

PERSONALITY



by rich ehisen • photography by jaysoncarpenter.com



MARTIN

KEVIN

>> This Sacramento Kings player's small-town values make him a pleasing anomaly among NBA stars.

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ith apologies to Ella Fitzgerald, for most of the modern NBA's young gunners, life just don't mean a thing if it ain't got that bling—the gaudy jewelry, tattoos, cars and other assorted flash-and-dash accouterments that make it clear to everyone that a major league “baller” is in the house. Not so for Sacramento Kings shooting guard Kevin Martin, dubbed K-Mart by fans and media alike. Although the 24-year-old Martin has certainly worked his way into any conversation about the league's up-and-coming young stars—and wears diamond stud earrings—the star trip itself just isn't his thing.

Soft-spoken and polite, Martin could be the poster child for the kind of player NBA commissioner David Stern so clearly longs for of late. Faced with numerous negative incidents involving some of the league's most marketable young stars—from nasty brawls on the court to gun play and other serious criminal acts away from it—Stern has come down on the NBA's bad boys by enacting several rules meant to curtail their miscreant behavior, including a player dress code when representing the team, a minimum age requirement and limits on arguing with referees. But while Stern may get heartburn from the knucklehead behavior of a few—including Sacramento's own Ron Artest, who once earned the longest suspension in league history while playing for the Indiana Pacers after charging into the stands to pummel a fan he believed had thrown a cup at him and more recently was arrested on domestic violence charges and accused of animal abuse—the commissioner can breathe easier knowing the Kings' newest star is far more likely to shake a fan's hand than grab him by the throat.

“Kevin is really not typical for the NBA right now,” says Greg Elmasian, Martin's Sacramento-based agent. “He isn't like a lot of these guys. Kevin is really just very humble, smart and level-headed.”

With no posse in tow, no rap records in the hopper and no self-aggrandizing behavior in sight, Martin would, in fact, probably not be noticed at all were it not for the increasingly spectacular nature of his game. He doesn't even have a tattoo—practically heresy in big league sports these days. Tats are so ubiquitous in athletics that *Sports Illustrated* recently

“I WASN'T SURE IF I WANTED BASKETBALL TO BE MY PROFESSION.”

ran a feature on players and their often-elaborate body ink. But while Martin may well end up gracing *SI*'s pages one day, he insists it won't be for any creative design work on his wafer-thin biceps.

“I'm never going to get a tattoo,” Martin says. “I don't like needles, so I'm not going to let a needle on me. But I also want to be a clean-cut guy. That's just how I am.”

Low-key and clean-cut is pretty much how he has always been. Martin was born and raised in a rural town called Zanesville, a burg of about 25,000 at the confluence of the Licking and Muskingum rivers in southeastern Ohio.

Martin calls Zanesville a classic Midwestern small town, full of “friendly people, where everyone knows everybody.” His life there, he recalls, was a fairly laid-back existence with his parents—Kevin Sr., a landscaper, and Marilyn, a social worker—and a younger brother, Jonathon. As with many small towns, Zanesville is crazy for high-school sports—the kind of place longtime resident Dana Matz, who grew up with Kevin Sr., says “everyone goes to the games on Friday night and then meets up later at the local restaurant.”

Although Matz remembers Kevin Jr. as something of a late bloomer physically, he says Martin was always a gifted athlete. But while many young athletes learn early on that their physical abilities often give them carte blanche to get away with almost anything, Matz says Martin's strong family life kept him out of trouble.

“We're no different than anywhere else,” Matz says. “If you want to get into trouble here, you can find it. But Kevin Martin was always just a nice, respectful kid from a good home who always knew right from wrong. If he ever did get off track, his father would absolutely tell him that he needed to get straight. In fact, his father will *still* tell him.”

Aside from keeping him on the straight and narrow, Martin says his dad was a big influence on getting him into sports. “He's the one that got me into basketball,” Martin says. “He just always wanted to see me in anything: basketball, baseball or football. I played football and baseball for 10 years.”

By his freshman year in high school, Martin had focused his energy on basketball. He did

well enough to grab the attention of a few college scouts, ending up at Western Carolina University for the 2001–02 season. He was a sensation right away, leading the Catamounts in scoring while also becoming the second leading freshman scorer in the nation. But while his game was clearly a success, he still wasn't sure he wanted to set his sights solely on the pro game.

"I felt like I had it (the ability to play in the NBA), but I wasn't sure then if I wanted basketball to be my profession," he says. "I was studying pre dentistry when I first got to college. Basketball was just something I always liked and I still did it at that time because I liked it. But at the end of my freshman year, my coaches started telling me I could probably play in this league."

Buoyed by their support, Martin focused on the game, leading the team in scoring all four years and becoming one of the top college

players in the country. When the Kings made him their first-round draft pick in 2004, any thoughts of working inside people's mouths for a living were permanently retired. (While Martin did not finish his degree at Western Carolina, he continues to take classes in the offseason, working toward a degree in sports marketing.)

After a rookie year spent mostly polishing the bench with his backside, Martin began to earn steady minutes last year as the team made a late-season run to the playoffs. This season, he came out of the gates at a full clip, turning his willowy 6-foot-7-inch frame into a whirling blur of arms and legs, acrobatic spin moves and feathery jump shots. Just as in college, he has become his team's leading scorer and has secured a spot in the Kings' trinity that includes forward/guard Artest and point guard Mike Bibby.



Kevin Martin displays one of his dynamic jump shots during a game against the Chicago Bulls.

Jerry Reynolds, the team's director of player personnel, broadcaster and former coach who has been with the team since it came here in 1985, calls Martin's evolution as a player "remarkable."

"I think Kevin had a slow growth period in his rookie year where he was just overwhelmed," he says. Reynolds, who is himself from a small, rural town in Indiana, says that was probably to be expected. "Coming from Zanesville and Western Carolina, I think he felt like being in the NBA was like hanging out at the county fair."

Reynolds says that changed about halfway through Martin's rookie year. "From then on, there has just been constant improvement, constant growth. In fact, I really don't think I have seen a player in my 20-plus years with this team who has improved at such a consistent rate."

With that also has come personal growth, mostly by ingratiating himself with the local community. "I've had to grow up a lot," Martin says of his development. A self-described "basketball

nerd" who spends most of his free time either sleeping, hanging out with his girlfriend or studying game films, Martin has branched out this year, getting

KEVIN MARTIN HAS HIS OWN CHARITABLE FOUNDATION IN THE WORKS.

heavily involved in a number of charitable causes across the city, mostly those aimed at helping disadvantaged kids. He's sponsored events for local schools and has done work with the Police Athletic League. And he has his own charitable foundation in the works, which he hopes will keep him involved with the community when he is done playing.

But even as Martin's game has taken off, the Kings have struggled mightily with a new coach and a losing record that has prompted fans to regularly voice their displeasure both inside Arco Arena and through local papers and radio shows. Martin acknowledges that

it can be hard to stay positive when things are not going well, but says he has learned to take it all in stride.

"I'm a person who doesn't get too high or too low," he says after a moment of reflection. "In the NBA, you have to have that level because one night you could score 40 and another you could score 2. It doesn't matter if you're struggling or the team's struggling, you just have to keep on doing your job."

He also waxes philosophical about the fans' reactions to the team's playing poorly after so many years of success.

"Nobody likes being booed, but we have to realize we got booed last year," he says, the big smile returning to his face. "Then we made the playoffs. So hopefully that booing will help us make the playoffs again." 5

