

## Romancing recruits a winding journey

### ECS's Jones leads local contingent

By Ron Higgins

Monday, February 4, 2008

As college football signing day 2008 dawns Wednesday morning, the national letter of intent, good for a full scholarship to the University of Alabama, will be in front of Evangelical Christian School offensive lineman Barrett Jones.

The best high school prospect in the state of Tennessee, with pen in hand, will be flanked by his parents, Rex and Leslie Jones. They should all be momentarily flooded with fast-forwarded memories of the chase for a college scholarship.

Probably through tears of relief and happiness, Leslie will recall Barrett's first football game, when he was a sixth-grader playing as a linebacker on the seventh-grade team.

"We got killed by Collierville, and I thought he'd be sad about losing, though he had a quarterback sack," Leslie said. "I asked him what he thought about the game and he said, 'Mom, I was born to play football!'"

And Barrett? Well, he'll remember going to Auburn for his first football camp in the summer before his junior year and shockingly being offered his first scholarship.

"When my Dad and Mom picked me up," Barrett said, "I told them, 'I can die a happy man today. I got a scholarship offer from an SEC school.' I never thought that would happen to me six months after my sophomore season. That's when I realized that God blessed me with talent, and I needed to work even harder."

There were many more offers to come. Rex Jones, a former basketball player at Alabama, invested a lot of time and money for two summers worth of family vacations that were unofficial college visits for Barrett.

Anyone who knows Barrett understands his work ethic in the weight room and the classroom (he has a 4.5 grade-point average). Barrett never hesitates to say how blessed he is to have had a supportive family and a well-organized, well-funded high school program.

But the road to a college scholarship offer is inexact. Some kids are less talented and

have to work harder to become prospects. It's also an undeniable fact that inner-city schools don't have the budgets, the financial supplements from booster clubs and often the parental support that county and private schools have to promote kids as prospects.

Yet on signing day, there will be plenty of area kids from both the county and inner city, stars like Kingsbury tight end Jamal Mosley and Whitehaven wide receiver Marcus Rucker, set to sign scholarships.

How did all these kids get to the biggest moment of their life to date? It certainly isn't by accident.

Starting the chase

It's easier for an athlete to get recruited these days because of evolving technology.

"Back in the day, in the '80s," said Pete Cordelli, a former college assistant at Notre Dame, Arkansas, Minnesota and Memphis, "the only way you could recruit was to work the phones, get in the car at 6:30 in the morning, hitting your first high school at 7 and going until that night at a basketball game or a wrestling match.

"Now, a coach still has to go see a guy in person. But initially on a prospect, a coach can get on the Internet, go to a high school Web site and see video clips of a kid's game.

"And companies like Nike now stage combines around the country where they test high school athletes in the same things done in the NFL combine and put those times and measures in a national database that coaches can access."

Last June in Olive Branch, where Nike staged a free combine, almost 220 high school athletes attended. Since most colleges now offer scholarships to high school prospects at the start of their junior seasons, recruiters are quick to look at the raw data from combines to assess possible prospects.

The next step in exposing a prospect is attending a college summer camp. The cost of such camps will vary between \$250 and \$745, depending on length of stay and whether a camper stays overnight or is a commuter. There also are one- and two-day mini camps for rising seniors for less than \$100. Whatever the cost, the exposure is invaluable.

That's why coaches at inner-city schools, like Kingsbury's Duron Sutton and Whitehaven's Rodney Saulsberry, spent their time and some of their money getting kids to camps. Fund-raisers also help pay for the trips.

"You want to see how your kids stack up against other kids, so it's important to get them to college camps," said Sutton, who hopes to take three to five players (including

hot-commodity running back Gabriel Hunter) this summer to camps at national champion LSU, Ole Miss and Tennessee.

Every summer, Saulsberry drives players in his SUV to such faraway locales as the U.S. Army combine camp in San Antonio (an 11-hour drive), as well as camps at Tennessee, Ole Miss, Georgia and the national 7-on-7 tournament in Hoover, Ala.

"We can't afford to take most of our kids to camps, so our plan is to take our best kids," Saulsberry said. "They shine the light on our entire program, because when college coaches see them, the coaches want to visit our campus. That's how we create traffic for our entire team to get exposure."

It certainly helped Rucker, who'll decide on Wednesday whether he'll sign with Ole Miss, Kentucky, Mississippi State, Indiana or Memphis.

"I went to the Ole Miss camp first, and that got me noticed," Rucker said.

If a player performs well at just one college camp, the word quickly spreads.

"If you go to camps and find one school that likes you, a lot of the other schools get jealous and the rest of them like you," Memphis University School coach Bobby Alston said. "But if one doesn't like you, nobody likes you. It's like waiting and hoping someone asks you to dance."

And ultimately, game film prepared and sent to colleges by high school coaches will convince a college recruiter to either offer a scholarship, or at the very least result in the recruiter personally scouting a game.

Kingsbury's Mosley, who also first attended the Ole Miss camp, and who has the Rebels as one of his finalists along with Kentucky and Oklahoma State, credits his coach's diligence in drawing recruiters.

"Coach Sutton sent out a lot of tapes," Mosley said. "He made sure schools knew about me."

It's hard out here for a parent

Recruiting is often harder on a parent than it is for their kid.

Parents have to walk the fine line of doing what it takes to give their kids the best chance of getting a scholarship, while not clashing with the high school coach.

For instance, parents who have the financial resources sometimes prefer to hire personal trainers for their kids' off-season work.

Whether it's using such training centers as D1 Sports Training or Velocity Sports

Performance, located a half-mile apart in Cordova, or a trainer with a word-of-mouth reputation like Jay Mathis, hiring a trainer can create a tug of war with a high school coach.

Mathis, 49, a teacher and cross-country coach of reigning Division 2-AA state champion St. Agnes, is a protégé of the late Dean Lotz, the most renowned personal trainer in Memphis. He has about 30 male and female clients (including Barrett Jones) in various sports, ranging in age from fifth graders to college athletes. He charges \$25 per session, and his emphasis is quickness and explosion, using quick-twitch training.

Because Mathis doesn't use a heavy dose of traditional weight training, his methods are frowned upon by many high school coaches.

"I try to stay under the radar, because a lot of high school football coaches think I'm a waste, but I get a lot of kids who come here secretly," Mathis said. "I look at myself as a troubleshooter. I see what the kids aren't getting in training, and try to fix that.

"I make it clear to the kids who come here and their parents that I train the kid to be a better athlete. I also tell a parent that the goal they should have is to get their kid to play high school sports. Anything after that is gravy."

Parents also worry if their child is enrolled in the proper high school program that will give him the best chance to earn a college scholarship.

For instance, the father of Christian Brothers running back Eric Watson Jr. recently raised eyebrows when his son transferred to Olive Branch. The elder Watson's explanation was simple. "When it comes down to your child's livelihood, you've got to make the best decision for your child," he said. "It's nothing personal."

Is that putting too much pressure on all parties involved?

"Football has been pretty good at Olive Branch for a long time," Olive Branch coach Scott Samsel said. "The only guarantee we give to every player coming into our program is we're going to develop them to their fullest potential. That's it".

Who are you?

One of the hardest things for parents to realize and often accept is whether their son is better suited for a lower level of play than Division 1-A.

"There are many levels of college football, and parents have to be realistic about at what level their son can get a scholarship and be able to compete," said Tom Luginbill, national recruiting director for Scouts Inc. "If you're a recruit who isn't of Division 1-A caliber and you're spending time and money chasing that, are you helping yourself? It's critical to look in the mirror and get that self-realization."

That's why even with someone as highly recruited as Barrett Jones, it took his parents awhile to grasp exactly the steps they were facing leading to Wednesday's signing day.

His mother, a Phi Mu back in her sorority days at the University of North Alabama, compared her son's recruiting process to sorority rush ("Coaches tell you what you want to hear," she said). Barrett's father, whose father had been the basketball coach and athletic director at North Alabama, didn't understand why his son was such a hot prospect until Alabama coach Nick Saban explained it in technical, yet simple, terms.

For Barrett, one chase is just ending with the scratch of a pen. Then another one begins.

"It will be a feeling of fulfillment," Barrett said of when he signs the letter of intent, "and it reflects the success of the whole Jones family, all my teammates and all my coaches who coached me throughout my career.

"But it also will be a sense of inspiration to get to work. Now that I've got the scholarship, what am I going to do with it? Once I sign, the goals change. I want to be a starter as soon as I can. I want to be an all-American. I want to be an academic all-American. I want to win a national championship."

-- Ron Higgins: 529-2525

Staff reporter Jason Smith contributed to this story.



© 2008 Scripps Newspaper Group — Online