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7-foot-4 teen has NBA dreams

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Sim Bhullar's 7-foot, 4-inch frame folds awkwardly into a seat at the Air Canada Centre.

His size 22s barely fit beneath him. His knees jut out into headspace of the adjacent row. Bhullar's 340 pounds are as uncomfortable as they have ever been.

But the baby-faced giant is growing used to his enormous stature, and the massive expectations they produce. And if you ask him, the 18-year-old will tell you he fully expects to reach those heights.

"I want to make it to the NBA," he says, looking over the wooden Raptor floor, pondering a day when maybe, just maybe, he'll dunk a ball and thousands of Toronto fans will roar with him.

"I want to play here for my family and my friends, and everything," he says.

Bhullar's already as close to *here* as an 18-year-old from where Islington Ave. meets Albion Rd can be.

On Tuesday he joined Canada's top high school basketball players at the All-Canada Classic.

Among the prospects joining Bhullar on the ACC floor were Mississauga's Naz Long and Brampton's Anthony Bennett — teammates at Findlay College Prep in Nevada. (It's the same school that NBA-bound Tristan Thompson, of Brampton, went to).

Long and Bennett's West squad — along with Bhullar — were getting schooled 78-49 in a defenceless first half, highlighted by a would-be-dunk air ball by Bennett as time ticked down at the half.

In the end, the West topped the East 132 to 111, in a high-scoring, fast-paced, zero-defence til that lived up to its All-Star game billing.

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Ottawa's Negus Webster-Chan, who finished with 25 points for the West, was named game MVP.

On the women's side, Toronto's Lindsay Shotbolt led the East team to a 51-42 win over the West. The 16-year-old forward from Bill Crothers Academy finished with 18 points, and was awarded game MVP by special guests DeMar DeRozan and

Sonny Weems.

Bhullar finished with six points in the game, with his family sitting courtside. His mother, Varinder (5-foot-10) and father Avtar (6-foot-4) fed him a lot of Indian food when he was growing up, he said.

In the third quarter, he blocked power forward Steven Jankoic without even jumping.

It's only been a few years since he realized his potential in basketball. He started playing basketball competitively in Grade 8, and went south to a prep school near Pittsburgh in Grade 10.

In November, Bhullar transferred to Huntington Prep in West Virginia (where Webster-Chan also plays). Since then, under the guidance of head coach Rob Fulford, he's dropped 40 pounds.

"He's come a long way in a short period of time," Fulford said, at the ACC watching Bhullar play. "He still has some work to do, lateral foot speed, things like that. But those are things that will come with time and hard work for him."

Bhullar recently committed to an NCAA Division 1 scholarship with Xavier University in Cincinnati, Ohio. He knows he has a long way to go to be a top player in the NCAA, let alone making the NBA, but says he's committed to getting there.

He takes a great deal of pride in his South Asian heritage: he hopes to do the same thing for basketball in India that Yao Ming did for China.

"If I make the NBA, basically a whole country is going to know that an Indian player made the NBA," said Bhullar, whose parents moved to Canada 22 years ago.

He'll be pushed every enormous step of the way by his 16-year-old brother Tanveer — 7-feet-2, size 19 shoes — who is taking his place at Huntington Prep next season. Yes, there's another one.

Asked which Bhullar was more dominant on the court, Tanveer replied: "Right now he is — because he's longer and bigger.

"But soon it's going to be me."