

# RISE ABOVE

THE WORLD WATCHED IN HORROR AS A MAJOR EARTHQUAKE DEVASTATED HAITI IN 2010. SKAL LABISSIERE LIVED THROUGH IT, AND HE'S NOT LOOKING BACK.

WORDS BY MATT REMSBERG // PHOTOS BY JOHN FEDELE

FOR SKAL LABISSIERE, THERE'S NO TIME TO LOSE.

He's been in America for less than 18 months, and his list of accomplishments is staggering. He's learned English and won a state championship, all while establishing himself as one of the nation's top basketball prospects in the Class of 2015.

Why the urgency? Because he knows better than most never to take a single day for granted.

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Moments after arriving back at his house in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, after basketball practice on Jan. 12, 2010, Skal headed to the bathroom to wash up. That's when the earth began to shake.

He and his younger brother both ran to their mom, Ema, in the next room, where they huddled together as a magnitude-7.0 earthquake rumbled. As fate would have it, they were in the only room of their home that didn't completely cave in, but the wall they were leaning against began collapsing on top of them. A desk was the only thing preventing it from coming all the way down.

They were alive, but they were trapped.

"I was thinking, 'I'm about to die,'" Skal says.

As thunderous noise gave way to eerie silence, Skal heard his father, Leslie, in hysterics. His dad had been outside at the time of the earthquake and could only watch as the home

crumbled with his wife and children inside. Soon, though, Leslie heard his family crying for help, so he hurried off to get assistance.

As the rest of the world started to learn of the earthquake that would ultimately leave hundreds of thousands of Haitians dead or injured, Skal and his mother and brother endured a harrowing three-hour rescue.

"I was freaking out," he says. "I asked my dad to forgive me for all my sins. At any moment, it could have been the end for us."

After they were freed, the nightmare was far from over. Skal had been pinned awkwardly under the wall, and couldn't walk for two months. He spent most of that time in bed recuperating. But once he got back to full health, things began turning around.

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A few months before the earthquake, Skal had decided to dedicate himself to basketball in hopes of one day reaching the NBA. He knew he'd need to move to the U.S. at some point to chase that dream, but he thought it would be many years down the line. After the earthquake, that opportunity was suddenly at hand.

Through the Reach Your Dream program, a nonprofit organization that identifies and relocates talented kids to America from

disadvantaged countries, Skal was given the chance to attend Evangelical Christian School (Cordova, Tenn.). Eight months after the earthquake, Skal was set up in Tennessee in time for his first day of eighth grade.

"I remember hearing about the earthquake at the time and thinking it was an awful tragedy," says ECS

basketball coach Terry Tippett. "But when you hear about it from someone who lived through it, who lost so much, it's just devastating."

Skal didn't dwell, though. He got to work. And there was plenty to be done. His fundamentals were sound, but in game situations he was lost. His Haitian teams never ran plays, and explaining strategy to him was a struggle because he was still learning English.

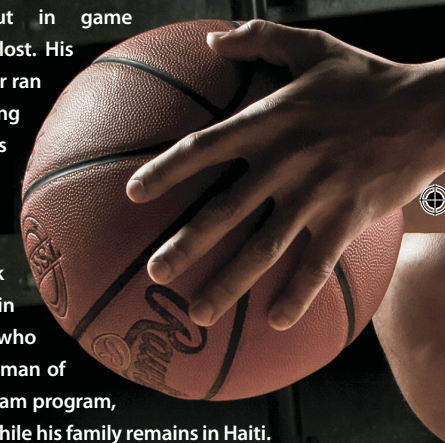
"I actually took English classes in Haiti," says Skal, who lives with the chairman of the Reach Your Dream program, Gerald Hamilton, while his family remains in Haiti. "But when I got here it was nothing like the real thing. It was very frustrating."

With the help of some NBA greats, the language barrier soon fell. Skal supplemented his English classes with episodes of "Hardwood Classics" on NBA TV. Not only did it help his language skills in general, it especially helped him with basketball terminology.

Skal's favorite player is Kobe Bryant, but as a 6-foot-9 power forward/center, he also idolizes Tim Duncan and Hakeem Olajuwon. After helping ECS to the Tennessee Division II-A state title last year as a role player, Skal is now playing like the NBA stars he loves to watch on TV. He moved into the starting lineup for the Eagles this season and was the team's leading rebounder and scorer as of press time.

"Skal works with a purpose," Tippett says. "He's gonna be good. He wants to be good. You can tell just by watching him."

He's got no time to lose. ☺



A MAGNITUDE-7.0 EARTHQUAKE WREAKED HAVOC ON HAITI IN 2010

DESIGN: PICY / REYNOLD MANISE / GETTY IMAGES



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