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ADDISON

THE MAGAZINE OF THE NORTH DALLAS CORRIDOR

summer 2011



pg **24**
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THE GAME
ADDISON'S OWN
BASKETBALL TEAM

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for the

GAME

by Aly Yale

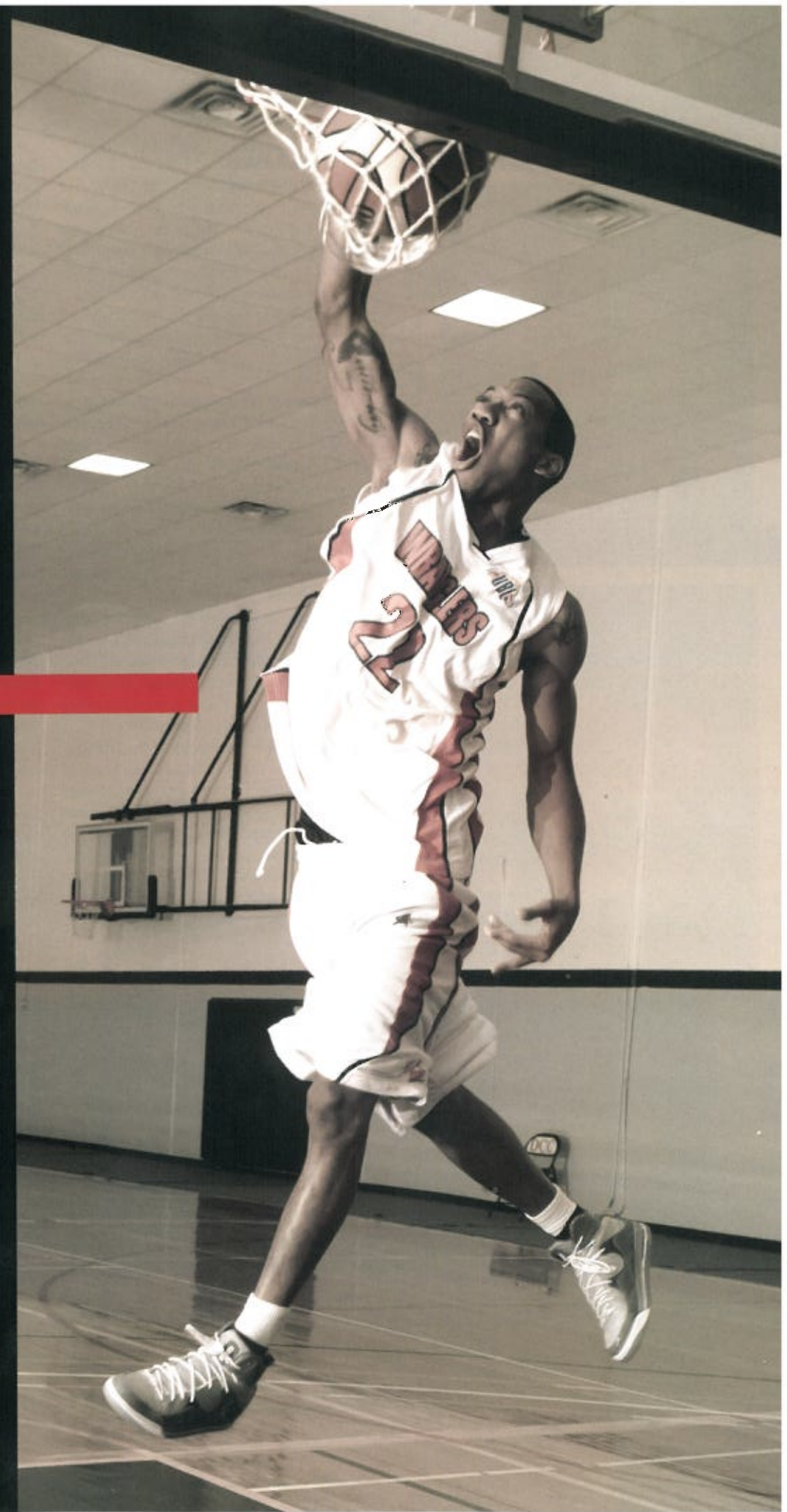
Can't afford to go to the NBA finals? You may still be able to catch a championship game. For about the price of a movie ticket, you can see seasoned players duke it out for a title right in your backyard.

Addison's own semi-professional basketball team, the Texas Wranglers, plays Saturday nights against their seven competitors in the United Basketball League. Home games are at Greenhill School on Spring Valley Road, and on June 11, they'll play for the UBL championship title.

The Wranglers team boasts players that hail from all over the country, bringing with them decades of experience on college, semipro and professional basketball courts. One player is currently playing in the Dallas Mavericks system, and another is a former Cleveland Cavalier.

The Wranglers also have the all-time leading scorer for the United Basketball League, a college title holder and a junior Olympian. Leading them is a head coach with state championship titles in multiple sports, an extensive playing history and more than 20 years of coaching in his repertoire.

Photography by Molly Dickson



“...JUST YOUNG MEN WHO LOVE THE GAME OF BASKETBALL.”

OZZIE DENSON, COACH

HOW IT STARTED

Literally a product of their coach and manager, the Wranglers have a unique history. They're part of the United Basketball League, a league that was created, and is still commissioned, by Wranglers coach Ozzie Denson.

Coach Denson started the UBL four years ago, after a one-year stint of coaching the Waco Wranglers in the American Basketball Association.

Denson says the ABA put too much weight on the shoulders of its coaches and because of high costs and expenses, more than half the teams were forced to fold by the end of the season.

So after honoring a one-year commitment, Coach Denson decided he could do it better. He started his own semipro league – aiming to create a high-value, low-cost outlet for talented and skilled athletes.

The league is currently at an historic high with seven teams this season – the Arkansas Warriors, the Oklahoma Impact, the Springfield Thrill, the Tulsa Tornados, the Metroplex Lightning, the Mississippi Tornados and the Texas Wranglers.

The lifestyle of the teams in the UBL is a stark contrast to many with the opportunity to play in the NBA. To help keep costs low and to sustain the league, most players are not paid. Teams generally avoid staying overnight after away games, cutting down on travel and

hotel costs. They often drive their own vehicles hundreds of miles to the games and drive back the same night.

The UBL, Coach Denson said, “is just young men who love the game of basketball.”

Sponsorships and ticket sales keep the league alive. Tickets are \$10, and sponsors like Pizza Hut and the American Heart Association can be seen on the UBL website and on team gear. The league even has a partnership with Cowboys Stadium; if you buy season tickets for a UBL team, you get a free tour of Cowboy Stadium.

The Town of Addison is also a supporter of the team. Coach Denson said, the UBL makes it a point to be “community-based.”

The team is focused on relationship-building within the community and, as Coach Denson puts it, “gaining one fan at a time.”

Unlike in the NBA, Coach Denson said, UBL players and coaches are very accessible. The team regularly hosts meet-and-greet events, and players are more than happy to sign autographs and talk to fans anytime. They also make it a point to give back. Just last month, the team went to Baylor Hospital to visit and play with young patients.

“You have to have relationships in the community,” Coach Denson said.

He hopes these relationships will turn into more fans in the stands at Wranglers games. Although players on the Wranglers team are required to have full-time jobs, they still make time to practice several times a week. Having fan support at games is an encouraging sight.

“I want people to see how hard we play,” Coach Denson said. “It’s serious business with us. We’re professional.”

And with Coach Denson, it truly is serious business.

COACH OZZIE DENSON

On top of managing the Wranglers and serving as commissioner for the UBL, Denson also works two full-time jobs. He’s lacking in sleep, he said, but it’s worth it.

“We’re family,” Denson said. “We take care of each other.”

Denson, a Terrell High School graduate, has an impressive athletic history.

After playing on the THS court, Denson went on to play in the NCAA for Texas A&M-Commerce, in the NBA Development League for the Mavericks, and later in the Continental Basketball Association, a professional men’s basketball league in the U.S.

Since his playing career ended, he’s been coaching and teaching – and not just in basketball. Denson has coached teams to

state titles in football and volleyball as well. He’s coached at Carrollton American Heritage, Akiba Academy and Yavneh Academy and even served as athletic director at the Selwyn School in Denton.

His 20-plus years of coaching have paid off, too. His players say they appreciate his guidance and mentoring.

“Coach Denson is a player’s coach,” said guard Reggie Griffin. “He does his best to accommodate every player. No matter if it’s the last guy or the first guy on the bench. He treats everyone with the same respect, the same dignity.”

Coach Denson’s nephew, guard Sheldon Denson, mirrored the same sentiment.

“He’s a great mentor and coach,” Sheldon said. “He has a big heart.”

Coach Denson hopes his guidance will achieve his goal for UBL, which is to move players up to the next level in their career.

“I just want to see some players go to the NBA,” he said.

And Denson wagers that will happen soon – possibly within a year – thanks to breakout star CJ Carter.

“I think within one year we’ll have a player in the NBA,” Coach Denson said, “and I think it will be CJ.”

NBA HOPEFUL

You’d never believe it now, but point guard CJ Carter wasn’t always good at basketball.

A naturally athletic child, CJ played just about any sport he could get his hands on, but he didn’t start playing basketball until he was 12, when his cousin Corey challenged him to a game. He was better than CJ and won every time they played.

CJ vowed to beat him one day, and took to practicing and developing his basketball skills. His passion for basketball was ignited.

“My competitive nature took over,” CJ said. “It’s been a love story ever since.”

Now 24, CJ balances his time between competing with the Wranglers, playing with the NBA Development League for the Mavericks and raising two young girls – all by himself. It might sound like a hard schedule to keep up with, but CJ says it’s worth it.

“I’m very passionate about two things – basketball and family,” CJ said.

CJ started playing for the Wranglers three years ago after graduating from Mississippi State, where he played for the Bulldogs basketball team.

Now, after starring in a Russell Athletic commercial and spending the NBA preseason

working out with the Oklahoma City Thunder, he is now a bona fide professional, playing in the NBADL for the Mavericks – and getting paid for it.

“CJ is great,” Sheldon said. “He has athleticism. He’s young. He has a chance.”

CJ credits Coach Denson for much of his success.

“He brought me in when I was at my lowest point in basketball,” CJ said. “I was clueless as to how to play the professional game. I was so raw.”

Coach Denson said he saw CJ’s talent and committed to helping him develop it and guide him down the road to professional basketball.

“CJ was very raw at first,” Coach Denson said. “He just needed someone to help and encourage him.”

CJ hopes to be able to mentor other players in the UBL, like Coach Denson did for him. That’s why, he says, he continues to play for the Wranglers, despite his other commitments.

“The UBL is a chance for me to give back. I won’t forget about where I came from.”

That’s why every chance he gets, CJ is sure to talk about the UBL and its merits in the big leagues.

“The UBL is a great place to find and mold young talent,” CJ said he tells people in the Mavericks D League.

It seems to have been paying off. The Wranglers have had a number of professional scouts show up at games recently, including some from the Mavericks, the San Antonio Spurs and the Cleveland Cavaliers.

One current Wrangler actually made it to the NBA – Coach Denson’s nephew, Sheldon.

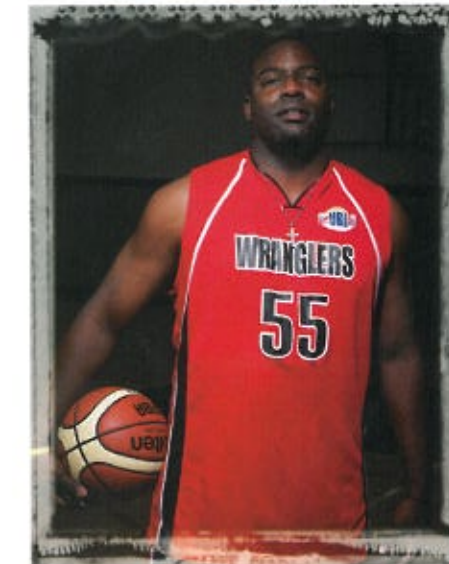
BASKETBALL IN HIS BLOOD

Sheldon Denson was born to play basketball. Nephew of both Coach Denson and former Houston Rockets player Michael Strange, Sheldon has been playing basketball since he was a kid, and now, at 32, he’s made a

“...HE BROUGHT ME IN WHEN I WAS AT MY LOWEST POINT IN BASKETBALL.”

CJ CARTER, NBA HOPEFUL

Coach Ozzie Denson founded and is currently the commissioner of the United Basketball League.



TOP: Reggie Griffin. Griffin’s maturity and leadership are a foundation for the team.
BOTTOM: Sheldon Denson. Denson is a born teacher, and has committed to mentoring his teammates.



The Wranglers compete against seven other UBL teams.

**“...I’VE BEEN
WHERE *THEY’VE*
BEEN.”**

SHELDON DENSON

lifelong career of it.

His success began when he start breaking his uncle’s records at Terrell High School. Sheldon still holds the 3-point shot record at Terrell; he made a whopping 13 3-point shots in one game.

After spending two years playing for Tyler Junior College on scholarship, Sheldon spent another two playing for the Texas A&M University-Kingsville Javelinas. Then, he went into the NBA draft.

He spent the pre-season period working out with the Cleveland Cavaliers. Things didn’t work out as he had hoped. He was cut after the first regular season game.

The decision wasn’t all bad news, though. Sheldon then entered a semi-professional league in Canada, and he had the opportunity to travel the world playing basketball for four years.

Now, as the second oldest Wrangler member, Sheldon is leading the team, both on and off the court.

“Sheldon loves to compete. He loves to play,” Reggie said. “No matter what the score is, no matter if it’s a game, a practice, Sheldon wants to win.”

Sheldon has been a Wrangler since Coach Denson coached the team in Waco. He moved to the UBL Wranglers when Denson started the UBL and has stuck around ever since. Coach Denson calls him “one of the best 3-point shooters in this league.”

In addition to playing for the Wranglers,

Sheldon is also a single dad of three boys, one in college, and he coaches basketball and track at Legacy Academy in Kaufman. He also teaches history and criminal justice courses.

Sheldon’s currently taking online courses to get his master’s in education. He hopes to become a school principal after his playing career is over – which Sheldon estimates will be after next season.

“I think I’ll give it one more year,” Sheldon said.

Sheldon said he still wants to stay involved with the Wranglers, though, once his playing career is over. He hopes to help his uncle coach and teach the Wranglers; that’s one of his favorite parts of the game.

“I’m kind of a mentor,” Sheldon said. “I’ve been where they’ve been.”

Much like Coach Denson, he likes to help the younger players learn to play the professional game. Sheldon said he and Griffin, currently the team’s oldest player, aren’t in it to make it to the NBA anymore.

“Me and Reggie have been there,” Sheldon said. “We do this because we love the game.”

A LATE START

Point guard Reggie Griffin played on his first basketball team at 24. He played for fun as a child, but never on an organized team.

“I didn’t know I was that good,” Reggie said. “There was one person that told me I was good, and that was my older brother.”

Reggie’s brother Charles saw him in a charity basketball game when he was 23 and told him he should look into playing for a college. Those were the words that changed Reggie’s life.

“[Basketball] has been my life since I started playing,” Reggie said.

Reggie went on to play for Cedar Valley College, taking home a national championship and the MVP title his first year, and later played for the University of Louisiana at Monroe.

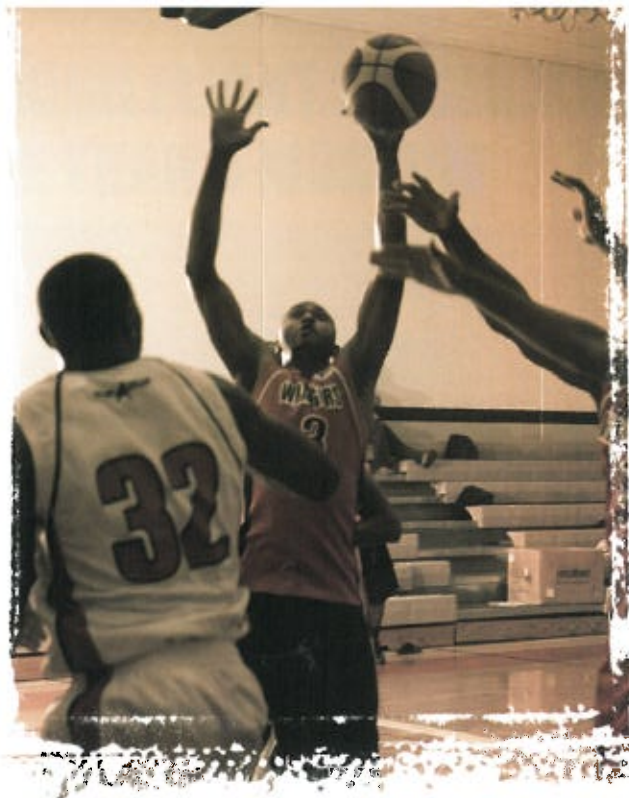
Following his college career, he represented the United States on the junior Olympic basketball team, touring South America and playing in a championship tournament in the Caribbean.

He worked out with and tried out for numerous NBA teams, but because of his mature age – 29 at the time – he was passed over.

Now, at age 35, a mere 11 years after his start in basketball, Reggie is the oldest player on the Wranglers, but is also a definitive part of the team.

“He’s the leader of our team,” Sheldon said of Reggie. “He is a player that just goes nonstop.

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**“IT REALLY
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REGGIE GRIFFIN

He's exciting to watch.”

According to Coach Denson and Sheldon, Reggie is a great mentor to the younger players on the team.

“He loves playing, he loves coaching and he loves teaching,” Coach Denson said.

He even helped CJ in his early years in the semipro league.

“When [CJ] first came, he was very athletic and he was kind of unsure of his ability to play,” Reggie said. “I mainly told CJ to play hard and stay humble – to concentrate on his game.”

Reggie's been with the Wranglers since they were in Waco, under Coach Denson. Since moving to the UBL, Reggie has won the league's three-point shooting and dunk contest, played in the all-star game every season and is the UBL's all-time leading scorer.

On top of leading the Wranglers to victory each week, Reggie works two jobs and is a full-time father, raising three daughters, ages 4, 7 and 10.

“They love to watch me play,” Reggie said of his daughters. “They're big cheerleaders. You can hear them in the stand cheering for their daddy.”

Balancing an intense work schedule that involves early mornings and even weekend shifts along with basketball games, workouts and quality time with his family is hard, Reggie said, but definitely worth it.

“I'm not going to be doing it forever,” he said. “There will be a time I can't stay competitive.”

Reggie says it's the camaraderie with his teammates and the fight to win that inspires him to keep playing.

“It really keeps me coming back, to continue to push myself to stay in shape so I can play,” Reggie said. “I can still see myself playing a few years from now.”

Despite his age, Reggie doesn't have a deadline for when he'll stop playing.

“I'll keep playing as long as it doesn't interfere with my normal life and as long as I'm healthy,” Reggie said.

BRINGING BACK THE EXCITEMENT

With seasoned talent and a dedication to the Addison community, the Wranglers and Coach Denson are a sight to be seen.

“It's the strongest semi-pro league in the country,” Coach Denson said. “We love basketball, and we've got a lot of talent.”

With lightning-fast plays, slam dunks and countless 3-pointers, the team delivers an entertaining and engrossing show. And that's the point. With the Wranglers, “[Coach Denson] is trying to bring basketball excitement back to Dallas,” Sheldon said.

It's true, Dallas has the Mavericks – but with the price of tickets and the demand for them, a Mavs game is just out of reach for many, Coach Denson said.

“NBA games cost too much,” he said. “For \$10, you can see great athletes right here in Addison.”

UPCOMING GAMES

May 22: UBL AllStar Game
Dallas Christian College
6:30 p.m. – 3-point Contest
7 p.m. – Slam Dunk Contest
8 p.m. – UBL AllStar Game

May 28: Texas Wranglers vs. Oklahoma Impact
At Oklahoma

June 11: UBL 2011 Championship
Greenhill Sports Complex
(4141 Spring Valley Lane, Addison) 8 p.m.