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Parents made sure UIS' Thornton got his shots

Sharpshooter's practice paying off

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Ryan Thornton wrote down his basketball goals in a notebook when he was growing up.

For the University of Illinois Springfield Prairie Stars sharpshooter, there was more to it than simply recording words on paper.

"My dad got me a goal book when I was in grade school," he said. "He said maybe get 2,500 shots up each day. I'd look at 2,500 shots and say I could do more, so I might get 3,000 or 3,200 shots up. In the summer I'd set a goal for myself that I want to have a basketball in my hand every day."

A day didn't go by this past summer without Thornton getting his hands on a basketball.

"I made a deal with my parents (Jim and Lori Thornton) that I would be in the gym every day instead of laying around the house all day," he said. "If I was in the gym all day, I didn't have to get a summer job."

UIS is reaping the benefits of Thornton's persistence. He is one of the Stars' best shooters from deep, leading the team with 25 3-pointers and shooting an impressive 48.1 percent from behind the arc.

The 6-foot-7 junior can be a game-changer with his 3-point shooting. He drained 14 3-pointers in three games at the 2006 Class A State Tournament, where his Chillicothe Illinois Valley Central High School team placed second.

Quick turnaround

Thornton was right on time for the Stars in the last two games against Wisconsin-Parkside and Lewis after missing a pair of free throws that would have extended the Stars' lead to four points in the final 12 seconds of regulation against the University of Indianapolis on Jan. 4. Indianapolis eventually beat UIS 90-85 in double overtime.

Thornton redeemed himself in the very next contest.

He knocked down four 3-pointers in the final five minutes against Parkside, turning the Stars' late four-point lead into a 67-56 victory. He was 5 for 6 from the 3-point line and 3 of 3 at the free throw line for a team-high 18 points. In a 77-71 win over Lewis on Saturday, he scored eight of his 11 points in the first half to get UIS within 33-24 at the break.

Thornton averages 8.1 points per game off the bench.

"He shoots the ball very well," UIS coach Kevin Gamble said. "What we've been trying to get him to do to get more playing time is to rebound for us and play defense, a couple of things that are not his strong point. But he shoots the ball so well you've got to have him in the game at certain times. Especially if you need perimeter shooting against zones."

Thornton was No. 6 for UIS in 3-pointers with 19 last season. It was his first season with the Stars after playing at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee as a freshman, then redshirting at Bradley for the 2007-08 season. He transferred from Bradley when he received a scholarship from UIS.

Basketball in his blood

Ryan, the son of Jim Thornton Jr., longtime coach at IVC High, and the grandson of Jim Thornton Sr., who also coached boys basketball at IVC, has worked tirelessly through the years on shooting. Ryan often let himself in the high school gym using his father's key.

Thornton's game also grew along body. During his freshman year of high school, Thornton stood 6-foot-1 and weighed 130 pounds. He was 6-foot-5 by his sophomore year and grew two more inches before graduating.

"In total hours, I was in the gym more than I was in class," Thornton said. "I was there shooting all the time. I'd watch guys like (Duke all-time leading scorer) J.J. Redick and Adam Morrison (who led the nation in scoring while at Gonzaga), and I'd want to be like them."

Watching and dissecting the game is something Thornton enjoys. He wants to coach. Over the summer, he worked basketball camps at UIS, Illinois and IVC High School, to name a few. He also coached an American Youth Basketball Tour team made up of high school sophomores that reached the AYBT national tourney.

"Coaching is in my blood," Thornton said. "It feels right and very natural. Duke is my favorite team. I'll watch a game and see a set. I'll write it down on a piece of paper and send it to my dad."

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