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City of Palms Classic hype can be biggest enemy for rising star

Top prospects walk fine line in public eye
 DAVID DORSEY • DDORSEY@NEWS-PRESS.COM • DECEMBER 14, 2010

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1:10 A.M. — The 16 dozen or so high school basketball players heading toward Fort Myers next week can read a cautionary tale of a player who preceded them at the City of Palms Classic.

The 38th annual State Farm City of Palms Classic commences Friday at Bishop Verot High School, the host that since 1994 has provided prominent, highly hyped players the opportunity to garner national attention.

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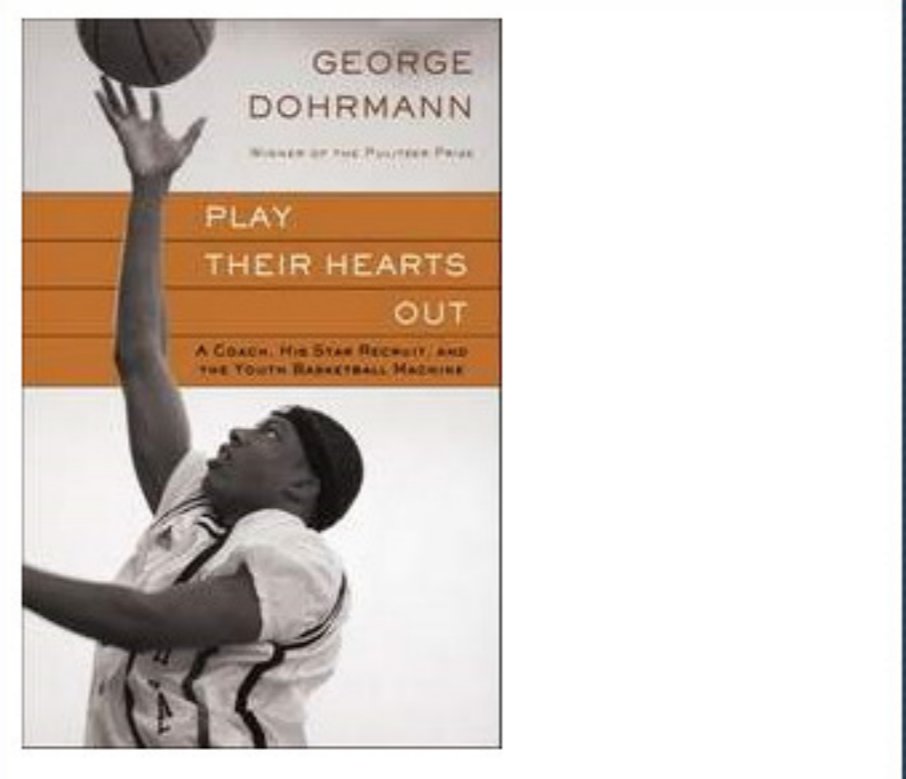
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Sometimes, however, hype hurts in hoops. "Play Their Hearts Out," a new book by Pulitzer Prize-winning Sports Illustrated reporter George Dohrmann, demonstrates the detriment of the "youth basketball machine."

In the summer of 2000, Dohrmann began an eight-year odyssey of following Demetrius Walker, then an 11-year-old middle school player.

In December of 2004, Walker, his Amateur Athletic Union teammate Aaron Moore and their coach Joe Keller visited the Classic.

They were not participants. Keller wanted the two eighth-graders to immerse themselves into the culture of elite youth basketball prospects.

Two years earlier, recruiting analyst Clark Francis of hoopscooponline.com, a longtime follower of the Classic, had rated Walker the No. 1 sixth-grader in the country.

A month after Walker threw down a thunderous slam dunk as part of the Classic's contest — he was granted the opportunity by tournament director Donnie Wilkie — a Sports Illustrated cover story declared him "14 Going on LeBron."

"By the time S.I. got done with him, he started to believe everything people were telling him," Francis said. "If he's not in S.I., he's probably OK. When the mainstream media comes in, some kids just can't take it."

The dropoff in Walker's game, however, went beyond any rankings or magazine articles. Walker, who is sitting out this season at New Mexico after transferring from Arizona State, where he averaged four points per game as a freshman, declined an interview request through the school's sports information department.

According to Dohrmann, Walker lacked the parental support needed to overcome the hype. Listed at 6-foot-2, he quit growing taller following the eighth grade as well.

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