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Jennings considering playing in Europe instead of college

By Andy Katz
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Brandon Jennings, who signed a letter of intent to play at Arizona, is looking at the unprecedented option of playing overseas next season to get ready for the 2009 NBA draft if he's not eligible to play for the Wildcats next season.

Jennings told ESPN.com that he is exploring the possibility of a professional basketball career. Jennings' mother, Alice Knox, has retained an attorney, Jeffrey Valle, to help look into the possibility that Jennings could play professionally in Europe while he waits to become eligible for the 2009 NBA draft.

Jennings, who is from the Los Angeles area but played the last two seasons at Oak Hill Academy (Va.), turns 19 on Sept. 23 and would need to spend one year out of high school and be 19 to be eligible for the 2009 draft.

The 6-2 Jennings is rated as the top point guard in the class of 2008 by ESPN.com. Jennings scored 12 points, had nine assists and six turnovers in the McDonald's All-American game in Milwaukee March 26.

"It's something I'm considering now," Jennings said. "I still want to go to Arizona but if things don't go right, I'm considering going overseas."

Jennings said he will get his standardized test results back next Thursday. This is the third time he has taken a standardized test. Jennings said he was red-flagged for a jump in his score from the first to the second test. He said he didn't know his scores.

"The first time I took it I didn't try, the second time I did so I had to take it a third time," Jennings said.

Arizona assistant coach Mike Dunlap said Friday that the staff was well aware that Jennings was looking into playing overseas.

"He's creating an option if things fall apart," Dunlap said. "I get that."

But Jennings is slated to be in Tucson on Monday to start summer school. He has been admitted to the institution. It's unclear what kind of affect having him on campus would have on Jennings' decision -- assuming he shows up.

Jennings has been staying with New Jersey Nets point guard Marcus Williams while playing in a summer league in the area in the tri-state area. He is close friends with Williams' father, Kelly, who is from Los Angeles as well.

Jennings said the professional players he has played with both in the New York-New Jersey area and back in Southern California told him he could compete with players overseas.

"Mentally I know I can play in the NBA, but physically is where it would hit me," Jennings said.

Jennings and his mother said that Jennings probably would have declared for the NBA draft had the new rule not been put in place two seasons ago (requiring a player to be one year out of school and at least 19 in the calendar year of the draft).

Jennings originally committed to USC before changing his commitment to Arizona. He said that had coach Lute Olson not returned from a year-long absence, then he wouldn't even have considered playing for the Wildcats.

Jennings said that with rising junior forward Chase Budinger deciding to withdraw from the NBA draft and return to school, the Wildcats would have a chance to be an elite team next season.

Jennings would be the lead guard next to experienced players Nic Wise, Chase Budinger and Jordan Hill in the post, making Arizona a potential top 25 team.

"Either [option] is good for me," Jennings said. "I just think I would develop more if I went overseas and I would have played pro ball for a year. But if I went to Arizona we would have a good team because Chase is coming back."

Valle said that the family is looking at all of the pros and cons and is trying to get a pulse on the interest from an international team. Valle said Jennings doesn't have an agent.

"It's an alternative approach," said Valle, a L.A.-based family attorney. "It makes sense. We're trying to get the eligibility issues sorted out. The main thing is that he's considering doing something different."

Jennings and Knox both cited renowned grassroots basketball creator Sonny Vaccaro's insistence that going overseas should be a viable option to combat the new draft rule for high school seniors talented enough to play in the NBA but prevented to do so for at least a year.

Reached Friday, Vaccaro said he hasn't advised Jennings. But when told Jennings was considering the option, he said, "It makes sense. It's one of the smartest things I've heard. It's a viable thing. I have personally spoken to teams internationally in Europe, Asia and Africa who are interested in this [taking high school graduates]."

Vaccaro said that high school graduates weren't ready to make the jump overseas the past two classes (2006 and 2007 high school seniors) because the NBA draft rule was so new. But now he said they are catching up and the "kids know it's a business. They see this as an option to work, a viable option."

But making this happen for Jennings is still a tough chore. Multiple NBA executives told ESPN.com Friday that in order for a high school senior to get a true picture of which teams were interested, then he would have to sign with an agent who is connected with overseas teams.

The NBA executives said that teams in Europe aren't designed to just sign up an 18-year-old American. They have junior programs where younger players go through a system to get to the primary club team. But if an agent were working for Jennings, then they might be able to secure a deal, although playing time might be an issue.

The other option for Jennings if he's ineligible for Arizona is to go to the NBA D-League. He would be eligible because he's a high school graduate, but he wouldn't be able to get called up to an NBA roster.

He would be able to play in the D-League and then go through the 2009 NBA draft. Former Iowa State guard Mike Taylor took that route after he was dismissed from school. He is eligible for the draft next week.

The problem with Jennings playing in the D-League, according to a number of NBA sources, is that he would be a potential target for players who would look at embarrassing Jennings as a way to increase their stock. The D-League is filled with players trying to make a living, and one source said it could get rough for Jennings.

Knox reiterated that her son has no issue traveling the globe. She said that she has consulted with a number of former coaches for Jennings and the move was endorsed.

"Brandon mentioned players like Tony Parker and Jose Calderon, point guards he admires who developed their game overseas and had no college," Knox said. "Brandon's main goal is that he wants to play professional basketball to take care of his family."

"The reason why I would consider going overseas is to play pro ball for year and develop," Jennings said. "I just want to be ready next year [for the draft] and come out and show I don't have any weaknesses."

Jennings said that if he were eligible at Arizona he would probably play only one season -- a season that the Wildcats were counting on, with Jennings to help offset the loss of freshman Jerryd Bayless.

If Jennings does choose Europe, then he would be a trend-setter, although it's too early to say if he would have any followers.

"And I hope to know what I'm doing by July," Jennings said. "I want to get this story out, get some feedback and know what's out there for me before I make my decision."

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