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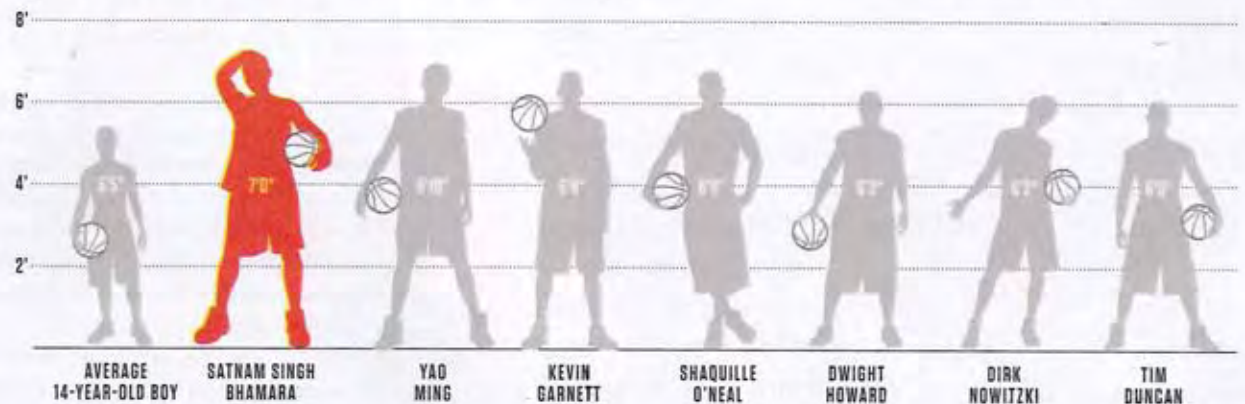
ONE

INDIA

ILLION

In a tiny village in India, a giant grew. His father placed a basketball in his hands. Years later, the NBA began searching for **India's version of Yao Ming**— and found seven-foot 14-year-old Satnam Singh Bhamara. by **MARK WINEGARDNER** photographs by **JOHN LOOMIS**

EARLY RISERS How tall is he? At 14, Satnam Bhamara dwarfed NBA big men when they were his age.





Satnam, photographed Dec. 8 at the IMG Academies in Bradenton, Fla., two days before his 16th birthday.

Soon, in a nearby village, the boy found a hoop. In no time, hoops found the boy—as, perhaps even in India, was not surprising for a kid whose turban nearly reached the net. People began telling Balbir that, in the cities, there were schools with proper courts where he could learn the game and, as a bonus, get an education. If he took to the game, as seemed certain, he'd have a chance to see the country. Maybe *represent* the country.

Maybe, just maybe, the boy could see the world.

Balbir's father would hear none of it. He refused to allow the boy to give basketball a try. Balbir would stay in the village and become a farmer. That was that. The boy obeyed, because that was what a boy did. In due course, he took over the farm and was prosperous. He married. He had three children. He was elected the head of the village.

And then one day another giant emerged: Balbir's middle child, a sweet and joyful boy named Satnam.

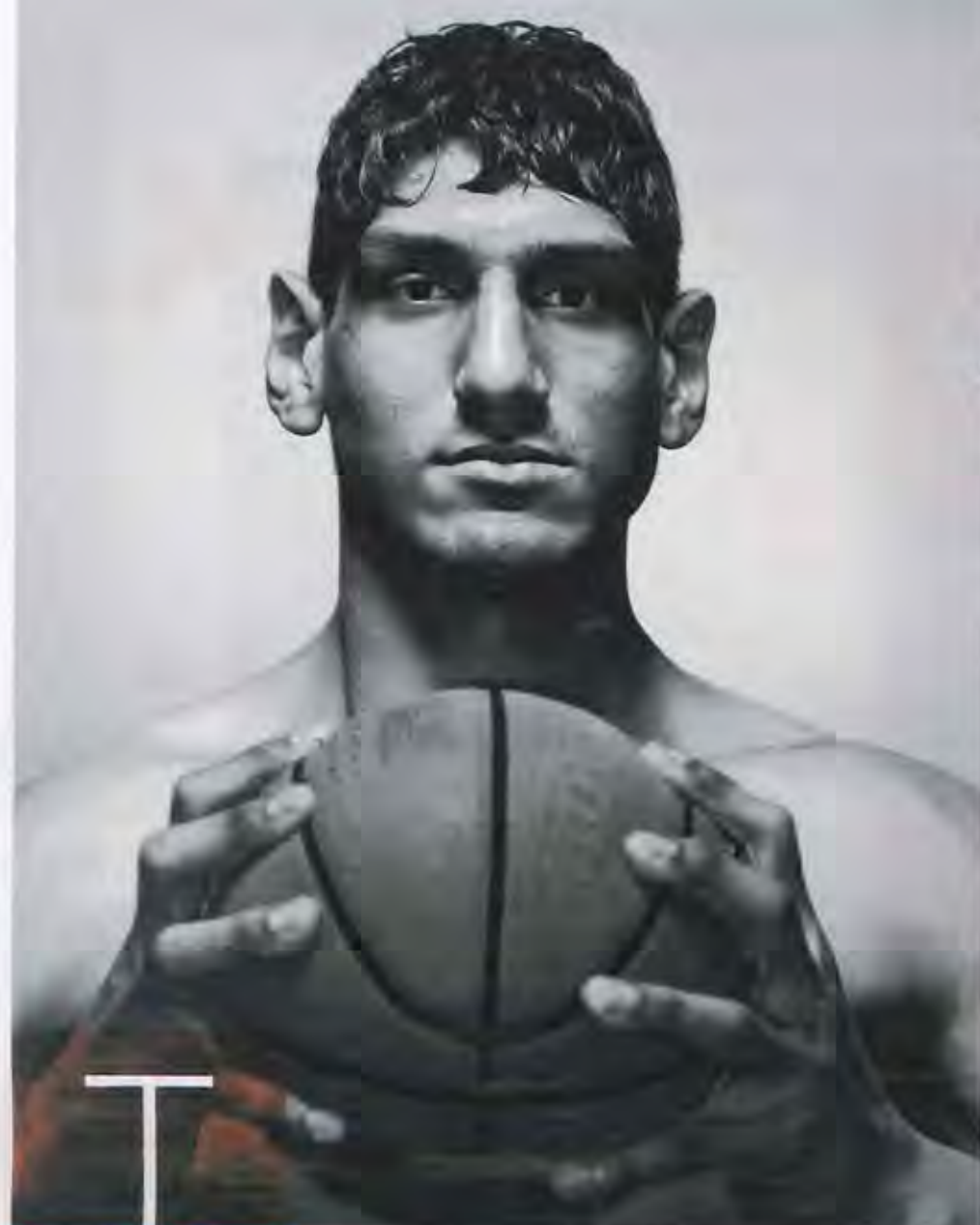
When Satnam was 9 years old and already taller than most adults in the village, Balbir took the boy to a scruffy local court to play basketball, a game Balbir still barely understood. Satnam walked onto the court, utterly bewildered. He had misunderstood and thought his father was taking him to play volleyball. Predictably, the boy struggled. Balbir watched, feeling untroubled, undeterred—happy, even.

Not long after they got back home, Balbir crossed the lumpy dirt courtyard that separated his small stable and mill from his even smaller house and mounted a hoop to the weathered brick wall. Balbir summoned his son to the courtyard and handed Satnam a new rubber basketball.


The family room was right inside. At the end of the workday, while others in the family strained to hear the little TV over the big kid's incessant banging of the ball against the wall, Balbir—a man destined to become the second-tallest person in his village—would just sit back, sip his tea with buffalo milk, stroke his long, graying beard and grin.

Balbir never pushed the game on Satnam. It just took. Over the next several months, puzzled villagers watched as Satnam spent hour after hour in that courtyard. The hoop and ball—merely odd at first—seemed to assume magical powers. The already tall boy shot up, dramatically, as if summoned skyward by the hoop. Just like that, he was as tall as his grandmother. Satnam's hands grew so large that, to the villagers' eyes, the basketball seemed to be mysteriously shrinking. They called him *Chhotu*—Punjabi for “little one.”

The real magic, of course, lay not in mere objects but in the boy's love of the game and the father's love of the boy. Naturally, Satnam—who now



Thirty or so years ago, in the Indian state of Punjab, in a tiny village surrounded by rice paddies, miles from the nearest home with air conditioning or even with glass and screens on all its windows, there lived a teenage boy named Balbir Singh Bhamara who did what had once seemed impossible; he grew to be taller than his mother. ¶ Balbir's father was a wheat farmer and miller with a string of glistening black water buffalo that gave milk as sweet as honey. His mother was 6'9", and young Balbir grew to be a little over seven feet tall—the tallest person in the village. ¶ Everywhere the giant boy went, people told him he ought to play basketball, a game many of them had heard about but never seen. Then, as now, cricket was the only sport that mattered. Hockey (meaning field hockey)—the official national game—was, by comparison, a niche sport. As was football (meaning soccer). Then, as now—but probably not for much longer—basketball was little more than a curiosity.


Satnam studies more than just low-post moves at IMG—despite the ergonomically challenging amenities.

looked almost as surreal in the seat of a tractor as Balbir—still helped with the family farm, but it was that magic that cordoned off time for him to practice. It was that magic that made the father pay for increasingly long and increasingly frequent trips throughout the Punjab region so the son could find other boys who played this exotic game and men who knew how to coach it.

In a year or so, Satnam was dominating the youth leagues in Punjab.

Balbir, who knew little of the world beyond the Punjabi countryside, took his giant son aside one day and pledged that he would do whatever he could to see that Satnam received the maximum chance to realize his abilities and dreams, no matter where that took him.

Satnam's father began asking friends and neighbors for advice and learned about a sports academy in Ludhiana, the nearest big city. It soon became Satnam's second home.

Three years ago, at the age of 13, Satnam was 6'11" and 230 pounds with size-18 feet, broad shoulders, a soft shooting touch and a voice deeper than Andre the Giant's. Other than all that? Just an ordinary, well-brought-up teenage country boy—humble, polite, shy, confused, a little goofy, perpetually embarrassed and in every way awkward.

In both of his homes, he was loved and happy.

In the summer of 2009, Satnam was invited to New Delhi to try out for the national junior team, which had qualified to play in the FIBA Asia Under-16 Championship in Malaysia. He didn't know enough to be intimidated or frightened. He was summoned, his coach said go, and so he went.

When he made the team, he was the youngest and tallest player on the roster.

Weeks later and without complaint, eager to see the world, the giant boy folded himself into the seat of an airplane for a five-hour flight across the Bay of Bengal.

He loved the travel, the sights, the new competition and, especially, the food. He'd been raised to appreciate food and was thrilled by tangy new dishes such as *mee rebus* and *laksa penang*. But the games themselves showed Satnam that his dreams were outpacing his skills, which still had far to go. He played only a few minutes a game. India went 3-4—including a 74-point beatdown at the hands of the Chinese, the eventual champs—and finished 10th out of 16 teams.

When Satnam returned home after a few weeks away, his life seemed no different from before. The tournament was barely mentioned by the Indian media. There was no Indian equivalent of Scout.com or the ESPN 100 to take notice of the still-growing middle school giant who made the national team. There were no sneaker company-sponsored AAU teams to woo him with free shoes and under-the-table payments—all to the good, although he did need shoes. He'd outgrown his and couldn't find any his size.

Satnam and his teammates at the academy knew about the NBA, but not much. They had favorite players, but these were only the biggest stars.



No one Satnam knew, not even his coaches, could have named 25 active players. No one could have named half the teams. No one had seen a game in person. Though a few games a year were broadcast live on cable at the crack of dawn, almost no one, Satnam included, had ever watched one from beginning to end. Certainly no one had any inkling that the NBA was about to launch an aggressive effort to partner with a few multinational corporations and build Indian basketball into a massive sacred cash cow. The target audience: Indians under 25. In other words, one of every 12 people on the face of the earth.

But Satnam and his teammates had spent countless hours watching clips on YouTube. And although no one from India has ever played in the NBA or even come remotely close, there wasn't a baller under the dim lights in that dingy gym who didn't try to ape the moves he'd seen online, who didn't imagine himself as Kobe or LeBron. For Satnam—who dreamed of being Kobe—hardly a day went by when someone didn't say something to him about Yao Ming, about becoming that one big star who ushers a nation of a billion strong onto the world's basketball court, the giant who becomes the catalyst for creating wealth beyond all imagining. The one who, maybe most important, single-handedly subverts pernicious stereotypes about his country's people and what they can do.

No one said all of this, of course. Instead, it was always some variation of "the Yao Ming of India." Even for Indians who knew nothing about basketball, this reliably delivered the whole message.

In November 2009, the NBA announced that Heidi Ueberroth—daughter of former MLB commissioner Peter Ueberroth and an oft-rumored replacement for NBA commissioner David Stern—would be the first president of NBA International. Ueberroth, who a few years before had helped launch NBA China, immediately set her sights on India, hiring a former Athletes in Action coach by the superhero-alter-ego-sounding name of Troy Justice to be the NBA's first director of basketball operations in India. Justice's mission: build interest in the game from the grassroots level.

Four months later, IMG (the global U.S.-based sports marketing and management titan) and Reliance Industries (the largest corporation in India) announced the creation of a new sports and entertainment marketing company called IMG Reliance, which, as its first order of

business, signed a 30-year contract with the Basketball Federation of India. Not only did the deal sew up all commercial rights to the game of basketball in India, it also allowed for the launch of an IMG Reliance-owned and managed professional basketball league. To get there, IMGR would attempt to build an infrastructure for basketball from the ground up: facilities, coaching, tournaments, school leagues, etc. IMG Reliance also announced it would provide full scholarships to train and go to school at the IMG Basketball Academy in Bradenton, Fla., whose alumni include Chauncey Billups, Kobe Bryant, Vince Carter, Al Harrington and Joakim Noah. The first recipients would be four boys and four girls—the best Indian basketball players 13 years old or younger.

No one, however, was quite sure how to find them.

Meanwhile, Satnam continued to grow.

By the spring of 2010, Satnam, now 14, was almost as tall as his father. His shoulders and torso had broadened. His voice had grown deeper. Then one day, back on the blacktop outdoor court at the Ludhiana sports academy, the head coach blew his whistle and halted practice. He ordered his players, who ranged in age from 14 to 24, to line up along the baseline, shortest to tallest, and stand at attention. Satnam, a head taller than the very tall boy beside him, glanced down at his shoes. He'd had a village cobbler slice the sides of a pair of running shoes and refashion them to accommodate Satnam's feet, which had kept growing and were now sticking out the ripped sides of the shoes. For a month, his coach had been talking about the important American from the NBA who was coming to watch them play. It was a notion so fantastical that Satnam hadn't expected it would ever really happen. Suddenly it was real. And here Satnam stood, a shaggy-haired giant in these inadequate shoes.

The American was a bald and florid man, trim but on the front slope of middle age, rumpled and bleary, minutes removed from stepping off the all-night train from Mumbai. The academy's coach explained that this man, Mr. Troy Justice, was the NBA's first director of basketball operations in India. He'd be running big tournaments and training players, the coach said, and spreading the culture of basketball throughout the nation.

Justice, more than anything, was looking forward to getting to his hotel and catching a nap. But the sight of Satnam brought him out of his fog. Satnam felt the man's eyes on him. The coach asked whether Justice wanted to run the rest of the practice and seemed surprised

when the American agreed. The boys broke rank and queued up in front of Justice, each in turn bending over and touching the visitor's feet before they took the court. Satnam was last in line.

"For your blessings," the academy's coach said, explaining the gesture.

Justice put the players into a three-man weave drill. Satnam's skill set was, to be generous, limited. He hustled and shot surprisingly well, but he couldn't handle the ball or reliably catch it. He shied away from physical contact, clearly worried he might hurt someone, although his footwork was so bad he might have been a bigger threat to hurt himself.

"How old is that kid?" Justice asked the coach.

"He is 14."

Justice shook his head. "I need his real age."

"That is his real age. He is 14. His father is 7'3". An exaggeration, a few inches for effect, but it got Justice's attention. The boy wasn't the product of a tumor on his pituitary gland, and he was so young for his size that his flaws on the court all suddenly seemed fixable.

"Do you mind if I take Satnam off to the side to work on his footwork?" Justice asked the coach.

Satnam spoke no English. In Punjabi, the coach told him to go work on footwork with the American. The boy, mortified, nonetheless obeyed. That was how he was raised. One obeys. He willed himself to forget about his shoes. He focused on what the American, who spoke no Punjabi, was trying to teach. Justice wasn't sure he'd ever coached anyone who was more *present*. Afterward, a reporter asked about the giant young Punjabi. "He can be the chosen one for basketball in India," Justice said.

Three months later, in June 2010, Satnam, still 14, led Punjab's state youth team to a national championship. Right after that, the Basketball Federation of India chose him and two others to send to the NBA Basketball Without Borders camp, which was held that year in Singapore—where Satnam got to meet several NBA players and coaches and be showcased as one of the 44 best basketball prospects from Asia. He was the youngest player there.

Soon, Harish Sharma, the head of the BFI, invited Satnam to play at an all-star game against senior players, most of whom were on the Indian national team. Sharma was impressed by Satnam's talent and character, but he wondered why a boy like that would want such long, shaggy hair.

"Sir, I have huge ears, and I can't afford to leave them uncovered," Satnam said.

THE PIPELINE

Thanks to an influx of Indian immigrants to the Toronto and Vancouver regions the past few decades, there are arguably more Indo-Canadian basketball prospects than Indian ones. These three stand head and shoulders above the rest—literally so, in the case of the Bhullar brothers. —Chris Wilson

SIM BHULLAR, 18

At 7'5", 360 pounds, Bhullar is a mountain of a man and an unusually agile mountain at that. His parents hail from the same Punjab region as Satnam Singh Bhamara, but Bhullar is a Toronto native. He played his high school ball at Huntington Prep (WVa.) and signed with New Mexico State in 2011. While the shot-blocking specialist also has great hands, he needs to improve his conditioning, skill and strength to compete in D1.

TANVEER BHULLAR, 16

Sim's little brother Tanveer is only 7'3" and 260 pounds. He's a junior at Huntington Prep and plays AAU ball with Team Takeover Canada. Immovable in the paint and virtually unstoppable when he's able to establish position near the block, Tanveer has a more natural skill set than Sim's and is comfortable facing the basket out to 15 feet, where he has a surprisingly deft shooting touch.

MANROOP SINGH CLAIR, 17

A combo guard from Vancouver with a jaw-dropping ability to rain down threes, Clair is another product of Huntington Prep. The 6'3", 165-pounder is a crafty ballhandler and is more than capable of finding the open man, but it's his shooting that makes him special. A long-range gunner—part Jimmer Fredette, part ICBM missile—Clair can, and does, knock down shots from anywhere on the floor.

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Satnam, at home in Punjab,
with brother Bayant, father
Balbir, mother Sukwinder
and sister Sharbjot.



"It doesn't matter how long your ears are," Sharma said. "It's how good you are as a basketballer that matters."

The next time Sharma saw him—hours later—Satnam had cut his hair short. He was also holding his own against the best senior players in India.

It was about then that officials from the newly formed IMGR met with Sharma to ask for help in identifying prospects for the scholarships. It hadn't dawned on them to consider anyone from last year's junior national team, since all, no doubt, were 16 or 17 by now. The scholarships were for kids 13 and under.

Sharma's first suggestion was a boy of 14.

Too old, they told him.

"This boy, you will want to see," Sharma insisted. "I've told people many times, he can become India's Yao Ming."

And so it was that Satnam became one of 50 players chosen to try out, in July 2010, for eight scholarships. He tried to explain this to his parents, but he barely understood it himself. Something about the chance to better himself by going to America among the big buildings, fast cars and all types of people. Where he would get an education and be trained for basketball along with other young student-athletes from all over the world in what must be a legendary place, seeing as it was where Kobe once trained. All expenses paid.

His mother could not imagine it or even believe it. She would miss him too much. More than words. But Balbir did not hesitate. If this is what the important people in the game of basketball think is best for you, then go. You are a levelheaded boy with God in his heart, he said, and we want you to be guided by the best teachers and make your way in the world. We want you to do what you love. Balbir embraced his son. The whole family, he said, would make the seven-hour trip to New Delhi to cheer him on.

Days later, outside the Sanskriti School, a charter bus carrying the scholarship hopefuls rolled up. The doors opened. The IMG coaches watched. A whole bunch of little people—and one guy standing head and shoulders above everyone else—emerged from the bus.

At that point, for all practical purposes, there were only seven scholarships still up for grabs.

Satnam proved not only to be the tallest and

strongest player there but also the most coachable. Raw, yes, but with no deep-seated bad habits to break.

Afterward, the coaches met Satnam's parents. Clearly, Satnam was Balbir's son—and not just because they were both over seven feet or because when either gave a handshake, his hand seemed to go halfway up your arm. It was the feeling the coaches got from Balbir. Despite the language barrier, he looked them in the eye when he talked. He smiled, and it felt genuine. That was the word for it: genuine. You could feel it—father and son alike.

Next stop: the great unknown.

By August 2010, before he could fully comprehend it, Satnam was 8,000 miles away in Florida, immersed in an elite young-jock version of a Benetton commercial and loving all the new food he got to eat. His parents were hooking up the new computer they had bought so they could watch their son's games on YouTube and talk to him on Skype.

Whenever Satnam called home—his night, their early morning—stray villagers would wander into the house to stick their heads in front of the screen and wave.

Because of the scholarship (and IMG Reliance's public-relations might), almost every major Indian media outlet did a story about the Americans' discovery of the Indian prodigy—with nary a word of how he'd been on the national youth team they'd ignored the year before but, always, with some mention of Yao Ming.

In August, when Satnam first hit the courts at IMG, his English was nonexistent and so, the coaches thought, was his coordination. He'd barely done any strength training other than farm work.

NEXT

At first, the coaches had to bend the English-only rule on the practice court. They feared he might hurt himself just running up and down the floor. But he was a quick learner. Within weeks, he knew enough English to get through any practice. And the physical improvement came even faster. He was running the court well and lifting weights like a man. He began to develop a decent lefthanded shot. He started to lose his fear of hurting people if he really banged the boards and used his size.

Satnam seemed unfazed by culture shock—perhaps because of his native, cheerful groundedness, perhaps because of the well-funded, insular bubble that is the IMG Academies, which provides him and his fellow transplants, among other supports, with a full-time chaperone/translator. Or, maybe, it was just magic.

When Satnam arrived at IMG, it was easy to watch him clomping around the court, scoring infrequently, struggling to catch the ball, and wonder whether he'd ever improve enough to play in the NBA.

Then again, as 2011 unfolded and Satnam toiled away at the IMG Academies, it was equally easy to imagine what might be. Satnam works like a mule. He's a coach's dream. Noted big-man guru Pete Gaudet, Coach K's longtime assistant who took over as the Indian women's team coach this summer, said that if Satnam were playing at a U.S. prep school, there would be scouts from elite college programs lining up to watch his games. Kenny Natt, a veteran NBA assistant and head coach who recently took over the Indian men's team, said that if NBA scouts could see Satnam, they'd be licking their chops at the prospect of drafting him.

So where, we wonder, does the fairy tale of Satnam Singh Bhamara end? With an NBA debut, dozens of Bollywood stars in the stands and a hundred million Indians waking up before dawn to watch the game on TV? Or might the kid just fade away, the guileless victim of other people's projections and wishful thinking?

Perhaps, by way of an answer, we could craft one of those artful flashbacks and end the tale of Satnam's rise from basketball

backwater to legitimate phenom this past summer. At the Indian men's team tryouts, with Natt suffering from Delhi belly and worried about what he'd gotten himself into, in walks 15-year-old Satnam. After a few days of drills and scrimmages, Natt tells the boy he's made the team (and will be one of the youngest national-team members in the world). Satnam grins, but not too much, and shakes the coach's hand.

If that's too soft for a fairy-tale ending, how about when Satnam makes his debut on the adult-level world stage, in September 2011 at the FIBA Asia Championship in China? In that case, we'll just say a lot about the food and the experience and finesse the part where the kid is at the end of the bench and scores a couple of points a game.

Or maybe our story ends in October 2011, when the kid has his first breakout performance at the FIBA Asia U16 Championship. There, after being overmatched by the excellent Chinese team in the first game, he slams down almost a point a minute in his next seven, including 41 against a very good Korean team, and leads the tournament in scoring. He hauls down nearly 10 rebounds a game and, according to Justice, is one of the two best post players there.

No.

Satnam's life and career could, like that of any blue-chipper, go any which way. One never really knows. But an entire life is not the same as a story. And this story, this part of a life, bursts into bloom at the end of 2010, during winter break from the IMG Academies, when the country boy whose horizons have stretched farther than he ever could have imagined, whose possibilities have become limitless, returns from America for the first time. There, still 14 years old for a few more days, giddy to see his family again after four long, strange months on the other side of the world, his mammoth frame folded into a too-small car as it approaches the village, Satnam can't believe his eyes. A crowd has gathered—1,500 people, maybe more, far bigger than the population of the village. They've come from all over the region to welcome Balbir's son home.

The giant boy is too overwhelmed to notice that he's grown a shade taller than the father. The father couldn't be happier. ■

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