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Ailene Voisin: Country Day basketball star stays grounded

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Robbie Lemons is not the perfect kid, OK? Like most 17-year-olds, the nation's leading prep basketball scorer and Sacramento Country Day School standout has issues.

Sometimes he forgets to make his bed. He remembers getting a B in elementary school once, tarnishing a straight-A academic history. He agrees to a trim, he says, only when his father threatens to "tie ribbons" in his spiked hair.

"Robbie is the type of kid who can get 100 on a test, and he'll do the extra credit anyway," his mother, neurosurgeon Dr. Laura Anderson, said with a chuckle. "He overdoes everything."

Other than that, no complaints. Lemons, who entered the weekend averaging 36.9 points, 11.2 rebounds, 6.1 steals and 5.4 assists in the small-schools division, is an only child who appreciates his many gifts and uses them to full advantage.

Start with the body. At 6-foot-4 and 190 pounds, the senior guard has thick calves, feet that squeeze into size 16 sneakers and a sturdy, physically mature frame developed from years of rigorous conditioning and shooting drills.

Then there's the school, a prestigious and pricey 11-acre campus tucked into a residential neighborhood near the Pavilions shopping center. Lemons, whose father, Van Lemons, is also a neurosurgeon, has been a popular figure on campus since kindergarten, and so fearful of appearing pretentious that he parks the family Mercedes near the end of the lot.

"He doesn't want to be perceived as the privileged kid," his mother added, "which is interesting, because he goes to a school where everybody is privileged."

And then, of course, there is the basketball, the vehicle Lemons prizes most and never leaves behind. His parents recall an afternoon spent cruising Venice in a gondola, with their son clutching his ball, insistent on finding a court to launch his 500 daily practice shots.

If overseas travel is an attempt to provide balance in his life – and Lemons' summer Amateur Athletic Union experiences are worked around vacations, not the other way around – the ability to remain grounded is aided by the nurturing guidance of Cavaliers coach Dave Ancrum.

Ancrum is everything Lemons is not. Fast-talking. African American. The product of a gritty Brooklyn neighborhood. A veteran of minor league and European basketball, his portfolio includes experiences playing for Phil Jackson in the Continental Basketball Association, for Iraklios in Peja Stojakovic's adopted hometown in northern Greece, and one season with Omri Casspi's former Israeli team, Maccabi Tel Aviv.

"I've seen basketball in a lot of places," Ancrum said, "and I believe Robbie can play at any level. He's strong. He has skills. The only question is his athleticism. But, believe me, if there's a way, he'll figure it out. He's just an incredible kid who works hard – sometimes too hard – for everything he gets."

Lemons' on-court style is one of constant movement, versatility and aggression. He can play all five positions, and while he is listed as a point guard and throws a mean bounce pass, he has a Tyreke Evans mentality: He looks first to score.

In Friday's losing effort against Bradshaw Christian, the Cavaliers' standout contributed 32 of his team's 63 points on a variety of deep jumpers, runners and layups with either hand. Though not completely ambidextrous, Lemons, like many right-handers, holds the knife in his right hand and fork in his left, but then crosses up – he eats with the left hand. "It's just more efficient," he explained, offering a clue to his mental makeup.

Lemons is warm, friendly and humble. His plan is to be a basketball walk-on at Stanford next season in hopes of earning an athletic scholarship. Aware that his spirited, undersized teammates won't be following in his footsteps, he can be seen encouraging them with quiet asides or pats on the back.

Ancrum, similarly recognizing his roster limitations, tapers his coaching accordingly. He barks out commands in a booming voice that is demanding but not unreasonable. Just for fun, he allows his players to name the offensive sets now known as "Kings, Omri, IHOP, Tupac."

Who knows? Maybe the sets one day will include "Lemons" or "Black Robbie," Ancrum's nickname for his star.

"I dream of playing in the NBA," Lemons admitted.

If that career fails to materialize, he says, he will become the third surgeon in the family. The future pre-med major holds up his massive right hand and laughs. He can palm a ball, but grip a medical instrument just as easily.

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