



Court of Dreams

The cornerstones of John Wooden's "Pyramid of Success" are industriousness and enthusiasm. They are the two traits of the fifteen building block initiative that have allowed Sooren Derboghosian to relentlessly persevere on and off the court. The UCLA basketball player maximized on those characteristics and defied all odds by making the team as a walk-on this season.

Text **Manouk Akopyan**

Sooren Derboghosian had a dream. It was not a dream in the cognitive state, but a childhood one that he hoped would one day become reality. Sooren dreamed of graduating from UCLA. With dedication, determination and support from his family, he believed it was possible, even if there were limitations. He would talk to his father Hovakom and his mother Diana about it and the steps he needed to take in order to get there. The formula of maturity, patience, and hard work – as simple as it may sound – was a tall task for the kid who ironically was the tallest ever since the first day he stepped into a classroom. Sooren was intrigued by UCLA's mystique after he saw the men's basketball team play on television. He was a five-year-old in 1995 and more interested in his duties as the goaltender of his soccer team than the sport he would eventually play. The game he was watching was 20 years removed

from an unprecedented stretch of ten national championships – including seven in a row – during a twelve-year period under legendary coach John Wooden. There was one obstacle the 6-foot-10-inch Armenian-Iranian had to hurdle, however, before even arriving at his destination in Westwood – the cozy campus nestled around the rich-and-famous neighborhoods of Brentwood, Bel-Air and Beverly Hills. Actually getting there. Sooren lived 7,500 miles away in Tehran. But there were a couple of out cards. First, he was bright. He speaks five languages – Armenian, Farsi, Arabic, Russian and English – and majored in math and physics at Sahakian High School. Out of the Iranian grade point average scale of 20, he scored 19. Second, he kicked soccer aside and grew into a standout basketball player for the Iranian under-14 to under-20 age group teams he played on.

And the final kicker – Sooren Derboghosian combined his two talents and obtained a student visa, arriving in sunny Southern California on April 10, 2010, where he enrolled at Glendale Community College (GCC). It was the first step in making his dream become a reality.

Welcome to Glendale

When Sooren was watching that 1995 national championship team led by the O'Bannon brothers – Ed and Charles, Tyus Edney, George Zidek and Cameron Dollar, he quickly understood that UCLA was a world-class institution that could also provide a future athletically. But he needed to transform his game as a set-player with international schooling to being athletic and rough and tumble in order to even get a taste of the domination that Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Bill Walton, and most recently Kevin Love, displayed. ▶

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The first thing in order was a reclamation project at GCC in order to perfect the game's nuances like improving his post game, rebounding, screening defenders and banging guys with his 240 pound frame. Derboghosian grew up watching Tim Duncan and later tried to model his game after Love and Dirk Nowitzki. He says feels just as comfortable in a three-point shooting contest as he does banging it out in the post. "He had a skill set when he got here, but it wasn't a skill set conducive to playing at a higher level. He worked hard in perfecting them," Brian Beauchemin, the Head Coach at GCC currently in his 34th season, tells *Yerevan*. "He did a great job making adjustments. From a coaching standpoint, his advancement was very encouraging." Beauchemin attributes Derboghosian's hardwood development to his incessant drive for improvement. As a freshman at GCC (2010-11), Derboghosian averaged 4.5 points and 3.7 rebounds per game. He doubled those numbers in his sophomore season, averaging nine points and leading the team with eight rebounds. He secured first-team All-Western State Conference honors and paired his athletic achievements by being a varsity letter winner with a 3.8 GPA.

"Armenians and Iranians on campus regularly came up to me and showed me their support and encouragement, and I was fortunate enough to be around them. It felt great," says Derboghosian. "I needed to be taught the American game, and I thank Coach Beauchemin for that. I felt like I was at home. I have some family here but that's been the toughest part in the United States. Being away from my family in Iran." "He is grateful for what has happened to him. The whole time, he has not forgotten his roots and the road that brought him to where he is today. He is very appreciative for everything that has been done for him," continues Beauchemin. "He was a highlight at GCC, and I enjoyed every moment with him. He's a remarkable young man who listened, and it was never a question of whether or not it was going to be done. It was how fast it was going to be done. If I had five players out of 15 like Sooren every



Don Liebig/UCLA Photography

year, it would be hard to lose games. He made my year when he came to GCC." Beauchemin says that by talking to Sooren for five minutes, you quickly realize he's a goal-oriented gentleman whose head's on right. Which makes the initial thought of Derboghosian forgoing Division I college basketball scholarship offers after his breakout sophomore season somewhat of a head-scratcher. Sooren received offers from the aforementioned Cameron Dollar, who is now head coach at Seattle University, as well as University of Texas-Pan American (UTPA). But he declined them both, all in the name of fulfilling his dream of making it to UCLA. In the summer of 2012, he was admitted into school. And now he is paying for it. Literally.

Inception

I meet with Sooren, a quiet and mild-mannered 22 year-old on a grey November afternoon, one day after he scores his first points as a UCLA Bruin. He greets me after practice with a smile that stretches from one ear to another and complements it with a crushing handshake as firm as a baler. We talk about the road that brought him here. Derboghosian humbly reflects his time in the United States, thankful for the support he has received from the Armenian and Iranian communities, his six cousins, and the chance to live out his dream by making the team as a walk-on. Derboghosian was one of four walk-ons this season – a sizable feat for a program basked in basketball royalty. Sooren had sought out the team by sending tapes well

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before he officially declared his candidacy this summer.

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The emotional whirlwind continued a couple months later. The night he scored his first points, Sooren had a special guest watching him play the final minutes of a 26-point blowout victory. His father. It had been 34 months since the two had last seen each other.

Hovakom came to the United States for the sole purposes of watching his son make his debut, which he briefly did against James Madison. Howland made Hovakom's trip half-way around the world worthwhile on Nov. 29 – the day Sooren scored his first field goal on a baseline jump shot.

"As soon as Sooren made the basket, I looked into the parent's section across from our bench to see (Hovakom) and Sooren's family and friends excited, and so prideful," UCLA Assistant Scott Garson tells *Yerevan*. "It was gratifying for me to see that his father saw him score his first points under the bright lights and a big crowd."

Hovakom also traveled to New York to see Sooren and UCLA play a back-to-back against Georgetown and Georgia. But that was it. There was no time for father and son to get some Big Apple tourism under their belts. During the trip, the business economics major was confined to his books, studying.

"Road games are fun because we get to see new places and bond with our teammates," Sooren says. "I didn't even get to see Times Square. It's fine, I will on my own time. One day."

After attending the team's first eight games and several practices, Hovakom left for home on Dec. 2. He left his son with a message: stay strong.

Hovakom's virtue of sustaining emotional and mental strength has been vital for both Derboghosian and UCLA.

Primed for another run of Final Fours, much like the three consecutive

appearances from 2006-08, UCLA opened the season ranked No. 13 in the country. The Bruins had what many believed was the core to a championship winning team. But Derboghosian and the program have been in somewhat of a rollercoaster ever since. Shabazz Muhammad, the nation's top recruit, was declared ineligible for the first three games of the season because of NCAA violations. The Bruins plummeted out of the rankings after a loss to Cal Poly, and shortly after Thanksgiving, Tyler Lamb and Joshua Smith were both granted their immediate releases. By December, old questions about Howland connecting with his players arose.

"The chemistry has been the same among our team," says Derboghosian. "It is better to lose early than to lose in the tournament. That's what coach (Howland) has us playing for. Being a disciplined and championship caliber team. He tells us 'fear none, respect everyone.'"

As for Derboghosian, playing time so far this season has been few and far between. Howland recruited the No. 1-ranked class in the country, and recruited players get the lion's share of the playing time and opportunities because a coach's livelihood manifests on it. They are all the reasons why the forecast on Derboghosian's playing time is gloomy. But it never bothered him.

Garson indicates that Derboghosian's characteristics of industriousness and enthusiasm, cornerstones of Wooden's "Pyramid of Success," never allow for him to be discouraged. With the departure of Smith, once a top recruit in the nation himself, the pecking order quickly changed.

"Basketball, or not, my goal was to come to UCLA. Education was a foremost priority for me and my family," says Derboghosian, who is covering all costs of his tuition, as is the case for any walk-on player. "I'm getting used to the program. It's a transitional period right now. I am practicing very hard, getting better by the day and supporting my teammates. Hopefully, I can earn more playing time in the future."

"He has become a crucial asset to the team during practice and five-on-five drills," says Garson. "He's never had to deal with guys with great size and athleticism in his life. So he's busting his butt and improving on a daily basis. He just has to wait for his opportunity to pop in. He has to be mentally ready, and I know he will. His maturity is going to allow him to do that." Garson continues, "Who knows how a guy can develop? You can't teach good size. He's really working very hard with our coaching staff. That's the thing we love about him. This kid is absolutely a workaholic and has a great attitude. He is a terrific young man to have in this program and is just going to get better and better."

Howland, Garson and assistant Phil Mathews have told Derboghosian what's expected of him. "My role is very simple: play defense, set screens...and maybe shoot the ball," he laughs. For now, Derboghosian is on Cloud Nine, living in the moment.

He's fresh off completing his first quarter and already has his goals set on the university's Anderson School of Management after graduation. Although he's been enjoying the college experience with his teammates, he prefers to be on his own during his free time, reading biographies of American success stories instead.

"I came to America at 20 years-old with goals, and I am committed to reaching them," he says. "I know I have the talent and skills to play professional basketball. Education, dedication and maturity are principles that I have been blessed with through my family. It's all about working hard to be an achiever."

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It was the day he fulfilled his dream. And now, from an MBA to the possibilities of the NBA, the future serves as his motivation. ■