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BayHawks' Davis has overcome plenty to reach D- League

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Jawann McClellan's cell phone rang one night in 2011 with an urgent call from Alex Davis, who had played basketball for him at Houston's Jack Yates High School.

Davis had been with some friends in a car that was shot at least 20 times. He escaped to safety by jumping a fence and running away.

A late bloomer who hadn't begun playing until his junior year in high school and subsequently led Jack Yates to back-to-back Texas state titles, Davis had tried to play prep school basketball in Charlotte, N.C., after graduation, but both schools he attended had shut down before their seasons began.

Davis had returned home to Houston's Fifth Ward, a hardscrabble section of the city that produced boxer George Foreman and baseball player Carl Crawford but has been plagued by crime.

He had fallen in with the wrong crowd, and that night, with bullets streaming past him, his basketball career had never felt further away.

"I talked to Jawann," Davis said. "He said, 'I don't care what you tell me, you're gone in a week or two. We're shipping you out.' "

McClellan, who had helped steer Davis through two seasons while an assistant coach at Jack Yates and through the prep school disappointments, told him it was time to make a choice.

"I told him, 'If I'm gonna help you, you've got to leave all this stuff behind,' " McClellan said. "He promised he would get off the streets, and he did."

Davis and his three brothers grew up in Houston in a single-parent household.

His mother, Joyce, provided what she could, but Davis says it was a tough childhood without privilege or opportunity or money for luxuries like AAU basketball.

He was a smallish kid, even when he became a teenager, and had to beg to be included in neighborhood pickup games with his older brothers.

When he hit a growth spurt in high school, the coaches noticed and convinced him to go out for the team. He ended up helping to lead Jack Yates to 34-1 and 36-0 seasons, but because he was a partial academic qualifier, the major schools that had been recruiting him backed away.

McClellan, a former Texas player of the year and 2004 McDonald's All-American who led Arizona to the

Elite Eight and later played in the D-League, steered him to prep school, both as a way of improving his grades and making up for lost time on the court.

"He was good, but he was so raw," McClellan said. "He needed to play."

But after both schools closed their doors, Davis returned home and was left adrift. He sunk into a lifestyle that wasn't pointed toward college or basketball.

"It was one of the most devastating moments of my life," he said. "I didn't know what was next. I was at a

point where I was just lost. I wanted to give up on basketball. I went home and I got sidetracked."

Everything changed the night of the shooting.

Afterward, Davis moved in with McClellan, got a job and took up boxing to stay in shape until he could get back on the court, and that's where he was when Jay Cyriac met him.

Cyriac, a New Jersey native and an assistant coach at Hutchinson Community College in Kansas -- one of the top junior college programs in the country -- met Davis through McClellan.

He had heard about his length -- by then he was 6 feet 9 inches and a wiry, if unrefined, shot blocker -- and was intrigued by his potential.

Cyriac traveled to the Wal-Mart in Stafford, Texas, where Davis had taken a job stocking shelves. The two sat at a table inside the McDonald's at the front of the store during one of Davis' breaks and talked about basketball.

"That was the first time I'd ever had a recruiting visit at a Wal-Mart McDonald's," Cyriac said, laughing at the recollection. "But I gave him a lot of credit. A lot of the people he grew up with in the Fifth Ward were

probably making more money in one day than he was in a month, and they were doing the wrong things. He was trying to do what was right. That was impressive."

Davis enrolled at Hutchinson, but he was reluctant to go, telling McClellan he knew nothing about junior college and fearing it might shut down, too, just like the prep schools had.

"But my mom, she was like, 'Jawann's right, you have to go,' " Davis said. "She said, 'If you stay around here, it's not going to go the right way.' "

So he went and, after taking a season to settle in, led the team to a National Junior College Athletic Association Region 6 championship as a sophomore. He finished his two seasons there as the school's single-season and career leader in blocked shots, averaging 13.6 points and 7.1 rebounds per game in his final season.

"The first year at Hutch was a little difficult," Cyriac said. "It's not like he was a problem or anything, but sometimes he didn't want to conform. He was away from home and he didn't know how to deal with certain situations. But he really changed and stepped it up his sophomore year, and you were like, 'Is this the same kid?' "

It was at Hutchinson that Davis' athleticism caught the attention of major programs. He remains the only big man Cyriac has coached there who had the green light to grab a rebound and push the ball up the floor.

In 2012-13, Davis helped lead Hutchinson to its first appearance in the NJCAA national tournament since 1997 and was named MVP of the Region 6 tournament. He embraced his role as team captain, Cyriac said, making sure his teammates were ready to go every night.

"I've never seen a kid so dialed in on a mission," Cyriac said. "It turned out to be a great experience," Davis said.

Davis received interest from several big programs, including North Carolina, but he, Cyriac and McClellan settled on Fresno State as the best fit. It was a smaller program that might give him a chance to shine.

But Davis says he never fit in with the guard-oriented offense at Fresno State. He would have preferred to play one of the forward spots but was forced to move to center because of injuries.

"I was limited. I don't feel like I was used to the best of my abilities," Davis said. "I respect those coaches, but my two years there were a roller-coaster."

Davis averaged 5.8 points in 31 starts as a junior. As a senior, he averaged only 4.9 points and started only 13 games. He missed time with injuries and served a two-game suspension for conduct detrimental to the team.

"When I look back, it probably wasn't the right move," McClellan said. "I think it was just a tough situation."

Davis declared for last summer's NBA Draft but wasn't selected. He also was passed over in the D-League draft last fall.

He paid his way into an open tryout for the Magic in Orlando, where he caught the eye of BayHawks coach Bill Peterson with his ability and won him over with attitude.

"I couldn't sell him on much," Davis said, pointing to his stats at Fresno State. "But I told him I would be there every day, that I would put in the time to get better. I told him he could count on me to be the same guy every day."

Peterson took a chance, acknowledging during training camp that he wasn't sure whether Davis would pan out, but that he wanted his next steps to come in Erie.

"I loved how he worked, how he carried himself, his energy," said Peterson, an NBA assistant for six seasons with the Milwaukee Bucks. "He's been through some tough things. He has fire. He has drive."

Davis played a total of 32 minutes in the BayHawks' first three games, scoring four points and blocking two shots.

But Peterson said he kept working in practice and he earned his first start at Fort Wayne on Nov. 29, finishing with five points, six rebounds, four blocks and two steals.

He has started all but four games since then and is averaging 9.5 points per game. He posted double-doubles in each of his past two starts before this weekend's D-League All-Star break, finishing with 13 points and a season-high 14 rebounds against Sioux Falls, then matching his season-high with 23 points and adding 12

rebounds against Grand Rapids on Wednesday.

Davis has blocked 15 shots in his past six games and is emerging as a rim protector with enough athleticism to stay on the court with 6-foot 10-inch rookie center Nnanna Ekwu.

"I look at him as a guy who can guard four positions in the NBA," McClellan said. "He's a shot blocker, but he's a lot more than that, too."

Peterson has raved about Davis' attitude and work ethic. He likes to hold him up as an example of a player who wasn't a star at the Division I level but has still managed to put himself on the doorstep of an NBA opportunity.

"Alex puts in a tremendous amount of time, and I love guys like that," Peterson said. "I love guys that are hungry. I like to be around guys like that."

Davis also has taken a leading role in community outreach events, building on the work he did at Fresno State. He visited with children at area hospitals and played basketball with kids at a local Boys & Girls Club, earning him a nomination to the 2014-15 Allstate Good Works team.

Now entrenched in the D-League, Davis said he doesn't spend a lot of time thinking about the past. What's

important to him now, he said, is trying to help take care of his mother and remaining focused on taking a final step in his career.

During a recent interview, he recalled the night in Houston inside the bullet-pocked car and acknowledged how close his story came to a different ending.

"I could have died that night," he said. "It's a miracle nobody got hurt." He quickly changed the subject.

"But I'm here now, and I can eat, breathe, sleep basketball every day," he said. "This is the way it was supposed to be. I'm blessed."

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