

What Money Can't Buy

By Rick Reilly, Taken from Sports Illustrated "Riffs of Reilly" 3/12/07

THE TEXAS TITANS sixth-grade basketball team is on its way to a tournament, so the kids do what they usually do. They board Kenny Troutt's chartered 737 jet (except for the times when they rent the Dallas Mavericks' jet or the San Antonio Spurs'). There's a flight attendant on board, video games and Haagen-Dazs bars. They're going from Dallas all the way to Houston. It will take about 50 minutes.

The D.C. Assault sixth-grade basketball team is on its way to a tournament, so the players do what they usually do. They pile into assistant coach Ed Powell's 2000 Suburban. Coach Donald Campbell and another parent will also take their cars. They're going from Washington, D.C., all the way to Columbia, S.C. It will take about eight hours.

On board the private jet is the man who ponies up for everything, the 59-year-old Troutt, whose son is on the team. Troutt is the founder of Excel Communications and, according to Forbes, is worth \$1.1 billion. On a lot of the plane trips there'll also be at least one parent of each player, plus the three full-time salaried coaches and the team's general manager. This is nothing. For a tournament in Washington, D.C., last year, the Titans' traveling party numbered 95. Nobody but Troutt spent a dime.

Crammed into Powell's SUV are just the players. Hopefully, none of them will get carsick and throw up like on the trip to Florida last year. Powell's still trying to get the smell out. "A lot of these kids are from the inner city," he says. "They'd never traveled that far in a car before."

When the Titans arrive in Houston, a luxury bus is waiting for them on the tarmac. They head straight to one of the better hotels in town. Usually it's a Hyatt or an Omni. No hassles at the registration desk—their keys are waiting on a table. It's all been handled by the Titans' advance man.

The Assault players feel lucky if they get to stay in a Holiday Inn Express. One time they checked into a bargain motel, where the clerk handed them their towels through a slot in the protective glass. The rooms were cold and damp and dirty. The boys refused to get under the covers. They slept on top of the bedspreads or on the floor.

The Titans meet for dinner in a banquet room set up by the hotel. The food has been selected by the team's trainer-nutritionist.

The Assault usually gets KFC but occasionally splurges for Chick-fil-A. The coaches pay for the food, the gas and some of the hotel rooms. Powell's a social worker, but he makes more than some of the parents, who sometimes can't afford the \$25-a-player tournament fee. Then Powell pays that, too.

The Titans will play about 90 games this year and practice twice a week. They hire private coaches to teach shooting, defense and rebounding. Soon, they'll start practicing at the high-school-sized gym Troutt is adding to his 13,000-square-foot mansion in Dallas.

The Assault tries to practice twice a week, too, but it's not easy to get court time. The team practices at a rec center unless the high school kids refuse to get off the court.

The Titans go to great places. Last year they went to Las Vegas for a tournament and stayed at Caesars Palace. Troutt gave each family cash for a nice meal and a Vegas show. A lot of them saw Celine Dion. This summer the team is planning to play in Germany and Lithuania, and each player can bring a parent.

The Assault goes as far as the parents can drive. They flew one time to a tournament in Oregon. For nearly every kid on the team, it was his first time on a plane.

A lot of rival coaches and parents would like to dismember the Titans. They think Troutt is spoiling this team as well as the fourth-grade Titans. (He has a son on that team too.) They think 10 is too young to be living like an NBA star. They say Troutt unfairly attracts some of the most talented kids in Dallas with his money. But even rivals say that at least Troutt isn't trying to make money off his players' backs—the scourge of AAU ball—and his players are humble and well-behaved. "I'm not spoiling these kids," says Troutt, who co-owns 2003 Kentucky Derby winner Funny Cide. "Any kid that's willing to practice six hours a week and travel three weekends out of four is working hard for what he gets." To which his critics say, "Sounds brutal. Where do we sign up?"

Powell isn't complaining. His kids are disciplined and well-coached. "Sure, we wish we had some of those things they have, but we believe that if you're not handed things, then you're hungrier and you play a little harder. When you're sharing a car for five or six hours, when you're sleeping in the same bed as your teammate, he's not your teammate any longer. He's your brother."

The Titans played the Assault four times last year. The Assault won all four.