

Lowell's Mann is taking his time at Tilton

By Paul Lazdowski
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TILTON, N.H. — it has been unavoidable for Terance Mann.

The inevitable question that the Tilton School's 6-foot-5-inch, 190-pound shooting guard has heard countless times before: Are you named after *that* Terance Mann?

"Most people think it's from the movie 'Field of Dreams,'" which featured a character portrayed by actor James Earl Jones, explained the junior, who, when not attending the boarding school in New Hampshire, lives in Lowell with his mother, Daynia La-Force, and 15-year-old brother, Martin. "But my grandma's name is Terancia, and they named me after her.

"Mann came from my dad's side of the family. It's a name that was passed down for a long time."

Born nearly a decade after the film's release in 1989, the 17-year-old Mann admits he has yet to see it. Chances are, however, that if the plot focused on basketball, Mann would respond differently.

Hoops, after all, have been an integral facet of his life.

"He was pretty much born at the gym," La-Force said. "He was in there trying to dribble and shoot at a very, very young age."

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La-Force, in her seventh season as the women's basketball coach at Northeastern University, was a standout on the court at Georgetown University, graduating in 1995. So Mann has spent long stretches inside a gymnasium throughout his young life.

And basketball created the foundation for an unwavering bond between mother and son.

While Mann initially played both soccer and basketball — the former influenced by his father, Eustace, a native of St. Lucia and an avid player — he seriously committed himself to one sport upon reaching eighth grade at the Hillside School in Marlborough.

"He's still good at soccer, but he decided to play basketball," explained his father, who lives in Maryland and frequently drives up to attend Mann's games. "A very good soccer player, but he wasn't interested. He preferred basketball."

Mann subsequently began playing for the Boston Amateur Basketball Club, one of the more prominent AAU programs in the country; its many notable alums include current NBA players Phil Pressey (Boston Celtics), and Nerlens Noel from Everett and Hamilton's Michael Carter-Williams, both with the Philadelphia 76ers.

Founded by head coach Leo Papile, the team plays a demanding schedule of tournaments throughout the year across the country.

The competition helped Mann improve while also exposing him to college recruiters.

He has already received scholarship offers from Boston College, Florida, Florida State, Miami, the University of Rhode Island, and Virginia Commonwealth.

"I talk to Florida State, Georgetown, VCU, Boston College a lot, so those are the ones that are really, really pressuring me," Mann said.

"Everybody wants me to make my decision now, but there's no way. I don't really see myself on that level yet, for me to make my decision, and everybody else does.

"I'm waiting to feel like I'm ready," he said.

Self-aware and humble, Mann is equally introspective, selfless and hard working. Friends and teammates trust him implicitly; they often seek him out when thoughtful advice, a perceptive observation, or an open ear is needed.

“He’s a good listener and he has great opinions,” said Tilton junior teammate Cam Durley, who is one of Mann’s close friends. “He’ll listen to you and then he’ll give you a solid opinion of what you should do.”

On the court, Mann carries himself with similar demeanor, contemplating game situations with the same calculated thought process one would expect from a coach’s son, though his warm smile is usually replaced with a focused expression befitting his fiery competitiveness.

Through it all, La-Force remains Mann’s closest confidante.

“Every time we talk its basketball,” Mann said. “I don’t really remember talking to my mom about anything but.

“Usually, when I call her, I need her for something . . . basketball, or, ‘Hey, can I have a little money?’ But that’s it . . . straight basketball.”

And when his mom shows up at games, Mann knows what she’ll be watching most intently.

“Body language, definitely,” Mann said. “She’ll come to one of my games and see my body language and she’ll leave the gym. Once she leaves the gym I know it’s because of my body language. That’s the only reason she’ll leave my games.”

Mann’s oncourt skill set is punctuated by a high basketball IQ — crafted by countless in-depth hardwood conversations with his mom — and an ability to change the game both offensively and defensively, often in the same sequence.

“It’s really not unusual for him to start a play and get a deflection that leads to a steal,” said Tilton head coach Marcus O’Neil. “Then, he gets the ball back, hands it to somebody else, they score. The other team gets the ball down and then he — there’s a ball in the air and he’s kind of above the whole crowd rebounding the ball.

“And there you go,” O’Neil said. “He just had a deflection, a steal, an assist and a rebound, and he’s just had a major effect on the game and he hasn’t scored a basket.

“It’s very unusual to have a player who can impact the game at that level without really needing to monopolize the basketball, especially at the high school level,” he said.

Since arriving at Tilton as a sophomore, Mann has improved as a finisher, especially when driving to his left, and has also added muscle. This year he has the Rams off to a 10-6 record by averaging a team-leading 16 points on 57 percent shooting along with eight rebounds. Over his last six games — a stretch in which Tilton went 6-0 — Mann averaged more than 20 points and shot better than 60 percent.

But it wasn’t a seamless transition from Hillside, where he often dominated opponents.

“When I got here and I had to guard Wayne Selden every day in practice,” he admitted, citing the Tilton alum now playing for Kansas as a freshman, “it was a huge jump . . . going from being the best player on the team to guarding the best player. It was difficult.”

Still, he remains a work in progress.

He’s continuing to learn how to utilize his impressive wingspan, while also gaining increased self-assurance in his own abilities and talents.

“As confident as he is and as much as he knows the game and how good he can be, there’s still part of him that he needs to prove to himself what kind of player he can be,” La-Force said of her son.

“And I think that’s the last piece to the puzzle for Terance. Sometimes that maturity comes later. Some kids have that swag and they don’t have the talent. For Terance, it’s the opposite.”

Perhaps a few years from now Mann will blossom into a tantalizing college basketball talent that leads his team to a Final Four berth.

Or, maybe, like his mom, he'll fulfill his own dream of becoming a women's college basketball coach, possibly in the mold of the University of Connecticut's eight-time NCAA champion, Geno Auriemma.

Whatever the path, Mann may just end up being someone "people will most definitely come" to see, just as the movie character with a similar name predicted.