kleiza, a workhorse weightlifter who had recently graduated from Montrose, to Stein's workplace, Rockville Fitness, which is tucked behind a suburban strip mall. "That's the hardest I've ever worked," Adkins remembers Kleiza, now with the Denver Nuggets, saying in his car afterward. "When can I do it again?"

Soon after, Vetter bought in.

"Our teams were doing weights in the '70s before coaches like even John Wooden saw it as fashionable," Vetter says. "What we have in Alan is something special."

A year later, Stein was at the Les Schwab Invitational in Portland, Ore., with Montrose when he met Kevin Durant, a sinewy junior who was enrolled at Oak Hill Academy in Mouth of Wilson, Va., at the time. He exchanged pleasantries and his business card with Durant's family, followed up with a packet of information upon his return home and soon became Durant's go-to trainer, continuing his relationship when Durant transferred to Montrose.

"I'm such a small piece of the puzzle with Kevin," Stein says. "But it is satisfying to see him succeed."

Last summer, Durant, who coordinated with Texas strength and conditioning guru Todd Wright and Stein to prepare for predraft workouts, had his bench press mocked and, most insulting to Stein and Wright, his strength impugned.



“To fault Kevin for not benching [more than 185 pounds] was ridiculous,” says Stein, who also notes that the long-armed Durant has gained 40 pounds in two years. “That’s like asking him to walk in and take 30 jumpers with his left hand. We knew he was strong and he’s proven it in game situations.”

In the Junes to come, Stein expects to have two-to-three NBA prospects whom he trains selected on draft night. Though he trains Montrose players in the school’s gym and travels to road games with them, he is not exclusive to Montrose. He trains players from top high schools in the Washington, D.C., area and has become a regular on the prep summer and all-star scenes, from Nike Skills Academies to the McDonald’s All-American and Jordan Brand games. Constantly expanding his network by working with elite athletes before they close off their inner circles, Stein has developed a pipeline as prospects grow wary of those entering their lives.

“It’s very smart planning,” says Adkins, now with DeMatha Catholic (Hyattsville, Md.).

During the weeks leading up to the predraft camp in Orlando this spring, Stein trained Kansas State’s Michael Beasley, a top prospect, North Carolina’s Tywon Lawson, who decided to withdraw from the draft following a DUI, and Cal’s DeVon Hardin. Knowing that the players are also doing 10-to-12 hours per week of hard running and conditioning with skills coaches, Stein focuses primarily on strength. Providing little rest and preparing his clients for the personal workouts with NBA teams, his workouts run about an hour long four times per week.

“I know what people have said about Michael [regarding maturity], but he’s just a 19-year-old who is one of the most competitive people I’ve been around,” says Stein, who first met Beasley through his AAU coach, Curtis Malone, when Beasley was a sophomore in high school. “He’s all business in the gym.”

Lawson, a blaze with a basketball in his hands, started working with Stein shortly after Durant introduced the two in 2003. Already speedy, he did not waste time on quickness during his four-week, predraft stint with Stein from the day UNC classes ended this spring until he left for the Orlando workouts.

“I’m strong,” says Lawson, a 5-foot-11, 175-pound burner. “What I needed was toning and stretching because I get stiff.”

Away from the camera-phone paparazzi, talk of character issues and predraft prognosticators, potential NBA players work out alongside current high school players with Stein at Rockville Fitness, where the prospects pay \$85-to-100 per session. Whether it is his manipulating sprint drills by having players chase tennis balls or doing push-ups on basketballs, the elite athletes with the heavy expectations say they enjoy the light, quick atmosphere that Stein creates on a rubberized, half-court surface. “You’d be amazed how many drills you can do with a tennis ball,” says Hardin, who was recommended Stein by his agent, Jim Tanner.

“Kevin Durant comes in and he’s just another guy from Montrose who works with Alan,” says Isaiah Armwood, a 6-foot-7, 178-pound rising senior at Montrose Christian whom Rivals.com ranks as the No. 23 recruit in the rising senior class.

The pool of basketball talent from Washington, D.C., and its outlying area is only shallow when compared to the depth of agents in the region. From super agent David Falk to Tanner, who works within Lon Babby's outfit, the number of agents looking for strength and conditioning coaches to stretch their clients' potential continues to grow. "I become a part of the agents' sell to players," Stein says.

On draft day, Stein will work the Steve Nash Skills Academy at Kean University across the Hudson River from the draft's location at Madison Square Garden, providing 15-minute warm-up sessions for the top 20 high school and college point guards. By evening he plans on attending the draft if his work is finished, or meet up with Beasley and others afterward if the camp runs late. Just as he sat in the audience last year when he watched Durant get selected, he will be a familiar face in the crowd to another top pick and several others.

"I walk, talk and eat basketball," Stein says. "I just like staying in the background at those events, though."