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The Comeback Kid

Vasu Kulkarni, 30
Founder and CEO,
Krossover

In June, Vasu Kulkarni was standing in the Cleveland Cavaliers' locker room, his hands sticky with Champagne spray, his ears ringing with screams. The team had just won the NBA championship game, and Kulkarni, CEO of Krossover, was invited in for the trophy presentation. It wasn't his footwork or his coaching skills that landed him the enviable invite: The Cavs use Krossover's data analytics tools to study their games to improve performance. "As a kid, I would dream of just being in an NBA locker room," he says. "But to actually get to touch the championship trophy? It was surreal."

Growing up, Kulkarni thought he'd be in the locker room thanks to his prowess on the court. "I don't think a day's gone by since I was 5 years old that I haven't played basketball," he says. As a child in Bangalore, he spent almost every afternoon on the outdoor dirt courts and filled evenings with old videotapes of American basketball heroes. But when he started college at the University of Pennsylvania, he was in for a rude awakening: "I was a star in India, but suddenly at college everybody's a foot and a half taller than me," he says.

The next four years weren't filled with much court time, but warming the bench gave him a front-row perspective on how coaches slogged through game-day prep. "In India, there were no videos and no stats—you just played and kept score," he says. "But in college, my coaches would sit for four or five hours at a time, breaking down film, taking notes, making giant charts in Excel."

He graduated with a computer science major and then blasted his résumé to every sports tech company he could think of. But he couldn't shake the feeling that his coaches' pain might harbor his biggest chance to stay close to the game. So when his first round of job hunting turned up nada, Kulkarni developed Krossover. Anyone can upload game footage, and the service makes it searchable by player and play—so that, say, a coach could find every drive by his point guard, or every turnover. The software also analyzes the footage and spits out stats. "I didn't have a dollar in my pocket when I left Penn, but for two years I passed the hat to anyone who would listen and maybe write me a check," he says. He drummed up \$300,000 in investments from a couple of Wall Street sports fanatics and crisscrossed the country to pitch the product at coaching clinics and sports

conventions. The beta launched with 50 customers, mostly high school basketball coaches.

Today Krossover has 10,000 customers around the world, and is set to surpass \$10 million in revenue in 2016. It has expanded to lacrosse, volleyball and football, and will add soccer later this year. "We think of basketball as our flagship product, but honestly, soccer could eclipse it," says Kulkarni. "Until you do soccer, everything else is an afterthought in every other country but the U.S."

High school and college teams are Krossover's bread and butter, though the sports analytics company has pushed into the NBA and NCAA as well as amateur rec leagues. Kulkarni doesn't think his target audience is limited to coaches and recruiters, either. Earlier this year, Krossover began selling directly to athletes: With a few clicks on the web platform, players can generate a personalized highlight reel from their last game, month or season in less than two minutes. "The analytics tool looks for your plays within context—it knows dunks are a good play, but it also knows that if the score is close in the final minutes and you hit a shot, it's probably a good play," he says. "We're not perfect, because it's being done by a computer, but it's better than a high school parent spending \$500 to have someone come and videotape their kid."

Though he initially expected the highlight reel to be popular with hopeful athletes sending tapes to far-flung recruiters, social media has been fueling the product's popularity. "People have always loved sharing their greatest sports moments once they're off the court," he says. "But now they post a video and let that do the bragging for them, instead of trying to describe how mind-blowing some shot was."

Kulkarni has also done a little bragging on social media. When his parents—who had always chided their son to get off the court and focus on school—saw an Instagram photo of him in the Cavs locker room, they wrote him an email. "They congratulated me for being a part of the sport despite not having the genetic makeup to be on the court. Then they asked me when I was going to settle down and get married," he says, laughing. —*Kate Rockwood*

Vasu Kulkarni,
photographed in
New York City.