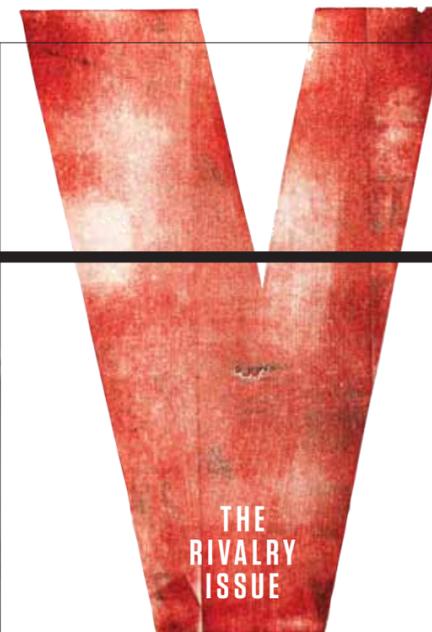




Jerron Love, in his new Fresno backyard, loves to ball. Coaches and scouts love his game. And they'd better, says his dad.



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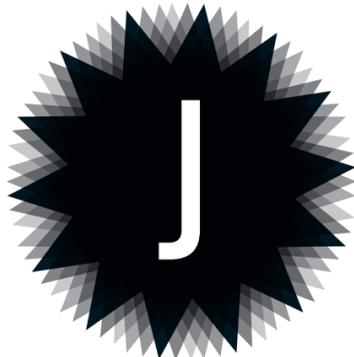
**MY SON IS BETTER ...
IF YOU DON'T THINK
JERRON LOVE IS THE
PERFECT GUARD, HIS
DAD MIGHT JUST PUT
YOU IN HIS CROSSHAIRS.**

By **JOSH DEAN** ... photograph by Joe Pugliese



✠ Jerron Love is the best point guard in the 2015 class—that is, according to a recruiting site run by dad Jerry.

"I'm the man behind the curtain, the Wizard of Oz," JERRY LOVE TO THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



JERRY LOVE didn't play or have the slightest interest in basketball—or any sport, for that matter—but when he saw his nine-year-old son bouncing a ball, he says it was as if James Naismith himself were guiding the boy. It was just obvious to Jerry that the game was Jerron Love's destiny. Now, Jerry didn't know anything about teaching basketball, but he knew someone who might. He'd seen a "Spanish kid named Angel," he says, who frequented a local playground in the Bronx, dribbling a ball around like a Globetrotter.

One afternoon Jerry offered Angel a deal: Five dollars to teach Jerron some of his tricks. Jerry left the two to their lesson, and when he returned a half hour later, he says, "Jerron could do it, exactly." That single half-hour session of impromptu, freestyle mimicry, Jerry swears, "just set Jerron off."

It set off Jerry, too. From that moment, Jerry Love, a 34-year-old hair salon owner from the Bronx, gave his life to promoting what he considers his son's legend-in-the-making abilities. Under Jerry's guidance, Jerron, now 15, has become a YouTube sensation and Twitter persona (voiced at times by Jerry). Jerron is also, notoriously, the big personality on a website, Middle School Elite, that Jerry himself started as a middle finger to the high school talent evaluation world. Jerron's ranking on MSE? No. 1 in the nation for the 2015 class.

Mercurial doesn't begin to describe the plottings of Jerry Love as he guides his son's spectacular ascendance from 10-year-old nobody to mega-hyped freshman. Starting in 2006, Jerry says, Jerron played for "50 local and AAU teams in the New York metro area and other states," while also making the rounds at camps from California to Kentucky. When Jerry's aggressiveness soured many basketball insiders in New York, and he got a "bad feeling" about Long Island Lutheran, the high school he'd hand-picked for his son, he went the free-agent route. He surveyed out-of-state options, consulted his longtime friend Dominick Young, who played for Fresno State, and ultimately decided last summer to move 3,000

miles across America to enroll Jerron at Clovis West High School in Fresno, a continent away from Jerry's business and Jerron's mother.

Their arrival, not surprisingly, was noisy. Three separate local news affiliates dispatched crews to profile the kid. ABC 30 called him "the nation's top-rated incoming freshman point guard." According to whom? CBS47 answered that. "He's been ranked as the top middle school basketball player in the nation in his age group," said a reporter, "by Middle School Elite dot com."

For a guy who taught himself the art of digital promotion, Jerry isn't the easiest guy to reach. His voicemail is always full, and emails, if he doesn't know you, aren't promptly answered. But with persistence, I get to Jerry, and once he hears of my interest in his son's story, he invites me to visit Fresno in December, a few days before the first high school game of Jerron's career.

I don't know what to expect. The Hyper-Involved Sports Dad is such a staple of the sports literature that I arrive in California carrying a mental mash-up of Marv Marinovich, Earl Woods and Mike Agassi. What I find is a thin, friendly, athletic looking guy in a black tracksuit and black St. Louis Cardinals cap leaning on a tree, tapping at his iPhone on the sprawling grounds of Clovis West High School. I expect brash, and he is almost humble. He thanks me repeatedly for coming, and when I tell him I have a 20-month-old son back home, he seems genuinely curious. "How tall is his Moms?" he asks. When I say my wife is 5'7", he looks up at the rafters and does some math. "So he should be six or six-one. Call me when

“The emails keep coming, as many as 10 in a day. In some, Jerry lumps me in with the grand cabal seeking to torpedo his son's chance of success. In others, he thanks me for the support. He is alternately dejected and defiant, all because his son isn't starting.”

he's in fourth grade, and we'll get him on MSE.” We move inside the school, and Jerry knocks on the locked gym door. “We just hoped this was a good fit for Jerron,” he says. “It was all about peace and no distractions and development.” Inside, a multi-racial cast of players hustle around under the observation of three coaches clutching whistles.

Jerry is eccentric, and following his train of thought can be exhausting, like chasing a chicken around the yard. Jerry rambles about the politics of New York streetball. He swears that Jerron could beat any player his age one-on-one. Then, he settles upon a strand of logic, the reason he moved here: Clovis West's well-regarded coach, Tom Orlich, known for teaching a Coach K-like system (Coach K being, for Jerry, one exemplar of the Coaches Who Espouse Fundamentals). “Pass, move without the ball, good defense, conditioning, you know what I'm saying?,” Jerry says. “Catch and shoot.” To punctuate the point, he feigns catching a pass and releases a ghost jumper.

Basketball dads from New York City, where point guards like Kenny Anderson, Sebastian Telfair and Stephon Marbury made the improvisational stylings of streetball a route to stardom, don't drag their kids to Fresno to learn to play a system. But Jerry Love doesn't do anything according to the norm. His thinking: Jerron has the skills; now he needs to integrate them. “Once he gets this game,” Jerry says, looking out on the practice, “it's going to blend together.”

He has such faith in Orlich that he says he'll step away from his role as marionette. Now that Jerron is learning system basketball, Jerry tells me, he plans to just be Dad.

“I think his game just has to speak for itself now. It's up to him.”

But the basketball world, I will learn, keeps trying Jerry's patience.

“That's the only way I'll shut up. Let Jerron be free like spirit of streetball.”—JERRY LOVE, IN AN EMAIL TO ME

Maybe the most surprising thing about Jerry Love is his intrepidity. For a guy who never played basketball, he built his son, in a quick time, into a kid who other kids admire on the Internet. Jerry credits the Coach's Clipboard, a

free online tutorial developed by a Michigan doctor that teaches the fundamentals and has become a cult instructional manual.

Jerry devoured and regurgitated the Clipboard during Jerron's 10th year—teaching him the 12 types of cuts, for instance, or the “seven things you have to do after you pass the ball” in daily sessions that lasted up to four hours. “We went over everything—everything,” Jerry says. If you believe him, he created an elite player in less than a year of teaching. Jerron, apparently, went along with the whole thing quite happily. “I love this sport,” he says. “You know, when you can't play bball but you want to so bad? That's the way I feel all the time.”

Once he'd honed his son into a player whose crossover bewildered opponents, Jerry commenced marketing him. He wanted the world to know what he knew. He showed up at the Adidas Phenoms camp in 2007 wearing a t-shirt with Jerron's baby face under the words “Just 10” (as in, his age) and handed out highlight DVDs of the same title. Jerry also posted videos with hip-hop beats to YouTube under the name “Jlovestudentathlete,” and further seeded those clips to tertiary sites until his son's game went viral.

Ryan Mendez, who played basketball at Stanford, first noticed Jerron in clips on Streetball.com, the website he'd launched after leaving his job as an investment banker. “I was amazed at the kid's talent level,” he says. “It was far and away above what I'd seen for kids that age.” But what surprised him as much was the existence of Jerry's clips. “This was before people posted video for kids who were 9 or 10.”

“I would say the middle school [rankings], I'm the author of that in the last six years. Like the Bible.”—JERRY LOVE, TELLING ME ABOUT HIS WEBSITE, MIDDLE SCHOOL ELITE

Because he was frequenting the country's top talent camps with his son, Jerry saw the best players in Jerron's age group, and began to jot notes and talk scouting with other dads and spectators. Soon he had an idea: to start a “movement” to promote not just Jerron but all talented tweens by posting video clips to streetball sites, message boards and early social media. It bothered Jerry that his son and his

peers weren't important enough to get noticed. Jerry didn't want to wait until Jerron's freshman year, when the high school scouting machine kicked in. He railed against the AAU coaches who thought younger players didn't warrant promotion. So in 2010, Jerry formalized his guerilla effort into Middle School Elite, a somewhat un-modern-looking site that ranked players the existing universe of sites thought too young. “MSE was my vendetta on the nation,” he says. “I was going to make it to where no one can ever say that [young players don't matter] again.”

The world of youth talent scouting has always been a little icky, dominated by coaches who act like managers and shoe companies pimping their brands. But until Jerry showed up, most evaluators focused on high school kids, in some cases not even ranking freshmen. Within a year of MSE's appearance, the most prominent entrepreneur in the field, Hoop Scoop's Clark Francis, who Jerry has frequently traded barbs with, was also dipping into middle school. In response, MSE began to cover prospects as young as five, all in the same fervent, earnest prose that makes it sound like the kids are ready for recruiting visits, when one look at the baby faces tells you they are a few years removed from eating dirt.

Dave Telep, a long-time scout who now works for ESPN, thinks MSE and its brethren are harmful. “Ranking middle school players has contributed more to the lunacy of parents than anything,” he says. Even high school rankings historically stumble, adds Jonathan Givony, founder of the well-regarded college/pro site Draft Express: “Guys miss far more often than they hit. It's hard enough for us to gauge the potential of a 21-year-old college senior, let alone going back to kids 11 or 12. What's the point?”

As Jerron worked the camps, and Jerry shot the video, MSE's real point became clearer: Here was Jerron playing in an adult game at Rucker (more than 500,000 YouTube views), and at the esteemed John Lucas camp, pitted head-to-head in highlights against Justin Jenifer, the only point guard his age whose name is as famous. (The Washington Post had featured him.)

To be clear, Jerron is a legitimate player; even Hoop Scoop's Francis rates him the among the





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best in his class. The hype about him peaked last summer, just before Jerron's freshman year, when Jerry gave an "exclusive" to the hoops blog NYC Hoops: Jerron would attend Long Island Lutheran. The blog called LIL's coach John Buck, who declined to talk. That worried Jerry, so he set up a meeting with Buck. According to Jerry, the coach wouldn't guarantee Jerron a starting spot and, worse, told Jerry that not everyone in New York's basketball circles appreciated the way he operated, pulling Jerron from team to team. "I'm letting you know there's going to be some rocky roads," Jerry claims Buck told him. (Buck could not be reached for comment for this story.) Jerry panicked: Jerron might not even play? He set about a nationwide search for his son and settled on Clovis West.

"He would [be] great for a Durant, or LeBron. They would love him."—JERRY LOVE, DESCRIBING HIS SON'S GAME WITH ME

One night after practice, I meet both Loves for dinner at a hibachi steak house chosen by Jerron. He is easy to talk to for a young teenager, even playful. There is none of the swagger he projects via Twitter, and he seems well-adjusted and mature. He makes eye contact, and answers questions clearly and humbly.

Jerron and I make small talk about his idols—he likes Kobe, but Floyd Mayweather is his favorite: "He's ruthless and confident." I notice Jerry fiddling with his iPhone and he passes it over: It's a picture of recruitment letters, the one on top from Arizona. Jerron has also heard from Oregon State, George Mason and UCLA, among others. Jerry tells me that in April they'll fly to San Juan; Jerron has been invited, based on his mother's heritage, to try out for Puerto Rico's Under-18 team.

Jerron says that getting attention is "all right," but he steers clear of the subject around his teammates, lest he be teased. I ask him if he cares where he ranks among America's best young players, and he shakes his head no. "If I do my thing," he says, "I'll get noticed."

Two days later, Clovis West travels south, to Huntington Beach, for the annual Tournament of Champions, and the team wins its first game of Jerron's career; he scores 11 and has three

assists. The next day Clovis wins again; Jerron finishes with 8 and 12. He doesn't start either game, but he's one of the first players off the bench, entrenched in the rotation that wins the tourney. Jerry stays home, for the first time since Jerron picked up a basketball. "Before, I felt like I had to be there," he says. "But now he's with Coach Orlich."

"I'm tired of being asked, why isn't jerron starting???. Enough explaining. Now let's bring it to surface. To the mass people."—JERRY LOVE, IN AN EMAIL TO ME

As Clovis West wins its first seven games, Jerron plays well, scoring a team-high 16 in one matchup. But Jerron isn't starting and that drives Jerry nuts. He leans on his old friend Dominick Young, the former Fresno State player whom Jerry calls the "ghetto Jordan" and who serves as Jerron's "mentor." Young hones the skills Jerron isn't getting to perfect on the court.

Young tells me that he thought Clovis West would "unleash the next level of [Jerron's] game." But he now wonders whether Jerry and Jerron will last more than a year there. Just as Jerry had ditched New York's AAU scene, he now begins to turn against Clovis West. Jerry doesn't like Fresno. He doesn't like Jerron being separated from his mother. He doesn't have a job and money is tight. I ask Young if a private school, which can offer scholarships, is an option, and he answers in the collective. "We gonna get educated on everything."

A day later, a strange text arrives from Young's number, apropos of nothing:

"From jerry love and dominick young. josh—jerry and I both believe in this. we r gonna let u in on our plan for jerron to stay enjoying the game of basketball. @ the age of 19 jan 2 2016 is jerrons birthday. that calendar yr jerron will

be eligible for 2016 NBA DRAFT HE WILL BE 1 YR REMOVED FROM HIS ORIGINAL SENIOR CLASS AND JERRON IS ENTERING THE 2016 NBA DRAFT AND [will] STILL GRADUATE. JERRON IS AWARE OF THIS AND JERRY AND I SUPPORT WHAT JERRON WANTS."

A week later, Jerry texts that he's thinking hard about relocating Jerron for his sophomore year, maybe to L.A.—"which J's moms is checking out over the holidays"—or Chicago, where he says Simeon, the nation's top-ranked team, needs a point guard.

As games pile up, Jerry's faith in Orlich's system keeps fraying. In one text he asks me—as a representative of ESPN—to "release the story that Jerron isn't starting." Jerry has decided Orlich doesn't appreciate what he has on his bench. "If J not good enough to start let it be known so I can prove you guys wrong when he scores 50 against Clovis West," he writes. He believes the only possible reason Jerron isn't starting is "politics—seniority, fundraisers, parents complaining that J just a freshman." He writes that, "Now this is bigger than basketball it's about holding an extremely talented kid back from god given ability." He never once raises his objections with Orlich personally. (Orlich tells the Mag that "[Jerron] plays as many minutes as anyone else.")

The emails keep coming, as many as 10 in a day. In some, Jerry lumps me in with the grand cabal seeking to torpedo his son's chance of success. In others, he thanks me for the support. He is alternately dejected and defiant, all because Clovis West's lone freshman, all of 15 and nationally famous, isn't being allowed to play to his true potential.

I remind Jerry of what he'd told me repeatedly during my visit, that he would hand Jerron off to Orlich and allow his game to broaden.

"We going to finish the year n who knows what's next," he writes.

Jerry doesn't know it yet, but in a few weeks he'll get what he wants: Jerron will start a game. But Jerry being Jerry, he's already left Clovis West behind. "As long as he gets in Boost mobile Game and McDonalds all American and play for international team like USA or PR—I'm happy," he texts. "I'll do what's needed to get him in that position." **E**