

AAU Profile

Denny is Twice As Nice hot shot

By DAVID BULLA
Chronicle Sports Editor

When the Twice As Nice All-Stars begin play in the Amateur Athletic Union Zone Tournament in Ocala, Fla., next Friday, they'll feature one of the best shooters in the state in Jeff Denny.

Yet, Denny might have been looking forward to signing a professional baseball contract this week if his jump shot hadn't been discovered by recruiters in the late stages of his junior season at North Forsyth and last summer at several camps. Denny had a stellar career in youth baseball, with his team finishing in first place nine straight seasons. He also possessed an 88-mph fastball that earned him a tryout with the Los Angeles Dodgers two years ago.

"I felt I had a pretty good chance to play college baseball or get drafted," Denny said last week during a Twice As Nice practice at Atkins Middle School gym. "I'm basically a fastball pitcher, but I have a pretty good curve and kind of got to where I could throw a screwball effectively. I guess you could say I experiment with a variety of pitches."

"I still have it in the back of my mind to play baseball after I finish with basketball."

But the stakes in the basketball recruiting game got higher and higher as years passed. He was an all-city selection at Atkins 9-10 High School before going to North for his 11th- and 12th-grade years. There he was the sixth man the first half of his junior season, but he had been holding his own in practice when matched against all-state forward Brian Howard. So Coach Olon Shuler turned Denny into a starter and North finished the season with a 23-2 record.

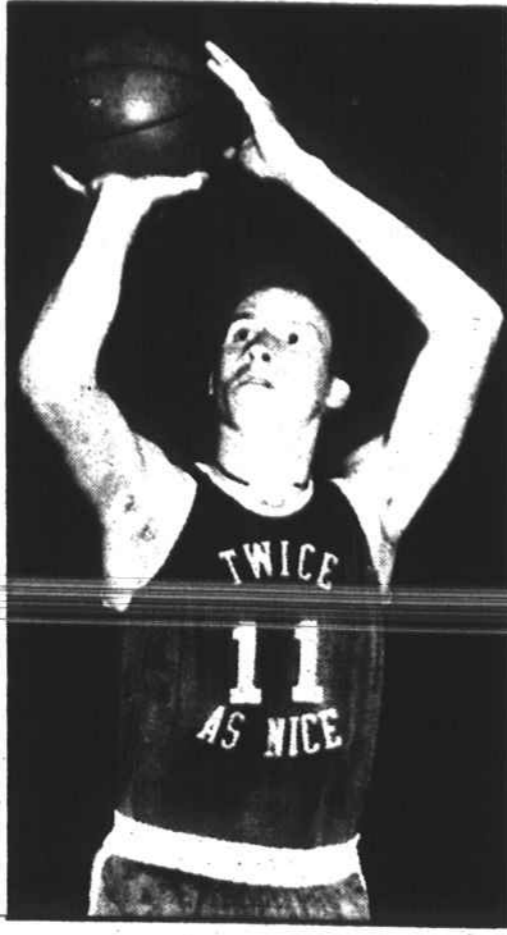
Denny's game blossomed last summer at North Carolina's basketball camp. Although he injured the thumb on his left hand the last day of camp, he continued his outstanding play at the Five Star Camp in Pittsburgh the following week. The highlight was a second-place finish in the camp's one-on-one contest.

With efforts like that, recruiters began to take a strong interest. So Denny decided to put off his baseball career for a while.

When the national signing period arrived in November, Denny committed to UNC. His signing came as a shock to some members of the state's athletic community, but the Tar Heel coaching staff had fallen for Denny's flawless shot. When the NCAA adopted the 19-foot, 9-inch three-point line for the 1986-87 season, the signing of Denny seemed like a minor recruiting coup.

"I was hoping they'd have the three-point line my senior year in high school," he said. "But it was up to the conferences and only a few experimented with it."

Although the 6-foot-4 Denny expected to sit a good portion of his first two seasons and perhaps his third at Carolina, now he foresees getting some playing time as early as his freshman season.



Set Shots

Jeff Denny's form fairly matches that of three-time NBA Most Valuable Player Larry Bird (Denny photo by James Parker; Bird, file photo).

"Coach Smith has explained the situation to me, and I'll be a backup to (No. 2 guard) Jeff Lebo and (point guard) Kenny Smith. He mentioned the three-point line as being a factor in my playing."

Another factor will be the development of swingmen Kevin Madden and Steve Bucknall, both of whom were blue-chippers in high school but sat deep on the UNC bench as freshmen.

"I think I'm a better shooter than they are," said Denny, who averaged 18.7 points and shot 66 percent from the field as a senior. "Both are much better in other aspects of the game, but I feel if a team goes to a zone I'll have a pretty good chance at playing."

Denny first picked up a basketball, a medium-sized ABA model, when he was 4 years old. His first shot came at his grandparents' house.

Along the way, two people suggested changes to improve Denny's shot: Whitey Bell, who played at North Carolina State and with the New York Knicks, and Jack Montgomery, his seventh-grade physical education teacher. They taught him to keep his elbow in and follow through.

Denny did the rest, putting in three or four hours a day shooting.

"I always set goals," he said. "I would move around the perimeter and make 15 in a row before I moved on."

During his middle school days, a fellow named Larry Bird was developing into one of the finest college players in the country at Indiana State. Denny took a quick liking to Bird's shooting form.

"When he goes up for the shot, he always squares up," Denny said of the three-time National Basketball Association Most Valuable Player. "His feet are parallel to the floor and his shoulders are straight. His elbow is in and he has the ball in the palm of his hand. He does something that's real important and that's shoot every shot the same way."

Denny's shooting ability may

not quite match Bird's, but Twice As Nice Coach Ron Hollingsworth said he ranks as one of the five best shooters to ever come out of Forsyth County.

"He reminds me a lot of David Morris (who played at Reynolds and Wake Forest)," Hollingsworth said. "He's one of the best ever out of Winston-Salem coming off the pick or shooting with his feet together."

Denny returned to the sixth-man role on the AAU team. He gives Twice As Nice instant offense in the manner of Hall of Famer John Havlicek.

"He's our designated scorer," Hollingsworth said. "We start out with our quick team to see what's available. Then we sneak him in there and turn him loose."

Denny averaged 13.3 points while helping the Winston-Salem team to the state 19-and-under championship last month.

Hollingsworth hopes Denny will be at full strength next week, for the North product suffered pulled ligaments in his left ankle in a pickup game at Wake Forest last month. He was in a cast until last week.

But Denny's the kind of player who won't let an injury get in his way. He shot several hours each day he wore the cast.

In addition to playing with the AAU team this summer, Denny will participate in the Winston-Salem Summer League and the East-West All-Star game at the Greensboro Coliseum in July. He has been on back-to-back Summer League champions.

While Denny will continue to work on his jumper this summer, much of his workout time will be devoted to dribbling.

"He has a little experience at the No. 2 guard," North's Shuler said. "We played him there some his junior year. So he needs to work on his ballhandling and upper-body strength."

But Denny's strength will always be shooting. In basketball there's always a place for a shooter. Before his career at UNC's over, he may set the ACC on fire with his classic shot.

Sports Profile

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year and was second the next. "They ran that tournament the right way, strictly by the book," he said. "It only lasted about five years, which was too bad."

Hairston has had some superlative rounds and holes. He has shot scratch golf at Hillcrest and a 76 at Winston Lake. He also has two aces to his credit, the latest coming last December at Winston Lake. He holed a 5-wood on the 145-yard 16th.

"I think it bounced one time," he said. "George Phillips said the ball was in the hole and I said, 'You have to be kidding.'"

Hairston, who's in his 60s, is a three-time-a-week player who

generally shoots in the 80s. That's not bad for someone who played a year of tennis as an undergraduate at Hampton In-

Big Apple

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city Recreation Department. "It serves the need of young adult men who still have the urge to play. In this city you find that many young men enjoy basketball, where in another city they might spend their time playing softball or what have you."

Among significant league

stitute, didn't do much of anything athletically for nearly two decades and never had a golf lesson.

rules: for late teams, forfeits will be called four minutes after the game's scheduled time; no additional players can be added after June 14; if any player is ejected from a game more than twice, he will be ineligible for the rest of the season, and all players will participate at their own risk as far as injuries are concerned.

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