

Freshman Avery Bradley is fulfilling a childhood dream with spot on Texas Longhorns, big game in Arlington

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AUSTIN – Although highly touted Texas freshman guard Avery Bradley now hangs with NBA player T.J. Ford from time to time and can call his childhood idol for advice, he plays it cool.

Bradley doesn't tell Ford about the No. 11 Texas replica jersey, one still folded away at home in Tacoma, Wash., that Bradley enticed his older brother to hand down. Bradley's eyes must have rolled when his mother, Alicia, suggested he get Ford's autograph. It was Ford who made Bradley fall for UT basketball during an impressionable time. With his parents splitting up and his mom wanting a fresh start, Bradley's move to Arlington from the Seattle area overlapped with Texas basketball's most storied run, a Ford-led surge to the Final Four in 2003. Now it's Bradley who will help No. 2 Texas take on No. 10 North Carolina on Saturday at Cowboys Stadium in Arlington, a short drive from his former home.

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ERICH SCHLEGEL/Special Contributor

"We would watch Texas all the time," said Bradley, who hung a Longhorns banner over his headboard. "I would see T.J. play, and I just fell in love with the program. ... He was the star of the team."

Bradley and his family returned to Washington before Bradley's eighth-grade year after living in Texas from 2001-2004, but the impact was made. As a rising recruit, by the end of his junior season, Bradley had received dozens of offers from major programs – but he held out for Texas. He found patience, as he's done in his first season in Austin. With his offense coming along to match his unique passion for on-the-ball perimeter defense, he's scored 50 points in UT's last three games. He's averaging 11 points and leads the Longhorns with 14 steals.

"He's just getting started," UT coach Rick Barnes said recently. "He's not even near what he can be."

Alicia Jones-Bradley remembers the family's time in Texas fondly because of the warm reception they received.

Avery still keeps in touch with many of his friends from Arlington. He has two aunts who live near Dallas, where he spent last Thanksgiving.

He expects a huge group of friends and family to attend Saturday's game, including Alicia, who tries to attend games every month.

Bradley favored football while in Texas. But when the family moved back to the Northwest, he hooked up with the Northwest Panthers, an elite AAU basketball club that has produced several Division I players, including the Washington Huskies' Isaiah Thomas and Abdul Gaddy.

Gaddy and Bradley, who are best friends, received loads of recruiting attention.

But after games, Bradley would always ask, "Was Texas here?" recalled Garry Ward, Bradley's AAU coach.

Texas assistant Chris Ogden, who was also interested in Gaddy, finally heard about it and checked out Bradley.

"I almost took it personal," said Bradley, of waiting for UT.

It was between the spring and summer of his junior year that he shot up in the recruiting rankings. He came to Texas for an elite summer camp.

"We wanted him as bad as we'd wanted anybody," Barnes said.

Bradley narrowed down a list that included Kansas, UCLA, USC and Texas. But he visited only Texas.

"They rolled out the red carpet, literally," Alicia said, describing the path that led from the airport terminal to a waiting car.

Another selling point: Saturday's game against storied UNC was already in the works, and UT pitched Bradley's homecoming to Arlington.

Bradley had played his senior year away from home. Findlay Prep, in suburban Las Vegas, is dedicated to basketball, with the team traveling nationwide for games – some televised – and players living together in a large house. Bradley did his academic work at an affiliated school that helped him ensure eligibility his freshman season, he said.

When he arrived in Austin last summer, Bradley turned to current and former UT players, including NBA star Kevin Durant, to show him the ropes. That's when he got to know Ford.

Bradley has worked hard at rounding out his offensive game, Ward said, honing a mid-range jumper and using his speed while keeping it under control.

Barnes admires Bradley's unselfish attitude but has mused about him being too deferential.

Bradley, Barnes said, is becoming more comfortable with his shot and even better at defense, which he's always loved to play – all for a school where he could always see himself.

"It's worked out great," Ward said, "for both of them." IN THE KNOW

Avery Bradley

Texas

Freshman, Guard

6-2, 180

Hometown: Tacoma, Wash

Notable: Bradley is expected to achieve at least a 3.5 this semester, though final grades were still pending. ...Bradley is wearing No. 0 this season to signify a fresh start in college. ...Bradley starred at Bellarmine Prep in Tacoma for three seasons before transferring to Findlay Prep in Henderson, Nev., for his senior year. ...Findlay went 33-0 and won the mythical high school national championship... Bradley won the McDonald's All-America slam-dunk contest. ...He was named the No. 1 prospect nationally by ESPNU following his senior season, though Kentucky freshman John Wall also earned the top honor in several rankings.