

Abdul-Rauf finds his peace

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the worlds of modern pop sports culture and his religion.

Last summer, he was the keynote speaker at an Islamic conference of 700 worshipers in Orange County, Calif.

The assistance he provided California freshman star Shareef Abdur-Rahim prompted an NCAA review, which turned up nothing.

"It's a Muslim's duty to help another Muslim," Abdul-Rauf said.

But he has paid a price for his otherworldly interests.

His marriage to his college sweetheart fell apart and relationships with two pro coaches soured.

Abdul-Rauf candidly admits

that more than once during his tenure with the Nuggets he has wished he were elsewhere.

He claims no longer to love basketball, saying his abilities are gifts from Allah and exploiting them is a celebration of Him.

Islam came into his life at the end of his freshman year of college in 1989 when he picked up a copy of "The Autobiography of Malcolm X."

"I was searching," Abdul-Rauf said. "I was pretending to be a Christian, but I really didn't follow. I couldn't really feel it. It made me so false and hypocritical."

"After reading that book, I wanted to read more. I wasn't much of a reader. That made me want to read."

He finally accepted Islam in August of 1991.

This year, things appear to be coming together for him. He and his coach see eye to eye and his basketball is producing career-best numbers.

In addition, he is considering an Islamic marriage with a Bulgarian woman who could end up being a suitable partner.

Now, when he hits a shot at McNichols Sports Arena, a tape is played that says, "Rauf, there it is," a takeoff of a popular song.

"When they do that, they're giving praise to God," he said.

"Abdul means 'servant of.' Rauf means 'the most merciful, most kind.' Abdul-Rauf is me. Rauf is Him."

Giants making splash with offseason deals

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in international play and was the ace of the Cuban team that won the gold medal at the 1992 Barcelona Olympics.

"This is where I've come to realize my dream and to represent all the Latin Americans in the city of San Francisco," Fernandez said through a translator. "I'm going to make a name for a Cuban who left his country with a lot of determination to triumph."

In signing Fernandez, Magowan cited the Giants' history of Latin American stars — including Juan Marichal, the Alou brothers and Orlando Cepeda.

The 6-foot-2, 190-pound Fernandez, a starting pitcher who will wear No. 46 for the Giants, got a \$1.3 million signing bonus and a three-year contract that guarantees an additional \$1.9 million. He could make \$700,000 more in

incentives based on appearances. The Giants will have the option of a fourth year for \$1.4 million or a \$400,000 buy-out.

He defected last July in Millington, Tenn., during a tour by the Cuban national team. He spent this winter in the Dominican Republic, where he was 4-3 with a 2.30 ERA in 11 games for the Licey Tigers.

Fernandez and fellow Cuban right-hander Livan Hernandez toured the United States last month, listening to bids from several major league clubs. Hernandez, 20, who defected in Mexico last September, signed a four-year contract with the Florida Marlins last weekend.

Brian Sabean, the Giants' vice president in charge of player personnel, watched Fernandez pitch several times in the Dominican Republic and

led San Francisco's negotiating team.

"He's the best amateur pitcher I've ever seen. His assortment of pitches is really that of an experienced major leaguer," said Sabean, who clocked Fernandez's fastball at 90-92 mph. "He has velocity, he has movement, he has location. He's the kind of kid that understands game situations."

Fernandez left his wife and daughter in Cuba when he defected last summer. He has spoken with his family on the phone since defecting, even hearing some of his 17-month-old daughter's first words.

But he realizes it may be a long time until he sees them again, or gets to watch his daughter grow up.

"I have to console myself with at least the fact that I can talk to her on the phone," he said.

NBA rookie's advice to high school pal: Don't be like me

By Mario Fox
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

CHICAGO — Like every basketball player, Ronnie Fields wants to be like Mike. Fields, who some compare to Michael Jordan, also may end up like his buddy Kevin.

That's Kevin Garnett, his former teammate and Minnesota Timberwolves rookie who went straight to the NBA from high school.

Fields is considering a similar move. But Garnett had some sage advice for his friend during a recent chat.

"Kevin told me not to go the route he went. He told me, 'You can always go to the NBA. Right now, if you can go to college, go to college,'" said Fields before a practice last week.

Garnett and Fields led Farragut High School to its first city championship in 1995.

Faced with poor grades and low college entrance test scores, the 6-foot-11-inch Garnett went pro. He was picked fifth in the June draft — the first high school-to-the-NBA player in 20 years — and signed a three-year, \$5.6 million contract with the Timberwolves.

Fields, 18, now finds himself in the same boat.

Considered one of the five best high school players in the nation, the 6-3 Fields would like to attend DePaul University only six miles from his West Side home. But he failed to qualify on his first college entrance test and plans to take it again next month.

If the shooting guard-small forward can't make it to college, he thinks he can play in the NBA now. He held his own this past summer on a league team that included Chicago Bulls players Ron Harper and Randy Brown.

Garnett feels the loneliness of being a 19-year-old in the pros.

"There's nothing easy about the NBA. If I could've gone to college, I would have, in a



heartbeat," he said in a USA Today interview last month.

Fields gets the message.

"My main focus right now is to go to college, getting that test out of the way," he said.

Marty Blake, director of scouting for the NBA, has more advice for Fields.

"Go to junior college if you have to, but stay in school," Blake said in a phone interview.

Fields could go to a junior college without passing NCAA requirements for grades and test results.

Blake said bluntly that Fields is not ready for the NBA.

"I've seen him. He's not a shooter, he's not a great ball-handler. I'm sure he's got 55 guys telling him he's like Michael Jordan," he said. "Please don't compare a 6-11 kid (Garnett) with lots of talent with some 6-3 guy (Fields) who can leap. Kangaroos can leap."

Fields realizes he has some work to do on ball handling and defense.

One of those comparing Fields—Farragut's No. 23—to

the Bulls' No. 23 is Farragut coach William Nelson.

"He could be the top player in the country. He's averaging 32 points a game and nobody has stopped him so far," said Nelson. "The more I see of him the more he looks like Michael Jordan."

Fields does have an impressive resume:

- A two-time dunk champion at Nike's All-American summer camp, he has a vertical leap in excess of 40 inches.

- He often can be a human highlight film, driving to the basket, popping jumpers, grabbing rebounds, blocking shots and flipping no-look passes.

- He has been an AP All-State selection since his sophomore year.

- He electrifies crowds from Columbus, Ohio, to St. Louis. A record 4,188 saw Fields score 51 points in a game at the Proviso West Holiday Tournament at the end of last month.

"I'm enjoying it. It's fun when you go places, people know you. It kinda bugs you when you are getting all the attention, but I'm handling it real well," Fields said.

Fields is a friendly guy and a prankster. He showed up for a crucial game with a long face and his arm in a sling. With his Farragut teammates on the verge of panic, he burst out laughing and revealed his injury was made up.

He was mobbed at an autograph table at Danville's Thanksgiving Shootout. At the St. Louis Shootout two weeks later, a record crowd of 15,379 was entertained with three spectacular Fields' dunks.

While many want to watch Fields, few want to guard him.

"The reason nobody wants to guard Fields is because they don't want to get 'poster-sized,'" said Chicago Taft's Brett Nishibayashi. "It's the worst to be caught in a photo covering your head and your face as Ronnie comes slamming it down."

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