

Testing the Waters: Smith gives inside glimpse



by **Jeff Goodman**

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Tyler Smith says he isn't feeling the pressure — yet.

But the Tennessee junior — one of 71 college underclassmen to test the NBA waters (it was 74, before three withdrew) — hasn't truly begun the process yet.

"This has been a dream of mine," Smith said.

But a year ago, the athletic 6-foot-7 forward decided against going through the process, feeling he wasn't quite ready after just one season at Tennessee following a transfer from Iowa.

"Last year was different," he said. "It was my first year being at Tennessee, and if I would have left, it would have been my fifth move in five years. I wanted to be at home for at least another year."

Smith, who is now only a little more than a half an hour from his hometown of Pulaski, Tenn., considers being able to test without commitment a bonus for himself — and more important, for his 2-year-old son, Amare.

And this year, Smith feels ready — and like he has nothing to lose.

"I'm a junior," he said. "I'll have to go through (the draft process) again (if I decide to go back to college), and it's something I can learn from. ... If I'm not in the right place, I'll go back to school — so for me, it's a win-win."

"A lot of people are saying it's not good for me to come out early and even go through the process," Smith said. "But they don't know my situation. I'm 22

and my son's going to be 3 in June. I've got to take care of my family. My grandma needs financial help — and if I can take care of them, that's what I'm going to do. That's my top priority."

Smith's father, Billy, died of cancer less than two years ago.

"Right now, I'm living off a scholarship check of \$800 a month," he added. "If I can graduate to making anywhere close to a million dollars a year, I've got to take (the chance)."



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Tyler Smith has a busy schedule ahead as he hopes to realize his NBA dream.

(Chris Graythen / Getty Images)

That's why Smith has made it clear that if he feels like he'd be taken in the first round, he'll turn the page on his college career.

"If I can get a guarantee," Smith says.

However, guarantees are difficult to come by in the NBA Draft. Sure, there's a pretty sure bet that Blake Griffin and Hasheem Thabeet will get them, but for most of the players outside the lottery, there's no such thing as a sure thing.

And that's what makes the process so difficult.

Smith said he's relying on Tennessee coach Bruce Pearl for information, and also to set up his workout schedule with NBA teams.

"I'm comfortable listening to him," Smith said.

Since school ended, Smith has been working out in Huntsville, Ala., with Ronnie Stapler, a former Alabama high school coach who runs the Alabama Basketball Academy and has a long-standing relationship with Smith.

However, Smith will begin his draft test in earnest when he takes to the road Sunday, departing for San Antonio and his first workout with the Spurs.

Here's a peek at Smith's tentative itinerary for the upcoming days:

Sat., May 16 — leaves for San Antonio
 Sun, May 17 — Spurs workout; flight to Cleveland at night
 Mon., May 18 — Cavs workout
 Tues., May 19 — Returns to Huntsville
 Thurs., May 21 — Flight to Washington, D.C.
 Fri., May 22 — Wizards workout
 Sat., May 23 — Returns to Huntsville
 Sun., May 24 — Flight to Chicago
 Mon, May 25 — Bulls workout

After the initial travel spree, Smith will remain in Chicago for NBA's pre-draft camp from May 27-31 before taking to the road again. He'll leave for a workout in Minnesota now set for June 3, which also will include several other NBA teams, a cost-cutting measure on their part. Sacramento, Boston, Detroit

and the Lakers all have expressed interest in bringing Smith in for a workout prior to June 15.

"I was surprised at how quickly you fly from city to city," Smith said. "You can work out one day with one team and then go right to another team. I know it's going to be tiring, but I'm looking forward to it."

Smith said he opted to work out down in Huntsville when not with the teams so he could be close to his son, and also so he could focus on his individual improvement prior to the NBA workouts.

"It's easier to focus, and it's special for me to be so close to my son," he said. "Rather than going somewhere that there's a ton of other players, I can just work by myself down here and get more reps."

Smith wakes up in the morning, has breakfast and then heads over to the D-1 complex, where he takes some shots and works out hard for about 90 minutes.

After lunch, he returns for agility work — and after an afternoon nap, he'll head back to the gym to work on his perimeter shot at about 7 p.m.

It's a routine that won't continue for much longer, with Smith set to take to the road for what could be the most critical month of his life.

"If I don't feel like I'm in the right place, I'll go back to school and try to win a national championship," Smith said. "But right now I'm focused on trying to get to the NBA — for myself and for my family."

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