

Baseball's Lebron

His name is Bryce Harper. You don't know him, But every big league scouting director does. He hits the ball a desert mile, clocks 96 on the gun, and he's only 16, more advanced than A-Rod and Junior were at the same age. and his ambition is as great as his talent

One rainy February day in Las Vegas, home to a fake pyramid, a phony volcano, a faux Eiffel Tower, an ersatz New York skyline, a pirated copy of a pirate ship and the clever sleights-of-hand of magicians and plastic surgeons, Sam Thomas watched two men stretching a tape measure across South Hollywood Boulevard, reaffirming that there was at least one real deal in town. Thomas is the baseball coach at Las Vegas High, and the two men were his assistant coaches. The pair had come out in the rain to revisit the spot where, in a game the previous spring, a baseball had made landfall, a dimple in the desert, a tiny crater left in the sand by a home run off the bat of Las Vegas High catcher Bryce Harper, then a 15-year-old freshman.

The lefthanded Harper had hit the ball over the rightfield fence, two trees, another fence, a sidewalk, five lanes of traffic on elevated South Hollywood Boulevard and yet another sidewalk, until it finally landed in the brown, undeveloped desert. It might as well have been a flying saucer, judging by the grin on Thomas's face as he recalls the distance the ball traveled.

"Five-seventeen," it sounds as if Thomas is saying.

Five hundred seventeen feet?!

"No," Thomas says. Of course not. That would be preposterous. No 15-year-old kid could hit a baseball 517 feet.

"Five-seventy," Thomas clarifies.

• **Golf has Tiger Woods**, basketball has LeBron James, hockey had Wayne Gretzky and military history had Alexander the Great, but baseball, like jazz, is a discipline that does not easily engender prodigies. Since 1967, only one player has hit a home run in the major leagues before his 19th birthday: Robin Yount of the '74 Milwaukee Brewers. The sport is so skill-specific that even the best, most physically mature young players typically must endure several levels of minor league apprenticeship to learn the game.

So good and so young is Bryce Harper, however, that he explodes baseball convention. He has hit the longest home run in the history of Tropicana Field, home of the Tampa Bay Rays, and he did so in January, at age 16, with a blast that would have flown farther than the measured 502 feet had it not smashed off the back wall of the dome. Still only 16, Harper stands 6'3", weighs 205 pounds, has faster bat speed than Mark McGwire in his prime and runs so fast that he scored

on wild pitches six times this season from second base. As a catcher he picks off runners from his knees, and when he pitches, he throws a fastball that has been clocked at 96 mph. He also does volunteer work, holds down a 3.5 grade point average and attends religious education classes nearly every morning before school.

When James was 16, he was a high school sophomore with an NBA game and a body to match. Harper has been compared to Justin Upton, Alex Rodriguez and Ken Griffey Jr., each a freakishly advanced high school player and each the top overall pick of his draft. But Harper, say the baseball men who are paid to make such assessments, has the ability as a *sophomore* that the aforementioned trio had as *seniors*. That is why Harper—to his own approval—is best compared to James. Indeed, Harper nearly fell off the couch one day last month when he heard a sports announcer call San Diego State pitcher Stephen Strasburg, the presumptive No. 1 pick in next week's draft, "the LeBron James of baseball."

"What?" Harper exclaimed with playful exasperation. "Hey, they stole that from me!"

Strasburg turns 21 next month and went undrafted out of high school, a late bloomer who is nothing at all like James. Just about everyone in the baseball industry has known about Harper for at least two years. To a man they describe him as an impact player with the skills, body and attitude—he says he models his game after those of Mickey Mantle and Pete Rose—perfectly suited for the sport. "If Bryce were in the draft this year," says one American League scouting director, "he'd go in the top five picks."

"Wrong," says a National League amateur scouting director. "He'd go *higher* than that."

Higher than top five?

"Top two," he says. "And that's taking nothing away from the guys in the draft this year. He's honestly that good. He is a once-in-a-generation talent."

• **So good is Harper**, and so bleak the prospect of his spending two more years with high school pitchers who can't (and won't) throw their sloppy 80-mph fastballs over the plate to him, that his parents—Ron, a steelworker, and Sheri, a paralegal—are looking for ways to make their son eligible for the draft next year rather than in 2011. One of their advisers is agent Scott Boras, who has a well-earned reputation for maximizing dollars and exploiting loopholes. "I heard one of the things they're considering is taking him to the Dominican Republic to make him a free agent," says one AL executive.

"No," Sheri says. "We are not taking our son out of the country."

What the Harpers are considering, however, is having Bryce earn a GED credential this summer and enroll in a junior college this fall, which would expose him to more challenging baseball competition as well as make him eligible for next June's draft, in which he would likely be the first pick in the country. Under that scenario, assuming the Nationals keep losing games at something close to their current rate (they have the worst record in baseball, and it isn't even close), Washington could wind up with Strasburg and Harper in the next 12 months—the

baseball equivalent of the Cavaliers getting James and Dwight Howard in consecutive NBA drafts. Of course, in both cases the Nationals would have to negotiate with Boras, who represents Strasburg too. A combined outlay in the neighborhood of \$100 million is entirely possible. Boras, according to league sources, will use the six-year, \$52 million deal he negotiated with the Red Sox for Daisuke Matsuzaka in December 2006 as the benchmark for a Strasburg deal.

"It's not just about the draft," Ron Harper says while seated on metal bleachers and watching Las Vegas High win a mockery of a game, 31--1, in May. His son hit one line drive so hard that the second baseman jumped out of its way, as if dodging gunfire. The ball smacked against the rightfield fence for a triple. "It's to get him to play better baseball right now," Ron continues. "We have to do what's best for Bryce. He wants to play baseball. Always has. The Number 1 thing guiding us is to do what's right for Bryce and his future."

Says the NL scouting director, "He's not going to make any more money [by] playing two years of high school ball."

Bryce leaves no doubt about what he wants. At 16, an age at which he still leaves piles of empty bowls of Fruity Pebbles in his bedroom, he has a clear vision of who he is, where he wants to go and how his enormous capacity for work is even more valuable than his great talent. Asked when he expects to play in the majors, Harper says, "Hopefully as soon as 18 or 19. The fast track."

When asked about his goals as a ballplayer, he replies, "Be in the Hall of Fame, definitely. Play in Yankee Stadium. Play in the pinstripes. Be considered the greatest baseball player who ever lived. I can't wait."

What's more jolting than his words is the manner in which Harper delivers them. The kid speaks with a measured, unemotional certainty, as if he were playing not the Natural but the Preternatural.

Last year Harper played in the Area Code Games in Long Beach, Calif., a showcase otherwise reserved for the best juniors and seniors in high school baseball. During batting practice, swinging a wood bat, he bombed balls over light towers and scoreboards in Blair Field. Damon Oppenheimer, the amateur scouting director for the Yankees, took note of his attitude as much as his power.

"One of his first at bats, he hit a ball into the gap, and there was no doubt in his mind from the moment he hit it that it was going to be a double," Oppenheimer says. "And it was close. He went into second sliding hard and got dirty and got his double. He played the game with a real ferocious type of attitude. He was out there to win. It was an old school way."

"He's the real deal. You know why? It's like he doesn't take the game and the gift that he has for granted. He's maximizing everything. You're not worried about him going out there and living on talent alone. He's working hard. He's playing hard. He has a maturity about him, a toughness that says he's going to work his butt off. It's really refreshing to see these kinds of skills and talent, and the work ethic and dedication to go with it."

• **Bryce Harper was playing** T-ball at age three against six-year-olds, partly to be with his older brother, Bryan, who was drafted by the Nationals in the 31st round last year but elected to attend Cal State--Northridge. By the time Bryce was nine, travel teams from California to Colorado to Oklahoma were calling the Harpers and offering to put their son on a plane, lodge him in a hotel and provide his meals so he could play for them in tournaments. A travel player for hire. He went, of course. Most times either Ron or Sheri went with him, but sometimes, for work or monetary reasons, they could not go, so Bryce went alone. He has played between 80 and 130 baseball games a year each year for the past seven years, in more states than he can remember.

"People say, 'Weren't you deprived of your childhood?'" Bryce says. "No way. I would not take anything back at all. Everything about it was great. I got to go places, meet people, play baseball against older kids and better competition. I had a great time."

According to Sheri, "A reporter once talked to us for a story about the travel baseball experience, but they didn't quote us because we had nothing but good things to say about it. Bryce is a normal kid. He snowboards. He played football up until last year. We don't limit him in any way. He loves to play baseball. He would come home after being away playing baseball all weekend, get off the plane and not an hour later be bored and say, 'Dad, let's go to the cage and hit.' I mean, he still sleeps with his bat. He'll get a new bat and go, 'Dad, isn't she a *bee-yooty*?'"

It was after one of those player-for-hire trips that Sheri began to understand that her son was really special. Bryce, then 12, was playing in a tournament in Alabama on a field with 250-foot fences. It was a trip Sheri could not attend. When Bryce phoned home, Sheri asked him how he'd done. "I did all right," he replied.

Later one of the coaches called Sheri. "Did he say anything to you?" the coach asked.

"No, not really," Sheri said.

"He went 12 for 12. Eleven home runs and a double."

"That," Sheri says, "is when I knew."

Nearly every chance they could, the Harpers had Bryce play against kids two or three years older than he was. "I love playing against the older guys," Bryce says, "because I love showing up the older guys."

• **Bryce Harper is the product** of a travel baseball industry that mushroomed, just as he himself was growing up, into big business. There seems no end to the tournaments, all-star games, showcases, wood-bat leagues, USA Baseball youth teams, "scout teams" sponsored by major league clubs. Premier players such as Harper can end up playing more baseball than minor leaguers, which can quicken baseball's traditionally long development process. This summer, for instance, Harper will play two weeks for a travel team in Oklahoma, participate in an 18-and-under all-star tournament in North Carolina, go up against college players in a wood-bat league in California, compete in Yankee Stadium for a scout team sponsored by the Yankees, play in

Fenway Park at an all-star benefit game, attend the USA Baseball 18U team trials and, assuming he makes that club, play in the Pan Am Championships in Venezuela in late September.

Last year, as part of USA Baseball's 16U team in the Pan Am Championships in Mexico, Harper signed autographs for 45 minutes, until the wee hours of the morning, after pitching the 11th inning of a 3--1 win over Cuba. He batted .571 in the tournament, with four home runs in eight games, a 1.214 slugging average, a .676 on-base percentage and six stolen bases in six tries—all team highs among regular players—and was named MVP.

It was during an international home run hitting showcase in January that Harper, with a metal bat, walloped his 502-foot shot at the Trop, part of a run of six consecutive homers that *averaged* 469 feet. (The night before the competition Babe Ruth's granddaughter displayed a commemorative bat to be awarded to the player who hit the longest home run. In his own version of a called shot, Harper told the Babe's kin, "I'm going to win that bat." He did.)

"In some cases it may be helpful," Mets scout Ian Levin says of the explosion in high-profile amateur playing opportunities, "and in some cases it may be hurting. Kids don't get into a regimen, a schedule. It is not a very structured system, and especially for pitchers, if it means they're not getting rest, that can hurt them. With all of that play, they still need a break too. So some guys it may help. It definitely suits some guys well in terms of speeding up their development. But it's not for everyone. And the other thing to remember is that these showcases cost money, and it often winds up being about the families with money."

• **Bryce Harper plays baseball** with a viciousness, a seeming contempt for whoever and whatever dares get between him and victory. "I'm going to play against you the way Pete Rose did," he says. "I'm going to try to rip your head off. That's just the way I am. Old school. If I could play for a guy like Lou Piniella or Larry Bowa, I'd love it."

Before he hits, Harper lays his bat down in the batter's box, takes two steps toward the pitcher, bends over, scoops up dirt in his bare hands (batting gloves? Hah!), rubs it between his palms and then returns to grab his bat and take his place in the box. "He's got this *thing* for dirt," Sheri says. It looks like an act of defiance, a marking of territory—in this case, home plate—as his alone.

"I love the way people talk crap," Harper says. "I hear it all the time. *Overrated. You suck.* I'll just do something to shut them up, like, *I'll show you.* It's like in regular pregame work. I like to show off my arm. Just so it's like, *There you go. Don't even think about trying to run.*"

His swing is downright violent, the bat whooshing through the zone at more than 100 mph. It is not pretty. Neither was Al Capone. 2 min. of fury, it says inside his cap, a reference to the time of the average plate appearance.

"What do I like about him?" says the NL scouting director. "Everything. He's got a great body. The perfect frame for baseball. A big-time arm behind the plate, but a good enough athlete to do anything you want. His bat speed is ridiculous. I've never seen anything like it. And since last

year he's calmed down his approach a little bit. He used to want to go out and get everything. Now it's more under control."

His dad has been his lifelong hitting coach. Up at 2 a.m. to lay rebar to help build the Strip in Vegas, Ron Harper, a former high school baseball and football player, spent many afternoons, evenings and weekends on the field and in the cage with Bryan and Bryce. To further sharpen Bryce's hand-eye coordination, Ron pitched him sunflower seeds, bottle tops, dried red beans—just about anything small that didn't move straight.

• **Twilight in Vegas** is when dreams take wing, when sunlight gives way to neon. Dreams—of making it big, of being the lucky one, if only for one night, for one roll of the dice, for one pull of the handle—are what built this place as much as the steel rebar laid by men such as Ron Harper. The neon lights are winking again, beckoning like a pretty girl, as Bryce Harper stands in the parking lot of a restaurant off the Strip with his mom and dad. In T-shirt and shorts—no baggy uniform, no eye black, no dirt—Bryce looks younger and slimmer than he does on the ball field. He is a wiry-strong kid with room to grow. He is not one of the dreamers. He is on a mission: Baseball has been his purpose, not his dream, for as long as he can remember.

"Bryce has a saying," Ron says. "Whenever people say how good he is, he likes to say, 'I'm not done yet. I still have work to do.' He's going to get a lot better, and I say that because of how hard he works. I don't think he'll ever rest on his laurels."

Bryce Harper is a scouting director's perfect prospect. He has size, speed, power, intelligence, a lefthanded bat, an appetite for work, a strong arm, the ability to catch and the athleticism to play almost any other position, plus a happy home life. To be this good and this complete at age 16 is something that just doesn't happen in baseball. And maybe being the next LeBron in a sport that doesn't have LeBrons is the worst part of being Bryce Harper: to have such expectations thrown at you at such a young age. But this, too, is what makes him Bryce Harper: He gladly accepts the pressure as something else he can smack 570 feet clear over South Hollywood Boulevard.