

The Wunderkind Years

MEET FIVE **PRODIGIES** WHO BALANCE SCHOOL, FAMILY AND FRIENDS WITH BEING EXCEPTIONAL AT COMPOSING MUSIC, DIVING, GOLF AND MORE

By **Anne Lang** | Photography by **Matthew Mahon**



Hayden Graham | **Basketball Powerhouse**

Basketball has been in Hayden Graham's blood since he was old enough to walk. One of the Anderson High School senior's earliest memories is of shooting mini-hoops in his bedroom, "as if I were Michael Jordan in *Space Jam*," he laughs. During first grade, after scoring 25 points in his first organized game, Graham knew he had found his love—and talent.

Last November, the 6-foot-5-inch starting player and co-captain of the AHS varsity basketball team signed a National Letter of Intent to play for the United States Air Force Academy in the fall. The Academy was attracted not only to

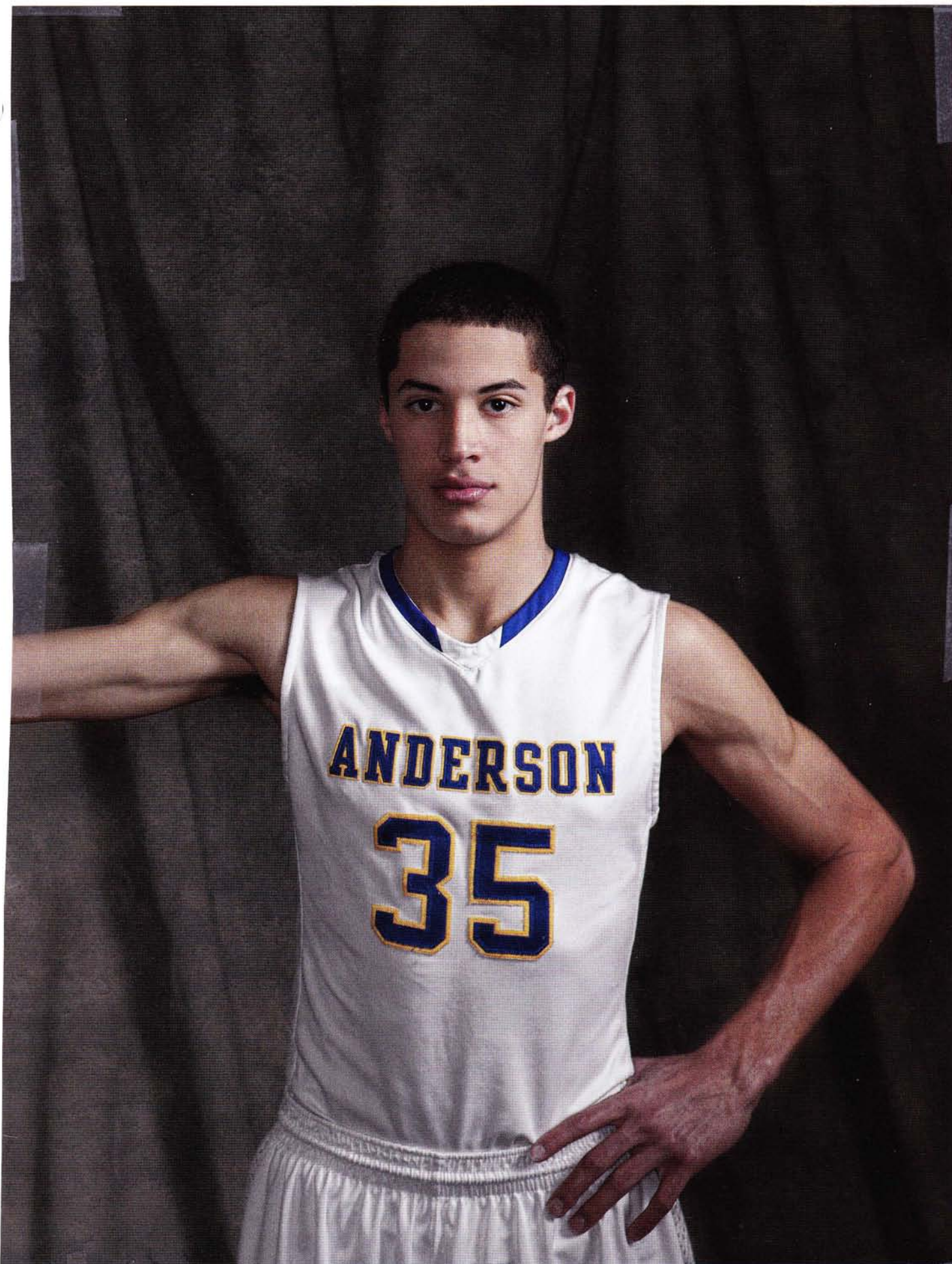
the 18-year-old's 3.5 GPA but also to his basketball record, which includes having been selected to the 2nd Team All-Team District and 1st Team All-Academic during his junior year. Averaging 17 points per game, Graham is among the leading high school scorers in Central Texas.

Last summer, Graham, who has a wingspan of 83 inches—four inches wider than Olympic swimming champ Michael Phelps—was voted MVP and All-Tournament in two state competitions. "Hayden is a great person, both on and off the court," says Leal Anderson, AHS boys' varsity basketball coach.

"He's a humble, hard-working, driven young man."

Graham says he practices about 13 to 15 hours per week, aside from games. Most weekends, he sharpens his skills for another four to five hours, which includes occasional one-on-one games with former San Antonio Spurs point guard Johnny Moore. "That man knows his stuff," Graham says.

While the 2012 Anderson Trojans Player of the Year dreams of a possible NBA career, he's focused on college, where he wants to study meteorology. "I've always been curious about the weather," he says. "I love snow and storms."



Christine Lin *Golfer Extraordinaire*

Christine Lin vividly recalls walking around the iconic campus of a certain Ivy League college in Cambridge, Mass., last summer. "I could actually imagine myself at Harvard," she says.

A senior at Westwood High School, where she is co-captain of the girls' varsity golf team, Lin committed last December to attend Harvard with clubs in hand. She's well prepared for both school and sport. Carrying a cumulative GPA of 5.4 on a 5.0 scale, Lin is a member of several academic societies and the recipient of many academic awards. She also does volunteer work and plays competitive piano. But the invitation to play varsity golf was the icing on the cake.

The 18-year-old developed a love for the game at age 8 after tagging along with her dad during his weekly round. "Each course reminded me of a maze or a puzzle, which I liked, and I learned that there wasn't only one way to excel at the game," she says.

Today, Lin has a stroke average of 75.05. And she was named to the 2011 HP Scholastic Junior All-America Team for American Junior Golf Association members who have high college-placement test results, great grades, perform community service and turn in top golf finishes. "It's rare to find an individual who excels in the classroom and on the golf course," says Dacia Mackey, WHS girls' golf coach. "Christine is one of these rare finds."

Hard work has something to do with it. Lin practices with the team every other day from 3 to 5 p.m., as well as two hours on her own on "off" days. On weekends, she puts in another four to five hours, either at the driving range or playing a round with her dad. During the summer, she practices on a daily basis and plays in tournaments several times a month. And she still finds time to make jewelry, listen to Coldplay and Adele and hang out with friends.





Jared Beu | *Music Master*

When Jared Beu was a toddler, his parents got him a Tap-a-Tune toy piano, and when he was 4, they bought him a Yamaha 61-key keyboard. "I still have them both," he says. Fast forward 14 years, and the McNeil High School senior is not only a piano star, but he also plays saxophone, marching percussion, bassoon and bass clarinet, and has racked up musical achievements, including winning the Austin Symphony Orchestra's Young Composers Contest twice.

"Jared is probably the most musically talented student I have taught in my 26-year career," says Travis Ancelet, director of the MHS band. "Composing music is something few musicians excel at, much less high school musicians."

The 18-year-old, who was named to the 2012 Texas Music Educators Association All-State Band, says his top challenges are finding enough hours in a day and keeping his perfectionist streak in check. "It's easy to obsess over little

details in the music to the point where you are never fully satisfied with anything," he says.

A self-described night owl, Beu often writes his music after midnight, despite getting up at 6:30 a.m. to practice with the orchestra, band or saxophone ensemble before school. Inspiration for compositions "comes at random times," he says. "I can hear something that spurs my imagination or dream the music, but just as frequently, I come up with important ideas while improvising on the piano."

Beu's work often provides insight to his state of mind. Take, for example, "Affirmation," which the Austin Symphony is playing April 26: "It became clear to me that the feel of the music was reflective of my mental state in my final year of high school: busy, stressful and chaotic, but longing for calmness and ultimately optimistic," he says.

He should be optimistic—he was recently accepted to UT's highly selective Butler School of Music.

Alison Gibson | *Diving Dynamo*

She's just a slip of a girl, but at the UT Swimming Center, Alison Gibson, 12, is affectionately called "Big Al"—a nod to all of her accomplishments.

An avid swimmer since 3, Gibson had been competing in meets for several years when UT's head diving coach, who knew that Gibson, then 9, was also a gymnast, suggested she try diving. It took just one lesson to convince her that this other sport suited her fine.

Since that day, Gibson has won an array of springboard and platform competitions around the nation. She was the 2011 Junior National Champion on 3-meter springboard and a silver medalist in that division at the 2011 Pan American Junior

Diving Championships. And last fall, she was invited onto USA Diving's Junior Elite Performance Squad, which helps divers qualify for international events, including the Olympics.

Some of Gibson's older friends have Olympic medals, and she says she's inspired to follow in their footsteps. "The 2016 Olympics are possible for me," Gibson says, "but for now, I'm taking it one dive and one dive meet at a time."

Among those dives is an inward two-and-a-half tuck, where Gibson "jumps backward, yet sort of flips forward at the same time," says Longhorn Aquatics Coach Gabi Chereches, adding, "You have to be a risk-taker to excel at div-

ing, and Alison is fearless."

As someone who is primarily home-schooled by her parents, Gibson has the flexibility to spend about 25 hours a week at the swim center, though she says she's often up before 6 a.m. to get a jump on schoolwork before practice. She takes seven "out-classes" from two schools for credit (two at the high school level) and maintains a 4.0 GPA.

Gibson, who likes to shop at The Domain and hike the Greenbelt with her family, also has afternoon dive practices from 3 to 5:15 p.m., followed by 90-minute swim practices. "We have a saying in our house: 'We do not sleep until it is all finished,'" she says.





Taylor Sutton | *Renowned Rider*

One of Taylor Sutton's proudest moments occurred last August in California, when she earned one of four divisional trophies awarded at the United States Equestrian Federation National Junior Hunter Championships/West Coast. The prestigious event, a challenging course of 3 ½-foot jumps, only accepts the country's top qualifiers. "Nothing makes you smile more than giving your mother what she wanted for her birthday—that championship and leading the victory gallop around the ring," she says.

The win capped a year during which the Westlake High School junior won prizes in two dozen horse shows across the nation. With her horse MTM Braggin' Rights (aka Casey), Sutton ended up fourth in the nation in the USEF Large Junior Hunter 15 & Under division. The 16-year-old also finished in first place in USEF Zone 7 and earned two year-end reserve championships from the Texas Hunter & Jumper Association. One of those titles was won on

her second horse, MTM Summit (aka Big), in the category of High Junior Jumper, which calls for galloping full-out around a course of 4 ½-foot jumps.

It's rare for a rider to excel in both jumper and junior hunter events, especially at Sutton's age, says her trainer, Kelly Lorek of Madrone Ranch Stables. "Taylor is a go-getter," she adds. "She's always willing to go the extra mile, as a rider and as a person."

The equestrian's busy show schedule, coupled with 15 to 20 hours per week of training, calls for plenty of self-motivation with schoolwork. "I really have to use my time wisely," says Sutton, who has received awards in technology, Spanish and interior design. She hopes to major in graphic design or advertising in college.

The only conflict she has with horse shows is missing Friday night football games at school. "I love rooting for the Chaps," she says. "But you have to make sacrifices for horseback and any sport that takes complete dedication." ■

CONTRIBUTORS

→ **Jill Broussard**

Dallas-based photographer Jill Broussard relishes opportunities to come to Austin for photo shoots, noting how much she likes the scenery here. This month Broussard shot the Opener, Trends, Spa and Style for Men pages in the Style section (page 65-70) in our very own office.



"Creative women, great products, Austin culture and food. Is there anything better in a 9-to-5 workday?" she says. Broussard says she especially loves looking closely at colors and composing photos of things that are edible or emotional. She has worked with *Parenting Magazine*, *D Magazine*, *Dallas Modern Luxury* and *On Magazine*.

→ **Matthew Mahon**

Photographer Matthew Mahon grew up in Germany and graduated from Rutgers University in New Jersey, where he studied documentary photography. Mahon, who now lives in Austin, shot five remarkable young people for "The Wunderkind Years" (page 108). "I always enjoy the opportunity to work with *Austin Monthly* because they are so supportive in allowing me to be myself in my creative process," he says. His work has recently been published in *WIRED UK*, *Fast Company* and *ESPN The Magazine*. In his free time, Mahon enjoys reading, traveling, riding bicycles and eating his favorite food: breakfast tacos.



→ **Anne Lang**

Writer Anne Lang's journalism degree from Michigan State University led to jobs as a newspaper reporter, radio copywriter and trade-journal editor. Today, she mostly works as a contributor to *People* magazine. Lang says she had fun connecting with the young subjects of "The Wunderkind Years" (page 108). "I was blown away by these kids, not only in terms of their amazing accomplishments, but also their intelligence, honesty and energy," she says. "Definitely, these are 'five to watch!'" An Austin resident for more than 30 years, Lang is also an award-winning writer for several national equestrian magazines.

