

I meet **Garrett Tallinger** who, at 6 feet 5 inches now towers over me, in his dorm room at Villanova College, a small Catholic school in the northeast. His cramped room in the suite he shares with other Villanova basketball team players has a single bed, a small desk, a computer, a picture of a young woman (a former girlfriend), and a window that overlooks a busy city street. Garrett's reddish-blond hair is cut very short ("buzzed"). He is casually dressed in a basketball jersey that displays his name and college colors, paired with gray, cotton-knit baggy shorts. The quiet, "low-key" manner that characterized him as a fourth-grader remains. Villanova awarded Garrett a four-year basketball scholarship that fully covers the annual private school tuition, room and board, books, and miscellaneous fees. His freshman year he played (off the bench) in all thirty games as a "small forward."

Sports dominated much of Garrett's childhood. He seemed to always have a soccer ball at his feet or a basketball in his hands. He played with friends at school ("just having fun") and on travel teams where he "loved the competition." In eighth grade, his family moved several hundred miles away when his father was offered an attractive job with a national nonprofit. His mother was able to be home with Garrett and his brothers for a number of years before landing a job doing high-level administrative work in a local university. Soccer was a relatively underdeveloped sport in their area, and Garrett's father, who remained actively engaged in monitoring and overseeing his son's organized activities, grew increasingly frustrated with the "yoyos" [i.e., idiots] who were in charge of the local soccer teams. That, plus a series of mishaps and conflicts (Garrett broke his wrist; the soccer playoffs conflicted with other commitments; and high school basketball and soccer were offered at the same time, forcing players to choose between the two) eventually made basketball seem the better option. At his high school, Garrett became "the first freshman to ever make varsity from the beginning." When the coach told him he would be part of the starting line-up for the team's first game of the season, Garrett

said that it was “the most excited I’ve ever been.”

Throughout his school years, Garrett continued to excel academically as well. Both his parents, but particularly his mother, pushed him to enroll in Advanced Placement and honors-level courses in high school. Ms. Tallinger “fought” with school officials to be sure that scheduling conflicts did not prevent Garrett (and other high achievers) from “maximizing their opportunities.” Senior year he took three Advanced Placement courses (English literature, calculus, and economics); he also took honors classes in physics and history. Garrett graduated with a “weighted” grade point average (i.e., one that balances course grades against course difficulty) of 4.2. He downplays this achievement, announcing that his brother Spencer, who enrolled in the high school’s most challenging program (International Baccalaureate), managed a 4.8 GPA. “Spencer is really smart,” Garrett tells me. He also reports being upset and “embarrassed” by his first round of SAT scores, which totaled “only” around 1030 to 1060 out of 1600 [i.e., 1550 to 1590/2400]. (“I know that I’m better than that,” he says.) Ultimately, through “mix and match,” Garrett scored 1090 [1640]—but he was extremely disappointed not to “crack” 1100 [1670].

In high school, Garrett had dreamed of playing basketball at Stanford or Duke. Although Stanford did express interest, in the end, they made an offer to another guard (“that sucked”). He could have played basketball at Yale or Brown, but neither offers athletic scholarships, and the tuition alone would have been extremely expensive. Ms. Tallinger was “really sad” for Garrett when Stanford did not work out (it “would have been great”) but also had hopes that he would attend Brown, her and Mr. Tallinger’s alma mater. In the end, the financial burden of paying for an Ivy League education along with the drawbacks of playing for a weaker team led Garrett to choose Villanova. Mr. Tallinger seems satisfied. He points out “the reality” of the situation: Villanova offered Garrett a complete “free ride”; he is doing well there academically (his GPA is 3.3); and he received the basketball team’s academic award.

(In reference to this last achievement, Garrett notes dismissively, “But that is not saying much.”) Garrett accumulated significant playing time during his freshman year and his team went many rounds in the NCAA championship tournament.

His plans for the future are uncertain. After briefly considering majoring in math and becoming a teacher (in part, dissuaded by Mr. Tallinger’s warnings about dismal earnings prospects “for the rest of your life”), he settled on a business major. He says he hopes to marry and raise a family, but he thinks twenty-five would be “too early” for that. He has some thoughts of working in the world of business, but once he finishes college, Garrett wants to play basketball for several years, probably in Europe.