

Reclaiming our place in the game

By Ray Glier



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College basketball coaches go to spring and summer games looking for skilled high school players, but they are also hunting players they can trust. You know, the player who does not believe the first pass is the last pass. The player who moves the ball before the coach yells “Move the ball.” The player who tries to fit in rather than stand out.

When college coaches do not see that player they desire in the summer gyms, they get up and leave. They don't leave and go home. Increasingly, the coaches leave the country. They leave for Europe or Australia or Canada, maybe Africa, and then Asia.

The Rukkus Blog, which maps the hometowns of athletes in various sports around the globe, said the number of international basketball players on U.S. college rosters has increased 40 percent since 2006-2007.

That means increased competition for your ambitious American basketball youngster. Let's throw some more shade on the youngster's dream to play college ball.

A 2016 summer tournament in Australia attracted 50 U.S. schools.

So, if it's spring or summer time, and early evening, and a college basketball coach you know is not answering his or her phone, chances are they can't hear it. They may be asleep after a busy day of scouting international talent. It's night time there, after all.

If you are a parent here in the U.S., you should ask yourself this question:

Contacting college coaches randomly without understanding their needs and their system is going about the art/science of recruiting the wrong way. For one thing, you are not ready for the moment of truth.

Why isn't the coach here watching my kid?

Here's why.

Your son or daughter has not spent enough time in the gym working on the skills of shooting, dribbling, and footwork, and they are a step behind their international competition, who routinely train, not play games. Your kids may be in a gym, but they are playing four games a day trying to show off what they know. It's a poor choice. The

European player is grinding, sanding, polishing in the gym. Our kids, as Kobe Bryant has famously declared, are only playing games and not learning to play.

Here is more shade. If you are playing on a travel team in a tournament hoping to get noticed, you are rolling the dice. Contacting college coaches randomly without understanding their needs and their system is going about the art/science of recruiting the wrong way. For one thing, you are not ready for the moment of truth. What if the college coach does show up to look at your 15-year old phenom and the child is missing the right skills? The coach might not come back for a second look.

Our system in the U.S. has let you down. You can't keep leaving your child's success up to the system. Sure, the top 150 players in America call their shot about where to play. What about all the others? They are getting lost in the system.

If you don't believe it, digest this direct analysis from a college coach.

“Obviously, over here, we're in love with the fantastic individual play, so sometimes it's even a little bit harder when you bring [American] guys in who have been stars of their AAU team. Sometimes you have to corral that. Whereas, I get a European kid over here, he's trying to fit in.”

– John Cooper, men's basketball coach Miami of Ohio on NCAA.com.

And now consider this from Butch Estes, the coach at Division II Barry College, which finished in first place in the Sunshine State Conference in 2016-2017. Estes, who was the conference Coach of the Year, has seven international players on his roster. Thirty percent of the players in his conference are from overseas.

“They play together a lot in Europe,” Estes said. “I have a point guard from Iceland (Elvar Fridriksson) who is exceptional at finding the open man and

making plays. You can see the difference in his training.”

Here are some more facts about the influx of international players into the college game. Teams in the 2017 NCAA Division 1 tournament ...

- New Mexico State vs Baylor game featured 10 players born outside of US.
- St Mary's alone had seven Australian-born players on their roster.
- There were 15 players on the rosters of the Final Four Teams.

Now do you understand?

Here are the three basic truths for parents about navigating through grass roots basketball, then high school basketball, and on to playing college basketball. This is what fundamentally has to change in the U.S.:

- 1.** Parents need to get involved the right way by meshing their parenting skills with the culture of basketball. The additional two truths below are critical for parental involvement.
- 2.** Young players need a better base of skills. Not running, and jumping, but footwork, ball handling, proper shooting mechanics, and basketball savvy. Not just any instructor can teach these skills. Families need to learn how to choose the right one for their child.
- 3.** Parents need to understand the nuances and drivers behind the recruiting process so they can get the attention of college coaches for their child's evaluation, the Moment of Truth.

Here is one story to show you the possibilities when the above three basic truths are followed:



Ross Alacqua was a 5-foot-9 guard in the Atlanta area, who lacked the one asset that can help overcome not being tall enough ... he was not fast. Like many think, too small to play, right? Well, Alacqua took the right path with a priority on his personal skill development during his middle school and high school years. This prepared him for the moment of truth, he impressed college coaches in his initial evaluation. He overcame the obstacles to getting the attention of college coaches.

Ross went on to have a solid career for Division I Mercer in Macon, Ga. (2003-2007). He had a significant role on the team throughout his college career and even earned his way into the starting lineup. All 5-foot-9 of him, proved that he could compete and achieve at the college level.

Alacqua had an edge because he had a parent who knew how to personalize his basketball path, who worked in partnership with Kevin Cantwell. They were always focused on how they could support his goals.

Alacqua spent several years learning from Coach Cantwell, the former assistant at Georgia Tech, who coached 24 future

NBA players. Cantwell schooled Alacqua in the attributes of the typical European basketball player: footwork, body control, persistence, seeing the game two moves ahead of your opponent.

“My biggest improvement was in my footwork, balance and body coordination,” Alacqua said. “Kevin taught me how to use both of my feet as equals in order to manipulate how my body could move on the court. It was the only way I could compete with bigger, stronger and faster players.”

What spring and summer basketball program teaches that?

Cantwell's teaching is upside down and against all convention, if you don't live in Europe, that is.

For instance, you are born with quickness, right? You either have it, or you don't, right? Cantwell believes anyone can become basketball-quick. He has drills, the drills he taught Alacqua, that can “teach your feet to be quick.”

Cantwell does not have a grievance against U.S. off-season coaches, per se. He has a grievance against a system that rushes to judgment on kids labeling them non-athletic or not tall enough.

“In our lifetime, the system is not going to change, so the question is how do you make the system work for you,” Cantwell said. “All the pieces are here in the U.S.

“Parents and coaches just need to rearrange the pieces of the game.”

By rearranging the pieces, Cantwell means teaching more of the right basic skills and involving parents at every step of the journey. Parents must be a partner in the process. Parents? Right away, coaches cringe when they hear anything about involving parents. There are coaches who would rather kiss a hot iron than let parents get involved in the process.

But those same coaches are over-emphasizing spring and summer games, and fomenting the idea of “playing to learn” instead of what should be happening, which is “learning to play.” Parents need to bring a halt to that herd mentality.

In fact, parents need to stop sub-leasing their kids to the travel ball circuit. You can participate in travel ball, you just need to go into it with the right expectations. Parents can feel defeated by the process, overmatched by what they don’t know, and they bow to so-called experts. But Cantwell said parents can be empowered with the right blueprint in place.

It is a matter for parents seeing their role through the lens of their own 24/7 parenting skills. Would they bring a History tutor in to get their son or daughter caught up in Math? Would they allow their children to walk into a 5-star restaurant in a tank top?

So, would they let a coach with no advanced training in basketball fundamentals, and not enough time to teach even if they had the knowledge, rule their son/daughter on the court during the spring and summer season?



The parents should become the general contractors of their son or daughter’s basketball dream. Knowing when they should be involved, and when they shouldn’t. The scaffolding toward building a college basketball dream starts with finding a teacher of the game, not somebody merely rolling basketballs out on the floor.

Once the young player has a solid base in the fundamentals and the parents have a firm hand on the wheel, they can start turning their attention to the recruiting process.

What Cantwell stresses is that parents should not rush to get their child in front of college coaches. That game with 15 college coaches watching is the Moment of Truth and your child better be ready for it. Maybe other parents are wheeling the spotlight toward their 15-year old at a summer tournament, but it is better to take a different path. Building the right skills come first. Learn how to play first. Don’t push your child out there too soon.

“It is all about having a blueprint,” Cantwell said. “You have to manage and coordinate these different silos, too. So I believe in empowering the parents. You

don’t want parents over-involved, but you sure don’t want them under-involved. I am not suggesting all parents must learn enough to be basketball coaches. They must only gain the knowledge to guide their child’s path. No one plays that role in America. Parents need to fill the void. This is what I call basketball parenting.”

The parent who is involved the right way can honestly evaluate their child, to some degree. The savvy parent has researched possible schools and knows the head coach’s system. That parent can break down an existing roster and know where the needs are position by position. The in-tune parent knows what questions to ask a coach. With some new knowledge for how to do these things, parents can easily play the right role.

The two steps___managed by a parent and a trained coach___are acquiring the right individual player skills and owning the recruiting process. The Europeans understand it better than we do.

Here is a stat that can help convince you: *Almost one-quarter of players in the NBA come from overseas.*

International players are not always paragons of the game. They can be just as ambitious as U.S. players and apply too much polish and hunt statistics. The goal for them is to get a basketball scholarship in the U.S., get to the NBA, or play professionally in their country.

The challenge in this country is facing up to the competition. This is not an anti-foreign policy toward international arrivals on the hardwood. This is being ready for the Moment of Truth in recruiting.

When our children are better prepared, perhaps college coaches will leave their passports in the back of the sock drawer and stay home.

Ray Glier is a journalist in Atlanta. He has covered college basketball for The New York Times and the NBA for USA TODAY.

Visit www.KEVINcantwellbasketball.com to learn more about how basketball parents can steer the path to success for their kids.