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Just play ball

By Mark Lewis
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The recent Nike Regional Skills Academies brought to mind once again a continuing issue in skill development and, ultimately, the level of play in the game today. A large and growing number of athletes seem to struggle when they don't have the structure of a set offense to dictate their next move. While it may not be a specific recruiting issue, college coaches who find talented players who also have a basic court intelligence feel like they've struck gold.

The current and most recent classes of women's basketball recruits have exhibited more physical talent and individual skill than the sport has ever seen. At the same time, their understanding of the game as a whole, and the specific nuances that can give basketball the appearance of graceful performance art, is seemingly at an all-time low. Ironically, these classes may well be the most experienced generations of prospects to ever take the floor. Yet that very experience may be what's led to a growing deficit of knowledge of the game itself.

Playing vs. Learning

Organized basketball has crept further and further down the age ladder of youth basketball. As kids who rely on Velcro rather than laces in their Nikes are playing full schedules, we're losing some simple and elementary building blocks to the game. Sure, on the surface starting them younger, putting them in uniforms and getting game experience appears to be something positive, but there's a tradeoff with a big price tag. Kids don't play the game anymore. Oh, they play games, but be careful not to confuse that with playing basketball.

A large percentage of those kids who have been playing for school teams and club programs at very early ages haven't been learning the game from the ground up. At events such as the Nike Skill Academies, when isolated players in breakdown situations of two-on-two or three-on-three, a lot of very talented players looked like deer caught in headlights. They've been running continuity offenses and quick-hitters rather than learning the pick and roll or simple pass-and-screen options. While they may know where to go next in an offensive set, they may not know why or what to do when they get there. We've got the equivalent of paint-by-the-numbers offense rather than real creativity of movement, floor spacing and reading defenders.

A lot of the athletes who I coached in my last couple of seasons, and those who many coaching peers have confirmed are currently finding their way onto college rosters, have found a new word that they find offensive (no pun intended) and it's not even the four letter kind. The word "or" has evolved into a negative term that leads to confusion and stagnation on the basketball court. Players are fine when instructed to do A, then B, followed by C, and ultimately D, if we need it. But tell them that they can do A *or* B, C *or* D and the results you get often resemble the same thing we get from our friends in



Players who are able to adapt on the court have an advantage at the college level.

Congress ... confusion with very little productivity.

Too Much Five-on-Five

It's hard to imagine, but we're talking about elite recruits who have a good grasp on the whole of the game but a seemingly minimal understanding of the parts. Several times in recent years I've had conversations with various athletes that ended up with a similar and telling theme. When asked to "freelance" or "just play the game," they don't have a clue what to do, or become overly mechanical and react slowly. In those situations, many players tend to take it individually, one-on-one, while the other four stand around and watch. The result of constantly playing in the framework of an organized five-on-five setting is that the ability to make plays and play instinctually with teammates is getting lost.

Obviously there are a lot of talented and well-coached players out there, and many of them have an impressive grasp of the skills I'm talking about. However, part of the reason they stand out is less about what they're doing and more about what their competition is not. Evaluators often refer to a player's basketball instincts or court concepts in describing the ability to adapt and make plays in transition or two- and three-player situations. It's become a standout quality rather than the given that it should be for a true college prospect. That ability is at a premium for the folks with the scholarships.

The reality of the situation may just be that we're too organized for our own good. I'm all for opportunity and any day you can be in the gym is a good day. At the same time, we need to find time to just play the game and turn simple basketball back into an instinct and reaction rather than thought-and-learned structure. Focus on two-on-two situations and three-on-three options and we'll see the game move to even greater heights. It doesn't matter whether you run the triangle offense, flex or some new innovative set, if you can't play the game within it, it's just movement.

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