

## 7-foot-7 high school basketball player a star attraction despite rarely playing



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Robert Bobroczy was the last player to emerge from the victorious locker room, arching his neck just enough to fit under the doorway. He put a red hood over his head and made his way through the cinder-block hallways of an unfamiliar arena. He couldn't find his teammates.

Bobroczy stood behind a black curtain by the entrance of the gym. He peeked out and could see that people were already gawking. Finally, he spotted his teammates in the stands and made a run for it. Hundreds of people whipped out their phones and began recording, some trying to be discreet, as if they felt bad about filming a 17-year-old who

has never had a say in being 7 feet 7 inches tall.

He walked up a section full of students and kept his head down. Little kids, giggling, chased him and formed a line to get his autograph in their tournament programs, which advertised Bobroczy as an "attraction" even though he hadn't played a second in the game his team just won. He signed at least a hundred items, nodding after each child thanked him. He shooed away all photo requests from older spectators, refusing to be a trophy on their Instagram and Facebook accounts. Already he has reported three Instagram accounts for using his name and

videos of him.

"Hey, Rob, can you go sit somewhere else? We're trying to watch the game," one teammate joked, and Bobroczy's face turned red before he let out a laugh. He has been both a medical study and a social-media curiosity for years, but his friends always make him feel normal. He lowered his hood. The line of autograph seekers and photo hounds thinned.

"Good job, Rob," one of his teammates said, patting Bobroczy on the shoulder.

A half-hour earlier, Bobroczy watched his Spire Academy teammates win the opening game of the Flyin' To The Hoop tournament, which is considered one of the premier high school basketball events in the country. His young coach, Justin Clark, stood protectively beside Bobroczy outside the locker room afterward.

"Where did they go?" Clark asked before Bobroczy made a break for it, wondering where the rest of his players were sitting. "I just don't want him to get bombarded." Clark spanned the arena for different routes to reach the rest of the team in the upper deck. This has become normal for the coach, because Bobroczy's high school experience is anything but. He's thousands of miles from his family in Romania, and for any teenager that would be difficult enough. But his height exacerbates everything.

The Spire Institute is nestled between Lake Erie and Interstate 90, on an unassuming 175-acre plot about 45 minutes east of Cleveland. Built in 2009, the 750,000-square foot facility has been christened as a U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Training Facility, and the small town of Geneva, Ohio, has become a beacon for high school athletes who seek specialized training and living accommodations at the complex.

It has also become something of a basketball factory since its inception, saying on its website that it has placed more than 100

players in college programs over the past five years. The prospects have been stockpiled largely by the academy's director, 34-year-old Bobby Bossman, who has built a vast network of relationships with coaches at the college, high school and AAU levels — as well as with agents and middlemen in overseas markets — to recruit players to his programs. Rarely does he stumble upon prospects out of sheer luck. Bossman was sitting in his office at Spire one afternoon in 2014 when he came across a YouTube video of Bobroczy, then 7-3 and 13 years old, playing for A.S. Stella Azzura, an amateur basketball club in Italy that produced Andrea Bargnani, the No. 1 overall pick in the 2006 NBA draft. "Holy Toledo," Bossman said under his breath. He Googled Bobroczy's name and learned that he was already one of the tallest players in Europe.

He immediately sent Bobroczy a Facebook message, but he didn't initially believe it would lead anywhere. When Bobroczy replied, they began an unlikely relationship that continued with periodic messages over the next year. Only then did Bossman begin to peel back the layers of his most fascinating recruiting story.

Bobroczy had grown up in a basketball family in Romania. His father, Zsiga, stands 7-1 and played professional basketball as well as on Romania's national team with Gheorghe Muresan, the former Washington Bullets player who at 7-7 is the tallest player in NBA history. That lineage explained Bobroczy's infatuation with the sport, and his parents' size — his mother is 6 feet tall — could at least explain his rapid growth early in his preteen years.

But that didn't make it any easier. "I guess when I was small, I focused on the negatives," he said. Bobroczy was 6-2 at age 8. By the time he was 12, he had surpassed his father's height. That year at a tournament in Romania he met Muresan, which helped change his perspective about his height.

"I had to look up for the first time," Bobroczy says. "We talked about never being shy, never feeling sorry for ourselves, just accept it, be happy and live with it."

Still, doctors studied Bobroczy's rare growth at every turn. They worried about his heart and weight. Bobroczy has scoliosis, a sideways curvature of the spine, and he developed pain in his knees as he grew. At 14, when he was 7-6, his parents brought him to Washington for a week of tests at Children's National Medical Center. Doctors didn't know when he would stop growing. Serious disorders — such as gigantism, caused by excessive release of growth hormones from the pituitary gland; and Marfan syndrome, a genetic disorder that affects the body's connective tissue - were ruled out. In free time between tests, his parents would take him to see the monuments in D.C. "We took the subway for some reason," says Bobroczy, who had to crouch just to fit on the train. "I was like, 'Are you serious?'" He found comfort on the basketball court when he returned to Europe, where his dad taught him back-to-basket moves and sky hooks; that helped Bobroczy land a spot with the club team in Italy. He continued to develop his shooting and court vision, but moving with his thin frame was difficult. Off the court he heard jeers, mostly from tourists when he ventured out into Rome. He reminded himself of a credo his father would recite growing up; that his height "could either be a curse or a blessing — you choose." "At the beginning, I just tried to ignore it. But then as I grew up a bit and got more mature, I realized that just ignoring it is not necessarily the right solution. You have to be smart about it," Bobroczy says. "Not everyone is necessarily polite, and some people have never seen such a tall person before, so it's a normal reaction. Now I try to be more accepting and just smile."

Two years after first hearing from Bossman, Bobroczy told him that he wanted to visit Spire.

The benefits for both Spire and the teenager were clear. Spire would inherit the ultimate basketball project, a player with above-average skills whom Bossman believed could eventually help his three high school teams. Spire was also keen on the attention that Bobroczy would bring its relatively young program; only 30 humans on Earth are verifiably taller, and having Europe's tallest player, who had already become something of a viral curiosity, certainly couldn't hurt marketing in the social media age.

For Bobroczy, the institute would cover the \$55,000 annual room and board. It would also complement its basketball training with full medical services, which includes monthly testing at the Cleveland Clinic and access to a sports psychologist.

"If you're 15, 16 years old and you're 7-foot-7, I can't even imagine the day you go through, the way people look at you, what people say. So the mental component was really big for us," Bossman said.

The medical challenges of training such a rare specimen are significant enough. As a sophomore this season, Bobroczy has been limited to five to 10 minutes per game, and he is not on the same practice regimen as the rest of the players. He arrived at Spire weighing just 180 pounds and was quickly put on a 5,000-calorie-per-day diet. Spire's medical and training staff are concerned that too rapidly accelerating his weight-gain and training goals could affect his heart. Bobroczy has never suffered a major injury playing sports, but his back and his knees are sources of discomfort.

"Nobody has ever trained anyone like him," says Brandon Strausser, a trainer at Spire who had not encountered a 7-foot person until Bobroczy. "We've had to keep a very open mind."

They've also had to be creative, as evidenced by a workout in the middle of December. Bobroczy cannot put any weight on his back when he squats, so the training staff propped his back up with a medicine ball against a pillar in the weight room, then had him squat as far as his fragile hips allowed. Instead of him working on a hamstring curl machine, they simulated the movement by tying a band to Bobroczy's feet and had him extend his leg while lying facedown on the floor. At the end of the workout, as always, he added a few chest lifts, because he dreams of adding muscle.

"I have to gain at least 60 pounds ... everything is centralized around getting big," Bobroczy says. "The biggest struggle [on the court] is getting from point A to point B. Speed."

What hasn't been a struggle for Bobroczy is building close relationships at Spire. Between sets during his workout routine in the weight room, he cracked jokes with Strausser, the trainer. They talked about his favorite player, Kristaps Porzingis, and the Ball brothers' move to Lithuania to play professional basketball.

"If you're going from Europe to U.S., you're okay. If you're going from U.S. to Europe, nah," Bobroczy said. He finished his session and went back to the locker room to put on his custom-made jeans with the 57-inch inseam; they hung over his size 17 Adidas. Bobroczy then walked through the silent hallways of the cavernous facility, ducking through every doorway and around every air vent, before arriving at the cafeteria for dinner with his teammates.

He has done everything in his power to blend in off the court. When Donald Trump held a campaign event at Spire in October 2016, Bobroczy was invited to sit in the front row; he declined because he didn't want to obstruct anyone's view. He moved into a new dorm with some teammates this year, and the facility managers moved two beds together so

Bobroczy could fit comfortably. He took the beds apart and stacked suitcases at the end of one bed so his feet would fit.

But there are some things he can't control.

"I've been looking and looking for you!"

Spire's chef said to Bobroczy as he arrived for dinner at the cafeteria, stacking his plate with mounds of spaghetti and broccoli. Bobroczy took his seat at a special elevated table, then sat on an elevated chair. His teammates sat beside him at a lower table.

Bobroczy dropped a protein bar out of his coat and had to get on both knees to pick it up. Grabbing a napkin was less of an inconvenience - he simply extended his arms to grab one, two chairs down. None of his teammates, who have grown protective and accustomed to shooing away photo seekers whenever they go to Cavaliers games or the mall, seemed to notice.

"Rob, we playing Call of Duty tonight?" a player asked. Bobroczy shrugged. He still had study hall — he's a straight-A student at a nearby boarding school who is fluent in Romanian, Hungarian, Italian and English — and he needed sleep.

Bobroczy has dreamed of playing professionally. "If I make it, my whole country would be proud. Everyone would know me, and it would be a reason to be proud," he says, even though he knows he has a long way just to play more meaningful minutes at the high school level. He still has two years of eligibility remaining, although nobody knows for certain if he will be able to get his body in shape enough to be a college prospect.

He and his teammates stayed for the nightcap of the Flyin' To The Hoop event, which featured 7-3 Bol Bol, one of the country's top college prospects and the son of the late Manute Bol, who stood 7-7 and along with Muresan set the NBA height mark.

In Dayton, Bobroczy earned gasps during warm-ups when he hit a few three-pointers and hardly needed to jump to dunk. As his

team pulled out a victory over host Fairmont High, the plan was to get him a few minutes of playing time. It never materialized. Bobroczy sat at the end of the bench, occupying two chairs to prop himself up as he watched.

After the first night of the tournament was done, he put back on his hood and headed for the exits along with thousands of spectators. It was a frenzy.

"Oh my god! He's a giant!" one kid screamed, and more high schoolers whipped out their phones to document his descent from a staircase to the front door of the arena. It only stopped when Bobroczy walked outside into a dumping snowfall. It touched his head first. "To be able to see the world from up there," he says, "is just different."