



A Big-time Gamble

As blue-chip recruits across the country signed with schools last week, other promising players like point guard **Oscar Bellfield** waited to make their commitments—determined to prove how good they really are

BY GEORGE DOHRMANN

Photograph by Nicholas Koza/Maxpreps.com

OSCAR BELLFIELD was sitting on the wooden bleachers at the Westchester (Calif.) Recreation Center on a recent Sunday watching his younger sister play an exhibition basketball game when a teenage girl spotted him and hurried over. Her silver filigreed earrings rocked as she sat down one bench beneath him.

“So, what school are you looking at?” she asked.

“Different ones,” he said.

“I heard you were up visiting [the University of] San Francisco?”

“Yeah.”

“You gonna go there?”

Bellfield sighed softly. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“No.”

Unhappy with the answer, the girl offered a half-hearted “See ya” and bolted down the gym toward someone else. Bellfield had engaged in two similar conversations in the last hour—in each case sensing that his questioner was really asking, *Why don’t you know?*—and seemed close to his breaking point. “It’s not easy to

AIMING HIGH Bellfield, who averaged 14.3 points for Westchester last season, dreams of playing for a top-level Pac-10 school.

explain what I am doing,” he said later.

In simple terms, what Bellfield is doing is gambling with his future. Last week, during the eight-day window for senior basketball players to sign letters of intent, Bellfield did not commit to a college. It was not because he lacked the talent or the grades (he has a 3.2 GPA and a qualifying SAT score). Nor did he lack for suitors; San Diego State, Santa Clara, San Francisco and Washington State all offered him a scholarship. Bellfield didn’t sign because he has always dreamed of playing for a prominent Pac-10 program. There is a chance that between now and next summer he won’t receive an offer from a program fitting that description, and also a chance that the four schools that currently want him will give their scholarships

to someone else. But the 6’ 2” Bellfield, a starter at Westchester

High (26–7 last season), was once offered a scholarship by Washington and just last spring was being recruited by Oregon and Kansas. He believes he can get at least one of those schools interested again. “It’s kind of like I am betting on myself,” he says. “Do I really believe in my talent?”

Bellfield is one of an untold number of good players across the U.S. who aren’t ready to settle. The risks are real: With schools encouraging kids to verbally commit earlier and earlier, players who haven’t signed with a school by November of their senior year seem like spoiled fruit; they are assumed to have flaws. “I know some people would say, ‘You got a scholarship offer, you take it,’” says Lawanda Bellfield, Oscar’s mother. “But Oscar, like a lot of boys, has a dream, and I wouldn’t ever want him to give up on his dreams.”

A CONFLUENCE OF factors put Bellfield in this position. Following his freshman year at Taft (Woodland Hills, Calif.), he received his first scholarship offer, from Washington. But Oscar and Lawanda felt (and rightfully

MORE
Basketball Jones
 Seasonlong high school coverage, including weekly Top 25, player rankings from Tackle and profiles from Rise.
ONLY AT SI.COM

so) that a player who gets an offer from a Pac-10 school before his sophomore year is like a stock on the rise. "We thought if he committed then, it might scare away other schools," Lawanda says.

After his sophomore year, Bellfield also received offers from Washington State and UNLV. He was getting letters and the occasional phone call from coaches at a dozen other major schools, despite not even being the most heralded guard on his high school team. He shared the backcourt with Larry Drew Jr., a top 50 guard. For his junior year, Bellfield transferred to Westchester and stepped out from under Drew's shadow. He was named second team Los Angeles

all-city and led Westchester to the Southern California Division I regional final, averaging 14.3 points and 5.6 assists a game.

Last February the coaches at Washington pressed him harder to commit, as did the coaches at UNLV. He resisted, he says, because "I didn't want to commit just to commit. I didn't know where I wanted to go. Looking back, maybe I should have committed and then just kept my options open."

In the spring Bellfield played for EBO/2K Sports, a powerhouse AAU team based in Las Vegas that counts Washington Wizards guard DeShawn Stevenson and Utah Jazz forward Carlos Boozer among its alumni. During tournaments in Houston

and Las Vegas, he starred. USC, Oregon, Utah, Boston College, Gonzaga and Kansas began calling regularly. They weren't offering scholarships but the message was clear: If Bellfield played well through the summer, the offers would pour in. "It seemed like everything was going to work out perfectly," says Lawanda, a nurse case manager.

Two months later, however, Bellfield pulled his right groin. He thought about skipping some tournaments, "but if you don't play, colleges will say you're not tough," Bellfield says. The injury was slow to heal, and he struggled the entire summer. The low point came in late July at the Adidas Super 64 in Las Vegas. "I had lost

SI's Top 10

ONLY AT SI.COM
For the complete Top 25
go to SI.com/highschool.

1. DUNCANVILLE (Texas) 39-0

The Panthers are primed for a second straight Class 5A championship with the return of junior forwards Shawn Williams and Roger Franklin. Last season, Williams led the team with 14.5 points per game and Franklin averaged a team-high seven rebounds. A Dec. 19 showdown against No. 3 Oak Hill at Southern Methodist University will be a big test.

2. ST. PATRICK (Elizabeth, N.J.) 30-2

Dexter Strickland, Scout.com's top junior point guard, will be the go-to guy for the Celtics, but he will not be alone. Kansas-bound power forward Quintrell Thomas (7.5 rebounds per game) and promising freshman forward Mike Gilchrist will need to step up for the Celtics to win the New Jersey Tournament of Champions for the third straight year.

3. OAK HILL (Mouth of Wilson, Va.) 40-1

Explosive Arizona-bound point guard Brandon Jennings, who had 15.2 points and a team-high 11.2 assists per game last season, will carry the scoring load along with Artesia (Lakewood, Calif.) transfer and USC-bound guard Malik Story (14.7 points per game).

4. MONTVERDE (Fla.) 30-0

Last season Texas A&M signee Dashan Harris averaged 12.6 points and set the school assists record (300). He will lead an international team, featuring Cameroon-born forward Steve Tchiengang (Vanderbilt) and Australian senior forward Femi Akinpetide.

5. ST. ANTHONY (Jersey City) 28-1

Five Division I senior guards—Rutgers-bound Mike Rosario, Pitt signee Travon Woodall, Marquette-bound Tyshawn Taylor and Fordham recruits Jio Fontan and Alberto Estwick—will lead the Friars. The athletic 6' 5", 170-pound junior forward Dominic Cheek will add speed to the up-tempo offense.

6. ST. EDWARD (Lakewood, Ohio) 25-1

All five starters return from a team that didn't lose last season until the state semifinal against Moeller (Cincinnati). The Eagles' frontcourt features two Big Ten-bound bruisers, 6' 8", 220-pound Michigan State recruit Delvon Roe (22.5 points, 11.5 rebounds per game) and 6' 8", 240-pound Indiana signee Tom Pritchard (14 points, 7 rebounds).

7. ST. BENEDICT'S (Newark) 24-1

Big man and Louisville signee Samardo Samuels (6' 8", 240), who averaged 19.7 points and 10.3 rebounds last season, joins junior forward Gregory Echenique (9.8 rebounds per game) to form the nation's top frontcourt. The Gray Bees also add highly anticipated Canadian sophomore transfer, forward Tristan Thompson.

8. MATER DEI (Santa Ana, Calif.) 33-4

Twin towers David and Travis Wear, both 6' 10½" juniors, will be the primary targets for 6' 1", 180-pound Gary Franklin, one of *Hoop Scoop's* top five sophomores. Franklin needs to mature quickly for a repeat run at Division II state and Trinity League titles.

9. NORCROSS (Ga.) 29-3

The Blue Devils are favored to win a third straight Class 5A title thanks to the athletic senior forward Al-Farouq Aminu (Wake Forest), who averaged 13.7 points, 9.5 rebounds and two blocked shots a game, and point guard Taariq Muhammad (7 assists per game).

10. RICE (New York, N.Y.) 27-4

The New York City Catholic League powerhouse will rely on a pass-happy four-guard lineup and will feature UConn-bound point guard Kemba Walker (9 assists per game), senior sharpshooter Chris Fouch (16 points per game), junior swingman Durand Scott (13 points per game) and 6' 8" sophomore Kadeem Jack. —Kevin Armstrong



SHAWN WILLIAMS

Recruiting Notebook

all my lateral quickness and couldn't jump," he says. "It hurt so much I could only play a minute or two at a time."

After that tournament, as if on cue, every school that was enamored of him in the spring suddenly lost interest. Moreover, Washington and UNLV, schools that had been pushing him to orally commit, stopped recruiting him.

Coaches rarely tell a player why they've lost interest (and it is against NCAA rules for them to comment on Bellfield for this story). Bellfield, who has since recovered from the groin pull, could only assume that they didn't know about his injury. "They had to be thinking that I was lazy, that I wasn't playing to my full potential," he said.

Bellfield watched as two other top point guard prospects from Southern California, his former teammate Drew and Brandon Jennings, signed with North Carolina and Arizona, respectively. "You read or hear about other kids committing or signing and you think, Wait, but that was my spot."

DARREN MATSUBARA, Bellfield's AAU coach who is universally known as "Mats," has slicked-back Pat Riley hair and is fond of black sweatsuits. He is perpetually pulling a tin of Altoids out of his pockets. It is not a question of how many mints he goes through in a day but how many tins.

In September, Bellfield called Matsubara in a panic. Matsubara then called coaches at a few of the schools that had recruited Bellfield. "They didn't know he was injured," Matsubara says. "I don't know how they didn't see it, but they didn't."

Matsubara, 41, is known for not letting his players commit early. In a way, he is the Scott Boras of recruiting, always advising his players to let the market do its work. "There are 325 Division I basketball teams," Matsubara says. "That's a lot of options for a kid with talent." He knows that in the time between November of a player's senior year and the following summer, much can change. College players leave early for the NBA, transfer to another school, get kicked out, become academically ineligible or suffer a serious injury.

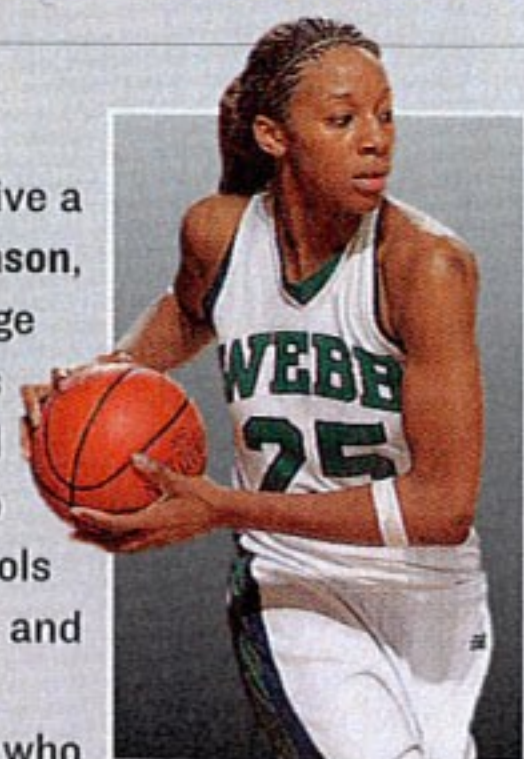
In discussions with Bellfield and his mother, Matsubara encouraged them to not accept offers from San Diego State, Santa Clara or USF, all of whom moved in after the bigger schools lost interest, or from Washington State. To support this

GLORY DAYS FOR THE VOLS

Each senior at the Webb School (Knoxville) is required to give a chapel talk about a significant life experience, and **Glory Johnson**, the reigning Gatorade state player of the year, chose her college recruitment. On Nov. 5 she dressed nine friends in T-shirts of the women's basketball powerhouses she had considered and had them stand behind her. Johnson, a 6' 3" forward who hadn't publicly revealed her college choice, eliminated schools one by one, dismissing the likes of UConn, North Carolina and UCLA until only her friend in Tennessee orange was left.

The element of surprise was lost on anyone in the audience who turned around: Sitting near the back of the chapel was Tennessee coach Pat Summitt. For the second straight year, Summitt hauled in the top recruiting class, signing six players, including five ranked in hoopgurlz.com's top 20. The Vols saved the best for last in Johnson, whom they've watched since she was in middle school. Last season she averaged 16.3 points and 9.0 rebounds per game in leading Webb to a 29-4 record and the Tennessee Division II title, the first in school history. Johnson has played all five positions for the Spartans. "She's a tremendous athlete," says Webb coach Shelley Collier. "She's quick off the dribble and a state champion in the long jump and 200 meters."

And so Summitt sat in the Webb chapel, her eyes having seen the Glory. —Joe Lemire



WHO'LL MEASURE UP?

College recruiting may be adding a new tool. A test called SPARQ (Speed, Power, Agility, Reaction and Quickness), conducted by a Nike-affiliated company of the same name, measures athleticism in sport-specific skills. The SPARQ test for basketball consists of a vertical jump, 20-yard dash, 30-second endurance jump, power ball throw and agility cone drill. The testing, conducted by a traveling group of certified trainers, is free, but the company charges for gear to improve players' SPARQ scores. College coaches can obtain results on the official website.

Last month SPARQ tested seven of Rivals.com's dozen best basketball recruits. **Al-Farouq Aminu**, a 6' 8" forward at Norcross (Ga.) and the 11th-ranked senior, had the highest score with 89.5; No. 1 recruit **Greg Monroe** (right), a 6' 10" forward at Helen Cox (Harvey, La.), was third with an 83.14.

The data may prove more useful in evaluating lower-tier prospects, who don't receive the same exposure top recruits do in AAU tournaments. SPARQ is so new that at least three SEC coaching staffs admitted never having heard of it, and other top schools are tentative about the data. "The rules allow us a lot of opportunities to see kids with our own eyes rather than just reading something on paper," says Arizona assistant Josh Pastner.

Of course, the test can only predict so much: Golden State rookie Brandon Wright has the alltime record of 91.06, while the Sonics' Kevin Durant scored a meager 68.80. —J.L.



COMMITMENT ISSUES

Two of the nation's top recruits, seniors **Tyreke Evans** (right) and **John Riek**, have yet to choose a school. Evans, a point guard at American Christian (Aston, Pa.) who averaged 25.4 points last season, is rated the No. 6 prospect by Rivals.com; he's considering Louisville, Memphis and Texas. For Riek, a 7' 2" center at The Winchendon (Mass.) School, the options are twofold. The No. 5 prospect immigrated to the U.S. from Sudan last January after graduating from high school in Ethiopia. He has offers from Duke, Georgetown, Florida and UConn, but Riek, who turned 18 on Nov. 1, is also old enough to be eligible for next June's NBA draft. —K.A.



2007 // HIGH SCHOOL BASKETBALL PREVIEW

course of action, Matsubara detailed two cases in which players had benefited from waiting.

• Last fall, going into his senior year, 6' 5" shooting guard Cory Higgins from Danville, Calif., had offers from only small programs on the West Coast. "There was some thinking that Cory wasn't an elite athlete, so we put him on my team for two [AAU] tournaments in the spring and gave him a platform to show his athleticism," Matsubara says. "We were throwing him lobs, all of that." After the second tournament, Higgins signed with Colorado.

• Also last year, Darshawn McClellan, a 6' 7" forward from Fresno, Calif., landed a scholarship from Vanderbilt after having offers from only Pacific, Cal-Poly and Fresno State in November. Vanderbilt was initially noncommittal, but that changed when Matsubara added McClellan to his roster for a tournament last spring. It was a not-so-subtle way of forcing the school into a decision. "College coaches know that a senior playing in the spring is in shape and going up against kids younger than him," Matsubara says. "That kid is going to look good, and history has shown you can use that as lever-

age. It may be the only time in recruiting that the kid has the upper hand."

One of Matsubara's favorite ploys could prove useful for Bellfield. He often hears that a player is thinking about transferring before the player's college coach knows it. Matsubara calls the coach and suggests to him a player like Bellfield. The coach might say, "I don't have a spot for him," but a few weeks later when his player transfers, he suddenly does. "And I am right there with a replacement," he says.



LEAN ON ME Lawanda stands by Oscar's decision.

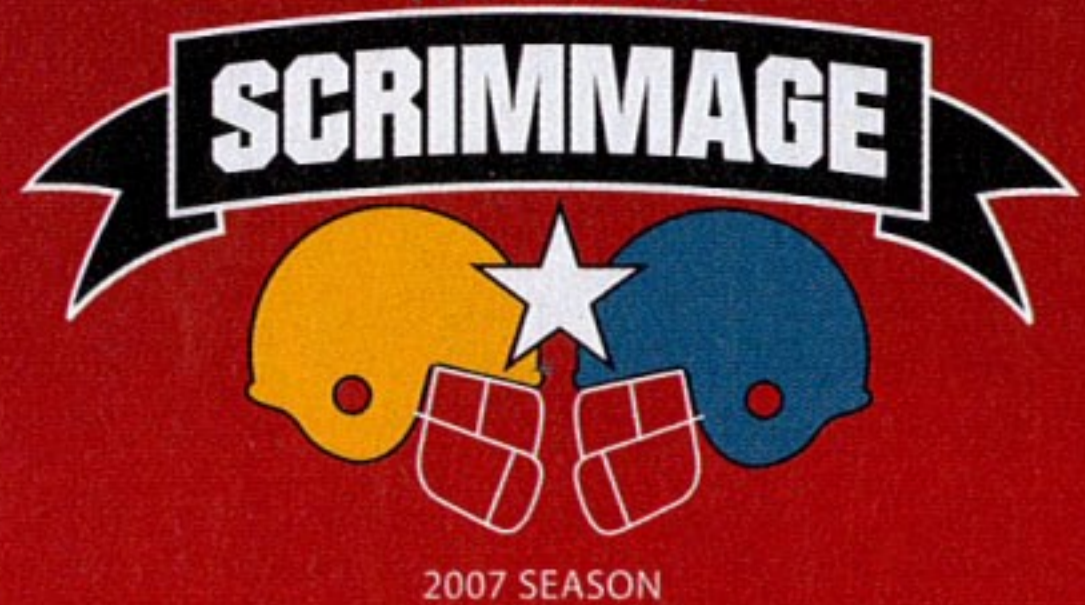
Bellfield likely needs a player to transfer out or to make an early defection to the NBA if he is to land at one of the two schools he most wants to attend—Oregon and USC. Trojans coaches have told him as much, though he wonders if they are saying the same to other recruits. In the end he knows he can trust only his talent and Matsubara. "I believe I am a Pac-10 player," he says. Later, he adds, "And Mats can sell anything."

One consolation for Bellfield as he sweats out his senior season is that at least one top player and his mother learned from his travails. Justin Hawkins, a guard who played with Bellfield at Taft, orally committed to UNLV in August, a month before his junior year. At the time, several larger programs, including Tennessee, had begun to show interest, and he was tempted to wait and see which others called.

"We were influenced by what Oscar went through," says Carmen Hawkins, Justin's mother. "If something happens and we need to look around at other schools, we still can. But we know for sure that Justin has a school lined up that he likes."

Bellfield is hoping, and betting, that in a few months he will have the same. □

TOYOTA PRESENTS
THE LINE OF



2007 SEASON

**WANNA TALK FOOTBALL?
GET A HAIRCUT.**

**SUMMERVILLE
VS.
BEAUFORT**

In Summerville, S.C., high school football—specifically, the Summerville Green Wave—is always a hot topic. Simmons Barber Shop serves as the de facto town meeting hall. Two brothers run the shop, a folksy, old-school spot where sports are discussed all day long. Summerville coach John McKissick gets his hair cut there, as do many of his current and former players (not to mention many Summerville fans). On the day after a game, you'll typically find Green Wave alumni dissecting the previous night's contest and quizzing the current players even more heatedly than a pack of newspaper reporters. If the 2007 players have done well, they'll hear praise from former players who date back to the mid-1950s, when McKissick won his first of 10 state titles. If the current crop had a rough game the night before... well, they'll hear about that too.

Tune in to the NBC Sunday Night Football Toyota Halftime Show and check out The Line of Scrimmage.



WHERE TO NEXT?

**BATESVILLE, MISSISSIPPI
SOUTH PANOLA H.S. VS. TUPELO H.S.**

To learn more go to:
toyota.com/lineofscrimmage



TUNDRA