

TOP STORY

# International Talent, Questions Follow Louisville's New Basketball Academy

By **ELEANOR KLIBANOFF**

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Head coach Jeremy Kipness, center, huddles with players for the Aspire Academy Wizards during the Grind Session World Championship in Owensboro, Kentucky on March 10, 2018.

The DeSales High School gym is all orange and brown, with horseshoes — for the DeSales Colts — decorating the basketball court.

But on a Sunday afternoon this fall, the gym's other home team was announced with red lasers and crimson fog. The Aspire Academy Wizards team was making its Louisville debut, and all eyes were on one player: 6-foot-11 Nigerian Charles Bassey, one of the top high school recruits in the nation.

The reason Bassey is in Louisville, playing for a two-year-old basketball prep academy, slipped onto the court without fanfare. That man's name was not announced with lasers and fog like the coaches and players, because international recruiter Hennssy Auriantal is not a man whose name gets announced.

He's a small piece of the transnational pipeline that brings high school kids from Africa to the U.S. to play basketball, usually at independent basketball prep academies like Aspire.

These teams play by their own rules, making them the perfect landing place for international players who might not be eligible at a traditional high school. They can offer what most traditional high schools can't: athletic scholarships, mid-season transfers and a national playing schedule.

This top talent brings shoe deals, sponsorships and paying customers. But with all this money floating around, experts caution these teams lack the safeguards that protect traditional high school student-athletes from exploitation.

Auriantal helped put Aspire on the map and also brought the baggage of an NCAA investigation, an international custody battle for his top player and a recent firing over his players receiving improper benefits.

Michael Kipness is Aspire's co-founder, main funder and a professional horse racing handicapper who goes by "The Wizard." He estimates he has invested \$700,000 into starting this program for his son, Jeremy, a 27-year-old former University of Louisville undergraduate student manager.

Kipness said his program is run with integrity, and he's unconcerned about questions around Auriantal.

"There's always people pointing fingers. There's always the press that will dig up something, and a lot of it is fiction, not fact."

## An 'overprioritization' of basketball?

Anyone with some money and a dream can start a prep academy.



Here in Louisville, the Aspire Basketball Academy

*J. Tyler Franklin*

Inside the Middletown house where Aspire Academy coaches say many of its players live. The players weren't home during the tour in April 2018.

(<https://www.aspirebasketballacademy.com/>) is made up of high school basketball players, but it's not a high school. It provides housing, but instead of a dorm, it's a two-story house in Middletown, supervised by two coaches who rotate duties. It promises a Catholic school education, but some students take online classes from home.

In interviews with KyCIR, Michael and Jeremy Kipness said their program is about more than basketball, and prioritizes the well-being and opportunities of Aspire players. But given the unregulated nature of this world, it's difficult to figure out which teams are doing things the right way — and what that even means.

Industry experts say these programs emulate summer basketball circuits like the Adidas Gauntlet and the Nike Elite Youth Basketball League, but year-round and coupled with housing and academics. They promise elite players a chance to improve their game against similar talent in pursuit of college scholarships.

"These players think they're going to get good exposure," said George Dohrmann (<https://georgedohrmann.com/>), an investigative sports reporter and author of "Play Their Hearts Out," a book about the youth basketball industry.

But Dohrmann said that's often not worth the tradeoffs.

"The problem is there are so many fringe kids who get sucked into that model and maybe aren't getting the education that they should be, that they're promised they will be, because they're focused on basketball," he said.

Currently, Aspire can't play member schools from the Kentucky High School Athletic Association during the regular season. KHSAA commissioner Julian Tackett said prep academies and his organization have a "philosophical divide as well as a technical divide."

"It's frankly a little bit of an over-prioritization of basketball," he said, addressing prep schools generally. "What you worry is that maybe people are, on the surface, trying to do things on behalf of students, but maybe it's really benefiting adults."

Jeremy Kipness, the head coach, said his program is about much more than basketball.

"The whole goal is to get these kids ready for the next level in all areas of their lives — socially, emotionally, in the classroom, on the court," Kipness said. "It's all about giving kids opportunities."

Jeremy Kipness points out that Bassey, the 6-foot-11 Nigerian player ([https://twitter.com/charles\\_bassey\\_?lang=en](https://twitter.com/charles_bassey_?lang=en)), has a 3.8 GPA. He said Aspire's interest in the player has more to do with Bassey's character than his status as one of the top three recruits nationally in his class.



Hennessy Auriantal, third from right, looks on while Charles Bassey plays in the Grind Session World Championship in Owensboro, Kentucky on March 10, 2018.

## Auriantal's international recruiting

Bassey came to Aspire with Auriantal — his legal guardian.

Auriantal did not respond to calls, Facebook messages or interview requests made through Michael and Jeremy Kipness. Bassey also couldn't be reached.

A Canadian, Auriantal played basketball at the University of Wisconsin in the late 90s.

According to his Instagram posts ([https://www.instagram.com/yes\\_i\\_success/](https://www.instagram.com/yes_i_success/)), Auriantal has brought at least 45 players to the United States in just the last few years, placing them at high schools around the country, including Aspire.

Before its move to Louisville last year, Aspire was in Arizona without any big name players or free Adidas gear.

But that all appeared to change when Aspire brought in Auriantal.

Auriantal isn't listed on the incorporation papers (<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/4432266-Copy-of-Aspire-Articles-of-Incorporation.html>) or anywhere on Aspire's website

(<https://www.aspirebasketballacademy.com/staff>). Jeremy Kipness said he is the vice president of international affairs and a paid staffer. Kipness said the website omission was an oversight.

Michael Kipness said his son and Auriantal know each other because of their respective connections in Africa. According to Michael Kipness, Jeremy Kipness lived in a hut in Senegal for two months working with a basketball program there.

“He liked Jeremy and he liked what we were doing,” he said of Auriantal.

Foreign high schoolers come to the United States through the F1 visa system, which is meant for academic study.

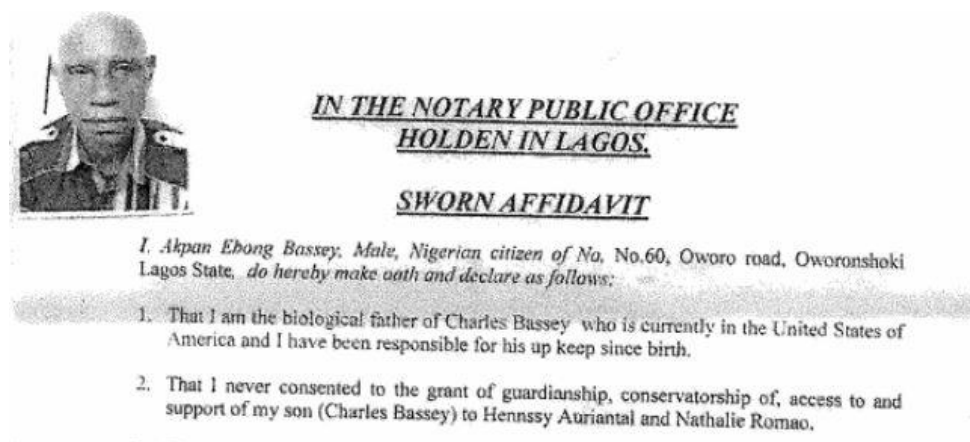
“There’s nothing wrong with using a recruiter to come and study in the United States,” said Carissa Cutrell, public affairs officer for Immigration and Customs Enforcement. “But students are ultimately responsible for maintaining their compliance.”

Auriantal’s recruits have gone to Catholic schools, established basketball powerhouses and flash-in-the-pan prep schools that disappear after a season or two. Many of his players move from school to school, sometimes four in four years.

Bassey, 17, is already at his second school since he came to the U.S. in 2015.

Bassey played for Auriantal when he was athletic coordinator at St. Anthony, a small Catholic school in San Antonio. While there, a judge granted Auriantal legal custody of Bassey in March 2017.

But the custody case turned into an international legal battle when Bassey’s father in Nigeria contested the agreement, according to court documents obtained by the San Antonio Express-News (<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/4432157-Bassey-Guardianship.html>).



Court documents filed in Bexar County, Texas, by a lawyer representing Bassey’s father said he had been coerced into signing the document.

Documents show Bassey’s father wanted guardianship restored to John Faniran, another recruiter in Nigeria. Faniran said in a phone interview that he had sent Bassey with Auriantal to the U.S. to get an education and a shot at a college scholarship, and had no idea Auriantal would try to get custody.

“I told him Charles was the next Hakeem [Olujuwon], so take care of him,” Faniran said, citing the Nigerian NBA great. “I didn’t know he was going behind my back.”

Ivan Friedman, the San Antonio lawyer representing Bassey’s father, said the pictures and signatures for Bassey’s father were inconsistent across the court documents. Given the distance and so many conflicting messages, Friedman dropped the case (<https://www.mysanantonio.com/sports/article/St-Anthony-coach-wins-custody-battle-over-Bassey-11290027.php>).

“I couldn’t feel with any kind of certainty that I was dealing with someone I knew was Charles’ dad,” said Friedman.

Faniran said he hired the lawyer and helped Bassey’s father with the case. They decided not to pursue it further.

“His father said, at some point, he just wanted to let it go,” Faniran said. “He didn’t want it to be too messy and affect his son’s career. We built Charles up, we don’t want to tear him down.”

Bassey's father could not be reached for comment.

While working to get custody of Bassey, Auriantal was also battling the Texas Association of Private and Parochial Schools.

The six international players that followed Auriantal to St. Anthony sparked an investigation from that athletic association in 2016.

The athletic association ruled that Bassey and at least one other player violated league rules by receiving athletic scholarships to attend St. Anthony. With Bassey benched due to the investigation, the school switched to a league that allowed athletic scholarships.

The Express-News reported (<https://www.expressnews.com/st-anthony-basketball-ticket-to-top/>) that Bassey's tuition was paid by the Beucler Family Foundation. Mike Beucler is a prominent San Antonio businessman and booster for the University of the Incarnate Word, which also runs St. Anthony.

While prep schools like Aspire allow athletic scholarships, financial support from a university booster could still raise red flags with the NCAA, said Rick Allen, a former NCAA compliance director and founder of the consulting firm Informed Athlete in Overland Park, Kansas.

"Was the booster just truly being supportive and a good guy for the kid, or was he doing it to angle a potential payoff on his investment?" Allen asked.

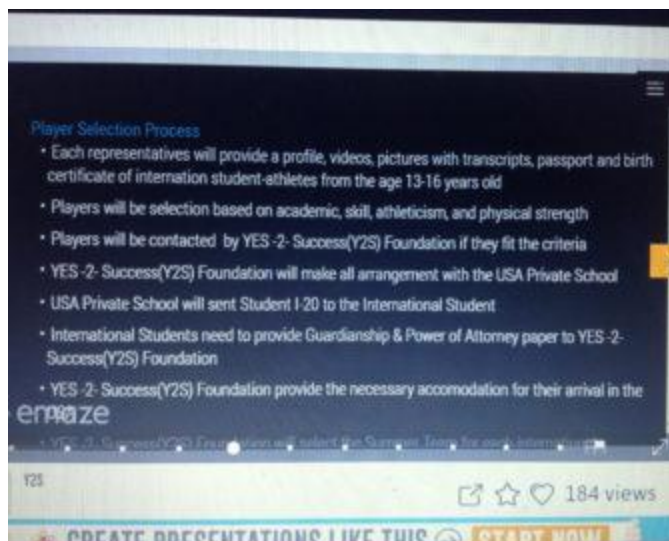
St. Anthony fired Auriantal

([https://www.mysanantonio.com/sports/high\\_school/high\\_school\\_basketball/article/St-Anthony-coach-Hennessy-Auriantal-dismissed-11342319.php](https://www.mysanantonio.com/sports/high_school/high_school_basketball/article/St-Anthony-coach-Hennessy-Auriantal-dismissed-11342319.php)) in July 2017. By then, he had moved from athletic director to interim associate head basketball coach.

With Auriantal out, the cadre of international players weren't far behind. By the first week of school in August, Bassey and some of his teammates were on their way to Louisville.

Problems have arisen for other international players tied to Auriantal.

Souleymane Doumbia came to the United States from Côte d'Ivoire through Auriantal's non-profit, Yes II Success, according to the organization's Instagram. He played at Evelyn Mack Academy in Charlotte, North Carolina in 2015. He joined Aspire and enrolled at DeSales High School this academic year.



Yes II Success presentation from EMaze.com explaining the organization's strategy for recruiting international students. (Courtesy San Antonio Express-News)

According to Jeremy Kipness, Doumbia took a trip home mid-season and wasn't allowed to return because of visa problems. Kipness wouldn't elaborate and DeSales President Doug Strothman said he couldn't comment.

Doumbia confirmed in a Facebook message that he's home in Côte d'Ivoire, but didn't respond to subsequent messages.

Doumbia's former school, Evelyn Mack Academy

(<https://www.wsoctv.com/news/local/charlotte-school-leader-allegedly-hid-foreign-students-from-homeland->

security/711384002) , was shut down after founder Evelyn Mack was charged in February with a federal immigration-related offense. According to the indictment filed in U.S. District Court in North Carolina, unnamed basketball coaches and recruiters paid Mack to say students were enrolled at her school in an effort to “knowingly and intentionally circumvent compliance with the student visa program.”

Immigration and Customs Enforcement accused Mack of sharing false and misleading information with the government about 75 student-athletes tied to her school.

Mack and her attorney didn’t respond to calls seeking comment.

## Other cases show that Mack is one piece of a larger — and interconnected — international recruiting web.

A West Virginia recruiter ([http://www.herald-dispatch.com/\\_recent\\_news/man-gets-federal-prison-time-in-basketball-academy-scheme/article\\_35243bd6-1afa-11e7-bd5e-5b87b2431124.html](http://www.herald-dispatch.com/_recent_news/man-gets-federal-prison-time-in-basketball-academy-scheme/article_35243bd6-1afa-11e7-bd5e-5b87b2431124.html)) is serving a year and a half in federal prison after he was convicted of luring students to the United States in 2011 with false promises of academics and basketball exposure.

Local authorities sent some players from that program to another coach, Aris Hines, who promised to help them find real prep schools. Hines, who separately brought some players to Evelyn Mack Academy, was charged in 2016 (<https://www.wsoctv.com/news/local/man-connected-to-private-charlotte-school-charged-with-defrauding-student-athletes/485608393>) with offenses related to his international recruiting.

The District Attorney’s office in Robeson County, North Carolina said 18 Nigerian basketball players were living together in one house.

In a separate but related case, the Alamance County, North Carolina sheriff has said he is investigating Hines for human trafficking. Hines couldn’t be reached for comment.

## Aspire found academic partner in DeSales

While the unregulated nature of prep academies make them ideal to accept international students, Aspire can’t sponsor visas for international students since it’s not a school.



St. Francis DeSales High School  
2017-2018 Online Application for Admissions  
FACTS Tuition Payment

*"The preparation of turning Aspire student-athletes into college graduates ready for the real world - the one beyond sports - is at the forefront of everything Aspire Basketball Academy aims to do."*

**- Co-Founder & Head Coach Jeremy Kipness**

**ACADEMIC LIFE AT ST. FRANCIS DESALES HIGH SCHOOL**

Our student-athletes at Aspire Academy are full-time students at St. Francis DeSales High School in Louisville, Kentucky. St. Francis DeSales High School develops the unique talents and abilities of its students by providing a variety of learning experiences both in and out of the classroom. Aspire Academy believes critical thinking and independent learning skills are crucial preparation for collegiate-level academics. Students-athletes of Aspire Academy find themselves in an environment that fosters academic excellence and unmatched educational support.

Aspire Academy student-athletes are students first and foremost. They are held to the same high standards, code of conduct, rules and regulations, and academic schedule as every other student attending DeSales High School. All undergraduate student-athletes are completely immersed in DeSales student life and are indistinguishable from their fellow students.

So Aspire partnered with DeSales High School (<https://www.desaleshighschool.com/news/aspire-moving-louisville>) , an all-boys Catholic school of about 300 students. The Archdiocese of Louisville, which oversees DeSales, is authorized to issue I-20s, the immigration paperwork these international students need to stay in the country.

Strothman of DeSales said the partnership has brought diversity, tuition dollars and attention to the school. Aspire's marketing boasts that all of the players get a DeSales education.

But the transient nature of the program means many players left before the year was over, and mid-year arrivals were on their own for academics.

At least 21 players were listed on the team's roster at different points during the year. Jeremy Kipness said the season ended with seven players on the team and six enrolled at DeSales.

The school doesn't take many mid-year transfers, Strothman said.

Michael Kipness said they intend for all the players to go to DeSales, but that's not what happened this year. The other students take online classes, which are arranged and paid for by their parents, he said.

Aspire players at DeSales are held to the same standards and follow the same rules, Strothman said.

But Aspire's schedule shows the team playing games across the state, and across the country, on half a dozen school days throughout the season. DeSales' boys basketball schedule didn't require its players to miss any school — and it couldn't have, per KHSAA rules.

"We have a percentage of allotted missed dates before there are consequences," said Strothman. "But we realize that some of these guys are very gifted and these are opportunities. We're not going to get in the way of that occurring."

Jeremy Kipness said when players have to miss class, the team's "academic liaison," Aspire executive coordinator Lupe Kraft, makes sure the students stay on track.

Kraft said in a brief phone interview that she is on campus multiple times a month meeting with DeSales teachers and administrators about the students' progress.

## **Prep academies 'like mushrooms'**

Prep academies run the gamut from postgraduate programs that promise ACT tutoring and not much else to established boarding schools that also attract top basketball talent.

Steve Smith, head coach for 33 years at Oak Hill Academy (<http://oak-hill.net/>) in Virginia, said he has watched the rise of newer prep academies warily. He doesn't play new teams unless they come to Oak Hill.

"We're not going to travel," Smith said. "I don't even know if these schools have gyms."

Anastasios Kaburakis (<https://www.slu.edu/business/about/faculty/kaburakis-anastasios.php>), a sports lawyer and professor at Saint Louis University, said it's increasingly difficult for players and their parents to tell which programs are legitimate.

"These institutions and these rogue actors crop up like mushrooms, all over the place, wherever they can find a community tie," he said.

State association regulations ensure high school players remain NCAA-eligible if they follow the rules. But prep academies play by their own rules and have to monitor themselves.

Michael Kipness said that's not a problem at Aspire.

"We're always talking to the NCAA," he said. "Coaches can come in and they don't have issues with our players."

Aspire's leaders openly admit to paying tuition and living expenses in an effort to attract top talent. That's allowed by the NCAA as long as the funders don't fall into certain prohibited categories, like university boosters or agents. The NCAA's definition of agent, though, is extremely broad: anyone who does currently or plans to seek "any type of financial gain or benefit" from an athlete.

There's little proactive monitoring of these programs, said Gerald Gurney, a professor at University of Oklahoma who studies academics in college athletics.

"Reliance upon the NCAA to actively pursue these schools — I won't even call them schools, I don't know what to call them — is foolhardy," said Gurney.



*J. Tyler Franklin*

Michael Kipness

## **Arizona to Louisville to Bowling Green**

Part of what makes these programs so hard to monitor is their ephemeral nature. Players move around, but so do entire teams.

Though it's only two years old, Aspire is already in its second location. The team was founded last year in Scottsdale, Arizona, before moving to Louisville over the summer.

Both Jeremy and Michael Kipness have ties to former University of Louisville men's basketball head coach Rick Pitino. Jeremy Kipness was a student manager under Pitino for four years; Michael Kipness and Pitino opened a company to buy a horse together (<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/4432149-Manhattan-Boys-Stables-Articles-of-Incorporation.html>).

Jeremy Kipness said the move to Louisville was to be closer to competition and recruiting opportunities for his players.

Coaches from a number of universities, including U of L, have visited Aspire practices. But recruiting rumors say Aspire's top player may have his eyes on a different Kentucky team.

Auriantal is rumored to be up for an assistant coaching job at Western Kentucky University (<https://www.courier-journal.com/story/sports/preps/kentucky/2018/02/14/western-kentucky-basketball-mix-nations-top-2019-recruit-charles-bassey/332583002/>), where Charles Bassey is being heavily recruited.

Auriantal has history with the Hilltoppers. A Senegalese player he helped bring over to the United States, Moustapha Diagne ([http://wkusports.com/roster.aspx?rp\\_id=1195](http://wkusports.com/roster.aspx?rp_id=1195)), is a redshirt sophomore there.

Diagne also spent half of his first season with the team benched by an NCAA investigation relating to Auriantal's intervention.

Diagne did not respond to messages to his email and Facebook accounts.

According to the Bowling Green Daily News, ([http://www.bgdailynews.com/sports/wku/senegal-native-diagne-took-long-road-to-wku/article\\_7ee54bd7-a1c5-519b-b0db-37b151debcc1.html](http://www.bgdailynews.com/sports/wku/senegal-native-diagne-took-long-road-to-wku/article_7ee54bd7-a1c5-519b-b0db-37b151debcc1.html)) Auriantal is Diagne's legal guardian. Diagne signed with Syracuse, but he never enrolled after questions arose about his high school transcript. He played in junior college and entered the NBA draft, but he wasn't selected.

In 2016, Diagne enrolled at Western Kentucky University and sat out a year per NCAA rules. Then, the NCAA opened an investigation into whether Diagne violated amateurism rules when Auriantal arranged to have his tuition paid, according to the Bowling Green Daily News.



Diagne lost half the season before the NCAA cleared him.

Diagne told the Bowling Green newspaper that Auriantal's motive is purely to help kids get an education.

"He's not looking for anything back," said Diagne.

Auriantal's network in college athletics extends well beyond Kentucky.

Ralph Auriantal, Hennssy Auriantal's brother, recently became an assistant basketball coach at Long Island University Brooklyn — and he has already landed one of Aspire's top international players.

Ousmane Ndim — a 7-foot-tall, 225-pound high school senior from Senegal — had scholarship offers from Oklahoma, Memphis and LSU.

He signed early with Long Island University Brooklyn.

"Ousmane could have gone to Oklahoma, but he would have rode the bench," said Michael Kipness. "The pundits will say it's because it's [Auriantal's] brother, but I'll tell you, LIU-Brooklyn is perfect, perfect for him," said Kipness.

## **Bassey lands top scores, big expectations**

The Aspire Academy Wizards ended their season at the Grind Session World Championship in Owensboro, Kentucky. Despite boasting 14 of the nation's top 100 high school basketball players, this tournament for basketball prep academies from around the country was held in a nearly empty gym. Aspire finished second overall, led by Bassey, who scored 22 of the team's 54 points in the final game.

Much like the first game of the season at DeSales, Auriantal sat quietly on the sidelines.

Though the season is over, basketball continues for these elite players. Aspire has spring conditioning, and Bassey will spend the summer playing for Auriantal's Adidas-sponsored team, Yes II Success Texas Future ([https://www.instagram.com/p/BhaOZt4lvGU/?taken-by=yes\\_ii\\_success](https://www.instagram.com/p/BhaOZt4lvGU/?taken-by=yes_ii_success)).

Bassey's recruitment is being closely watched, in Bowling Green and around the country, even though many people assume college will be a brief stop on his way to the NBA.

That's when Bassey would make the big money. People around him are already imagining what that would mean for the teenager — and for them.

"If Charles goes to the NBA, I would expect Charles would come back, mentor, visit the kids [and] make a donation to the foundation," Michael Kipness said.

Auriantal has given his young charge a nickname, borrowed from NBA great Kevin Garnett. He calls Bassey "The Big Ticket."

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