

WEEKEND JOURNAL; A **Hot Prospect?**

Jon Weinbach. [Wall Street Journal](#). (Eastern edition). New York, N.Y.: [Mar 7, 2008](#). pg. W.1

[Lil' Romeo's scholarship to USC is a perfect L.A. story, involving a music mogul, a child TV star and basketball.]

Romeo Miller is a 5-foot-10 point guard with a bad knee. He has never played a full season of high-school basketball. This season, he averaged 8.6 points a game for Beverly Hills High School, which finished last in its league. But next fall, the 18-year-old will suit up for the [University of Southern California](#), a program in the tough Pac-10 conference. And he will receive a full basketball scholarship valued at \$44,400 a year.

The scholarship, which is the talk of college recruiters, is a perfect L.A. story, intermingling money, show business and basketball. Besides being an average point guard, Mr. Miller is an actor and singer known as Lil' Romeo, and the son of a wealthy music mogul. Some question whether the Millers took advantage of their resources -- and their relationship with Demar DeRozan of Compton, Calif., one of the top high-school basketball players in America -- to win the scholarship over more talented and less privileged athletes.

Bob Gibbons, who oversees the scouting service All-Star Sports, says he was "shocked" when he heard about USC's offer. "It's very rare to give a scholarship to someone who may never play."

That scholarship is a valuable commodity. Like most Division I basketball programs, USC offers only 13 basketball scholarships a year. The award is based on talent and pays for tuition, fees, books, housing and meals. Nearly all of USC's current scholarship players were very accomplished high-school players.

Yet the school broke no rules, and Tim Floyd, USC's basketball coach, makes no apologies about Mr. Miller's potential to sell tickets. "We may have more 11- to 17-year-old girls in the stands than we've had in the past," he says.

Romeo's father, Percy Miller, 40, rose to fame in the early 1990s as the rap star Master P, performing and producing a string of hits for his label, No Limit Records. He has since expanded into film production, real estate and fashion.

Romeo, the oldest of Percy and Sonya Miller's seven children, has been acting since the age of 11. From 2003 to 2006, he starred in "Romeo!", a Nickelodeon series that his father produced. He is also a successful hip-hop artist, and has sold 1.5 million albums since 2001.

Both father and son share a passion for basketball. Percy Miller has championed Romeo's career, serving as coach, recruiter and promoter for his son's club team. (Club teams, which play in the spring and summer, often draw elite players looking for experience and exposure.)

The Millers first met Mr. DeRozan when he joined their club team as an eighth-grader. A highflying, muscular prodigy, Mr. DeRozan started dunking when he was 12. At Compton High School, he led the basketball team to consecutive league titles, averaging 29.2 points per game and making 80% of his two-point shots this past season. The 6-foot-6 All-American forward is rated as the No. 5 prospect in the country on Scout.com.

Mr. DeRozan has traveled with the Millers to tournaments around the country over the years. He has eaten holiday meals and slept over often at their house in Bel-Air. "A couple times I had to get him and it was like, 'Boy, you got to come home,'" says Frank DeRozan, Demar's father.

Mr. Floyd has closely monitored Mr. DeRozan. A former [NBA](#) head coach in Chicago and New Orleans, Mr. Floyd was hired by USC in 2005 to energize a struggling program in time for the 2006 debut of the Galen Center, a \$147 million, 10,250-seat on-campus arena. Since he was hired, the team has landed several talented players -- notably O.J. Mayo, the freshman guard who was the country's top high-school recruit last year.

After years of minuscule attendance, the team has averaged about 8,200 fans a game over the last two seasons. Last year, USC won a school-record 25 games and advanced to the "Sweet 16" of the NCAA Tournament. Mike Garrett, USC's athletic director, says the team now turns a profit.

Mr. Floyd was introduced to Percy Miller years ago in Louisiana. Last April, Mr. Floyd says, Percy Miller called while driving both players from a tournament in Fayetteville, Ark. Percy Miller said "Demar and Romeo are ready to make their decision, and would you like to have them both on scholarship?" remembers Mr. Floyd. "I said absolutely."

Percy Miller says he does not recall the conversation. Demar's father insists the players chose USC independently. Demar says that while he and Romeo had "always talked about going to the same school and playing together," he chose USC on his own, citing the school's new arena and Mr. Floyd's track record as draws.

But Jermaine DeRozan wishes his half-brother evaluated more schools before committing, and says Demar was seduced by the Millers' generosity and lifestyle. Last summer, he says, the siblings had a scuffle when Demar chose to play on Mr. Miller's club team at a big tournament rather than a team Jermaine was helping to coach.

The scholarships were announced last November at a press conference arranged by Percy Miller's public-relations firm. A press release for the event, held at a Four Seasons hotel, gave Romeo Miller top billing. It called him "one of the top 15 point guards in the nation," citing hoopersonly.com. The Web site was the extension of Hoopers Only magazine, which featured Romeo and Demar on its cover last summer. The site is now blank.

Jermaine DeRozan did not attend the ceremony at the Four Seasons. "That press conference should have been at Compton High with his coach and his family," says Demar's older brother.

Sonny Vaccaro, 68, was the longtime director of the ABCD Camp, a summer showcase for top recruits. He invited Romeo Miller to the 2006 camp, primarily as a favor to Percy Miller, whom he knew from the club basketball circuit. "If you're looking for the profile of an athlete who plays basketball at USC, he's not it," he says.

At Beverly Hills High School, Mr. Miller appeared in only eight of the team's 27 games this season. He stopped attending most games and practices after injuring his left knee.

Off the court, his teachers say he is a solid student. Mr. Miller supports a variety of charity projects and plans to take film classes at USC. "Basketball is just one-half of what I'll be doing," he says.

He also says that several universities offered him basketball scholarships, including Louisiana State and Arizona State. In an interview, he says "it was kind of a surprise" that he and Mr. DeRozan both ended up at

USC. During a recent appearance on [ESPN](#), Mr. Miller said that Florida State and UC-Berkeley were "in the mix as well."

John Brady, who was recently fired as LSU's basketball coach, says his staff did not recruit Mr. Miller. At Arizona State, "there was not serious recruitment," says a spokesman. Florida State and UC-Berkeley say Mr. Miller visited each campus. (However, both schools say there was no scholarship offer.)

Mr. Floyd says his staff had Mr. Miller on their radar before Mr. DeRozan signaled his interest. He describes Romeo as a "good little player" who must improve to get court time. Fame was a factor, he adds. "The more buzz you can create, the more news stories you can create, the better served you are as a program."

That doesn't sit well with Don Wetherell. His son Ryan, a 5-foot-11 guard, was one of the best high-school players in Canada and earned a walk-on spot at USC the last two seasons. Mr. Wetherell says he asked the USC staff how Mr. Miller's arrival would affect his son, who had been told that he had a "good shot" at a scholarship next year. He says they told him Ryan may still get the award -- and that Mr. Miller got his because of his relationship with Mr. DeRozan. (Mr. Floyd could not be reached for comment.) "We're learning a lot," says Mr. Wetherell, who owns a beverage company in Calgary.

Percy Miller is surprised by questions about his son's abilities or the scholarship. "When you get out there and earn something, then you deserve a reward," he says. "Why shouldn't he accept a scholarship? That's like a trophy for all his hard work."

Romeo Miller agrees. Once he gets to USC, he says, "my game will speak for itself."

(See related letter: "Letters to the Editor: Why Give Athletic Grants To Sons of the Wealthy?" -- WSJ March 15, 2008)