

## From Page Youth Center to the Thunderdome? Santa Barbara High School star Luke Zuffelato receives an offer from UCSB

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Photo courtesy of Greg Zuffelato.

Nine years ago, a seven-year-old Luke Zuffelato took his first steps into the Page Youth Center, Santa Barbara area's youth basketball hotbed. Many of Santa Barbara's high school basketball players get their first taste of organized basketball here years before debuting for their high

school. Located in Goleta's Eastern Valley just before Hollister Ave. turns into State St., the Page Youth Center boasts two indoor courts and can take credit for cultivating some of Santa Barbara's finest basketball talent.

"I wasn't very good," Luke recalled. "I was just playing with kids I grew up with. I was coming off the bench."



Zuffelato pictured in Clovis, Calif. in 2014. His family moved to Santa Barbara the next year. Photo courtesy of Greg Zuffelato.

This past January, nine years later, Luke and his father Greg, who is also his head coach, were invited to the Thunderdome by UC Santa Barbara men's basketball head coach Joe Pasternack. They were met inside the film room by Coach Pasternack and his entire staff. After a brief presentation, Coach Pasternack informed the Zuffelatos that Luke is being offered a full scholarship and a spot on the men's basketball team at UCSB.

"It was a great feeling knowing all my hard work has paid off," Luke said. Greg also described the emotions he felt as a father during the meeting. "I felt, as a dad, major relief. Since being a little kid, he's worked so hard. His dream is Division I basketball. To know that's locked in, it's great. I felt the weight of all these years of not knowing what's going to happen lift off my shoulders."

In the time since his first days wearing rec specs at the Page Youth Center, the now 6-foot-4 Luke has become one of Santa Barbara's most highly-touted basketball prospects of all time. Having recently finished his junior-year season, Zuffelato [averaged over 27 points per game](#) en route to leading Santa Barbara High School to a Channel League championship, semifinal run in the CIF Southern Section tournament, and qualification to a state championships tournament appearance. The guard also has First Team All-Channel League and First Team All-CIF honors to his name, with more accolades surely to follow. For Santa Barbara High School's single-game scoring and all-time three-point record holder, UCSB's Thunderdome may well be his next stop.





Luke Zuffelato throws down a vicious dunk against Lompoc High School in December 2023 at Santa Barbara High School's JR Richards Gymnasium. Photo courtesy of Greg Zuffelato.

It was at the Page Youth Center all those years ago where Luke discovered his affinity for basketball. “As I got to fifth grade, I started getting better at basketball,” said Luke, adding that he played a grade above.

In middle school, Luke transitioned to club basketball to seek a more competitive and rigorous experience. Luke realized that he was a special basketball player while playing for local clubs.

“As I got into middle school, there was a realization,” Luke said. “So I just worked harder. As I got older, I started to realize more where I am and the high level of basketball I can play at.”

One of Luke’s most cherished accomplishments came while playing for local club Santa Barbara Vipers in sixth grade. At a tournament in Anaheim, California, Luke’s team banded together to

take home a gold medal. “We came together as a team and won [the championship] by about four points. Earlier on in the tournament, we had lost to that team by 15 points.”

Youth basketball in Santa Barbara has several distinct characteristics, one being the defensive style of play. “I grew up in Fresno. Clovis West [High School] is known for their trapping defense and full court press,” Luke said. “Down in Santa Barbara, most teams run man-to-man defense.” The Zuffelatos say this influenced Luke’s development, having moved from Fresno to Santa Barbara in 2014 before Luke began second grade at age seven.

Greg also pointed to the small size of the community and large number of youth basketball programs in Santa Barbara. “There’s our club, Hustle Hoops. There’s also the Vipers with Dave Palmer. The Page Youth Center,” Greg described. “You have so many different people pouring into our kids that... we have way more opportunities than other communities the same size.”

Santa Barbara’s location and population also affect the basketball scene. “There’s a lot more publicity in the L.A. area. There’s a lot more people getting more looks down there,” Luke said about scouting opportunities.

This necessitates increased travel for youth basketball teams in Santa Barbara. “All the club programs have to travel,” Greg said. “What’s been great is the Sports Academy in Thousand Oaks. It brings all the L.A. teams up and allows us to meet in the middle where we play at a really high level. During the club season, we’re in that facility twice a month or more, or even in L.A.”

Greg also credits UCSB's basketball program for growing the Santa Barbara basketball community. "UCSB's tradition and success, [and] Coach Pasternack, has taken them to another level of quality. Even back in the Pimm era they had really good runs and great players," Greg said. "For our town, basketball is a primary sport."

In fact, Luke has been able to take tangible advantage of UCSB's basketball program by training with Calvin Wishart, a [former UCSB men's basketball player](#) who now plays professionally for [C.D. Póvoa](#) in Portugal, during Wishart's time at UCSB.

Wishart said in an interview that Luke's mentality is a real asset that goes beyond his basketball skill and athleticism. "I think he'll do well no matter where he ends up because he's level-headed and poised," Wishart said. "I think he'll do just fine because he's poised and skilled, and that can take you a long way." Wishart expects Luke to rise to the mental challenges that come with playing basketball at UCSB should he choose to accept his offer. "Playing for UC Santa Barbara, there's expectations. Luke, if he decides to take [his offer], will be poised enough to handle the ups and downs."

There are plenty of reasons that may compel Luke to commit to UCSB. "I know Santa Barbara. Great weather – great everything, really. Santa Barbara is one of the best places I could've possibly grown up," Luke said, noting the importance of location towards his ultimate decision. "Being home and near family, it's great."

Not all of UCSB's pros on Luke's list have to do with just being from Santa Barbara. "It's a great program. Coach Pasternack is a phenomenal coach, one of the best coaches in the country." Luke

said. Coach Pasternack was reached out to for comment, but NCAA bylaws forbid coaches from commenting on potential recruits.

“The coaching staff and the relationship I have with them is one of the biggest factors,” Luke said, emphasizing the importance of his relationship with his future coaching staff. “Coach Pasternack offered a great opportunity to go to UCSB and meet his staff. That’s going to play a big part in where I choose. Building good relationships with the players and coaches is key to me.”

Greg then seconded the importance of strong relationships to their family. “It’s different [with UCSB], we have such a good relationship with them and we know each other. Other people that see him in club are going to have to develop a relationship with him,” Greg said. “The process will be different with other schools.”

The opportunity to continue representing Santa Barbara through college was not lost on Luke either. “It would mean the world. You hear the term ‘hometown hero’ a lot. It’d be great to represent where I grew up.”

[Max Sheldon](#), a junior guard currently on the UCSB men’s basketball team, graduate of San Marcos High School, and lifelong Santa Barbara resident, was able to offer a unique perspective that he shares with Luke. “He’ll have his dad here... he’ll have all his teammates come back and visit, and come to games. He’ll have a lot of local support, which is awesome,” Sheldon said. “Take it all in and be aware that the community, whether you’re from Santa Barbara or not, knows who you are and they support the UCSB basketball team. Especially being a local kid, he’s going to have a lot of support behind him to give it his all. So embrace it and have fun with it.”

Sheldon, who also trained with Luke and has played under Greg, is excited for the player Luke can be for UCSB. “He’s a scorer [and] shooter. If he grows a couple inches, I think he could have a role similar to [Jason \[Fontenet II\]](#)... playing 20 to 30 minutes a game and being a scorer, slasher, and defender,” Max said. “If he doesn’t keep growing, I think he could have a role similar to [Cole \[Anderson\]](#): an offensive spark for us and a three-point shooter.”

Luke is still just a junior in high school and has over a year of basketball left before graduating high school and playing in his first college game. Greg described how Luke is still at the beginning of his recruitment process because he doesn’t live in a population-dense area like Los Angeles/Orange County. “That’s why I think it was such a great thing for Coach Pasternack to offer him because he’s been able to see him. But a lot of people haven’t been able to see him,” Greg said.

That is why Luke will be playing for one of California’s most prominent clubs this summer where he will get scouting opportunities from coaches nationwide. Luke is deciding between West Coast Elite and Dream Vision. Whichever team Luke decides to ply his trade for this summer, he will be competing among the best of the best in circuits sponsored by the likes of Adidas and Nike.

Between now and his commitment, Luke has set several goals to continue developing into the player he aspires to be. In addition to receiving more offers and increasing his strength, Luke wants to develop strong relationships with his future club teammates.

Perhaps no relationship is more important to Luke than the one with his father. In addition to a father-son relationship, Greg and Luke also share a player-coach relationship. “It’s the ultimate



blessing,” Greg said. “It only works because of him, his attitude and coachability. To have your father as your coach is not easy.”



Photo courtesy of Greg Zuffelato.

In the coming months before his commitment, there is still lots of work to be done. “It’s a relief knowing that I have a chance to play at a really good program, and that there’s going to be other opportunities. But at the same time, I can’t sit back. I have to work for more.” Regardless of where Luke continues his basketball career, he has already cemented himself as one of Santa Barbara’s most legendary basketball successes.

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