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ZEKE MARSHALL ISN'T YOUR TYPICAL HOOP STAR

BUSTER

The Curious Case of

Zeke Marshall

On first glance, McKeesport 7-footer Zeke Marshall appears to be a standard high school basketball star. Look deeper and it's clear he's anything but.

By Ryan Canner-O'Mealy

Photos By Jeff Swensen

"Dunk the ball, Zeke!" "You gotta power it up, Zeke!" "You should be dominating, Zeke!"

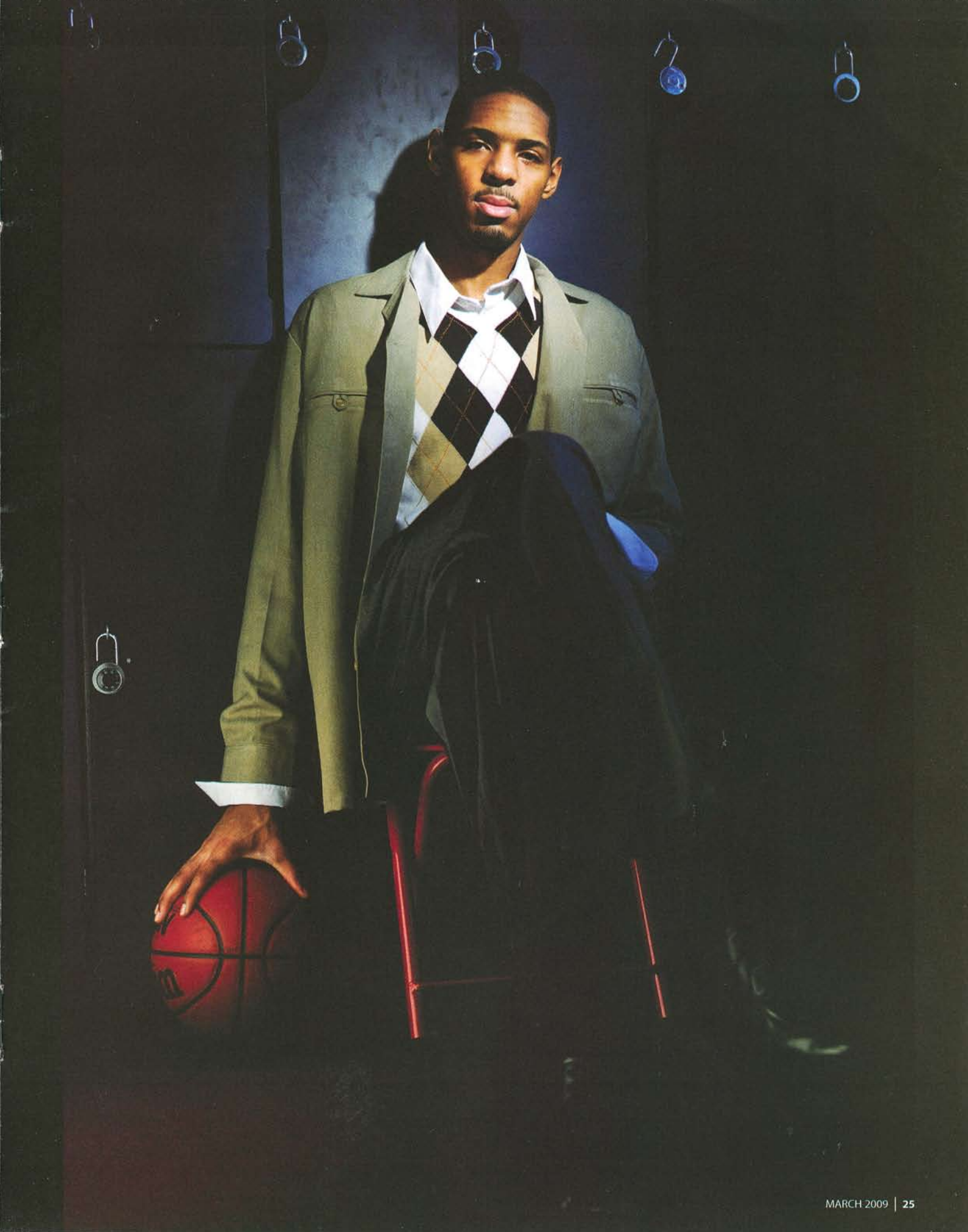
Zeke Marshall hears the critics.

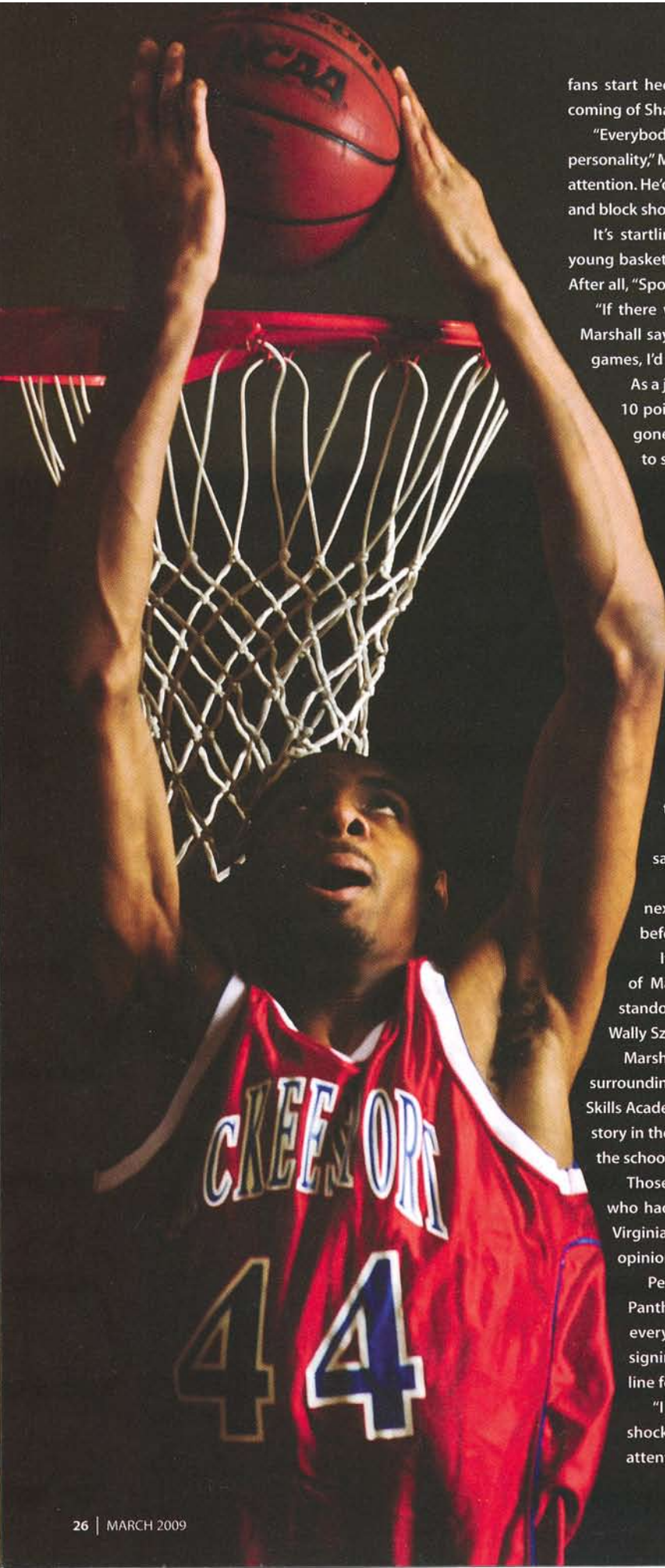
Such is life for the 7-foot McKeesport senior center. There's nowhere to hide. Fans are always expecting more from him, even though he averaged nearly a triple-double as a junior.

But Marshall ignores the critics.

"If there is pressure, it doesn't faze me," says Marshall, who is rated the state's No. 3 player in the ESPNU 100 and No. 70 nationally.

Marshall is the rare teenager who truly does not care what anyone else thinks. And that attitude forms the foundation for everything he does — his style of play on the court, his dedication in the classroom and his unconventional decision to spurn bigger-name programs to sign with Akron. So when opposing





fans start heckling him and calling him overrated because he isn't the second coming of Shaq, Marshall easily laughs it off.

"Everybody wants him to be this dominating center, but that's really not his personality," McKeesport coach Corey Gadson says. "He's a kid that doesn't need any attention. He'd rather take a backseat and pass the ball. He just wants to play defense and block shots."

It's startling to hear the words come out of Gadson's mouth because elite young basketball players are almost always conditioned to be scoring machines. After all, "SportsCenter" doesn't highlight things like strong help-side defense.

"If there was a way I could win every game without scoring, I'd pick that," Marshall says. "I'd really rather never score. If I could just play defense and win games, I'd be happy with that."

As a junior on a team with several high-scoring seniors, Marshall averaged 10 points, 11 rebounds and nine blocks per game. But with those players gone this season, he's had to pick up his offensive output for McKeesport to stay successful.

He's had his share of 20-plus-point games this year, but Marshall's

"He's a unique guy in today's world."

calling card remains his defense. He is an outstanding rebounder and a game-changing shot blocker. The normally quiet Marshall gets fired up when he swats one out of bounds and would take a rejection over a dunk any day of the week.

Marshall especially loves the look in his opponents' eyes when they see his 7-foot-5 wingspan protecting the rim.

"It's fun seeing them get intimidated and not wanting to shoot," he says. "It makes me realize they're fearing me."

His future college coach expects him to be just as dominant at the next level. "He's going to be one of the best shot blockers in the country before it's over," Akron coach Keith Dambrot says.

It's rare that a coach from the Mid-American Conference signs a player of Marshall's talent and potential. The MAC has produced several NBA standouts, but they have been mostly late-blooming perimeter players like Wally Szczerbiak and Earl Boykins.

Marshall committed to Akron last spring, and there was serious buzz surrounding the program over the summer when he attended the LeBron James Skills Academy, which is held on the Zips' campus. He was the subject of a feature story in the local newspaper, and numerous Akron fans dropped by to check out the school's high-profile recruit.

Those fans probably left unable to believe their luck at getting a player who had offers from Big East power Pitt and ACC schools like Virginia and Virginia Tech. But Marshall has never been one to be swayed by popular opinion.

People constantly told him he should have picked the hometown Panthers or some other school where he could have been on national TV every other week. But Marshall never second-guessed himself, and when signing day came around in November, he inked his name on the dotted line for the Zips.

"I did it for me, not for other people," Marshall says. "Some were shocked, some were mad, but they really don't know me so I don't pay attention to it."