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Player rankings nothing more than entertainment

By Mark Lewis
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I've always considered myself socially conscious and politically aware, but somewhere along the line my priorities have gone askew. Throughout the past year the Presidential campaigns have debated back and forth as to the most prevalent topic on the public's mind. I honestly believed it was either the economy or the war in Iraq. Silly me. Based on my travels around the country during the July evaluation period, I was reminded of what truly represents the concerns and passions that lie in hearts of Americans:

The ranking and evaluations of high school girls' basketball players.

Seriously, if you heard some of the comments, conversations and arrogant posturing that seemed to be a daily occurrence you would believe we were talking about an issue of critical global importance. It isn't enough to be ranked. It's where a player is ranked or where they're ranked in relation to someone else or the perception that there's some conspiracy or agenda keeping this kid or that unranked. All this is undermining our way of life. Who knew?

Let's get a grip on reality and talk about what rankings are as well as what they mean. First and foremost, they are opinions, nothing more. They're for entertainment and discussion. Nobody is branded or scarred for life if they don't make the list or receive a lower than expected ranking. As for what they mean, well, nothing. They just mean an evaluator liked what he or she saw on the floor more than some others they saw. You don't get to wear the yellow jersey and folks don't kiss your ring when you walk in a gym.

Contrary to popular, and very much uninformed, belief, they are not used for anything. College coaches do not use them in their recruiting. If someone is ranked 17th on a list and coaches don't like they way they play, they don't recruit them. On the other hand, if they are not anywhere to be found in the rankings and recruiters love the player's game, they'll be knocking down their door and using up all their cell minutes. Coach's jobs are on the line and they are not going to rely on Blue Star, All-Star Girls Report or ESPN HoopGurlz when making recruiting decisions.

OK, step back, I lied. College coaches do use them. When an athlete signs a national letter of intent and we get ready to do the press release, we want to use their rankings to pump up the perception of the recruiting class. And when they're freshman and we're doing that first media guide, we'll include rankings from their own grandmother if it makes them look better.

One of my favorite questions posed by parents and coaches exemplifies how warped the concept of rankings has become: "How do I get my daughter/player ranked?" Seriously, they want to know how *they* can make it happen. I don't want to get off on a social rant here, but how about letting the players handle this one themselves? Tell them to train hard, commit to the sport and, when game time comes around, give it your best shot. If someone from the recruiting services or the media likes your game, it might happen. If it doesn't, work harder. I know that's a lost concept these days, but if we have to live with rankings, at least make them be a result of their work and not the phone calls and e-mails of their folks and coaches.

There seems to be a line of thought that rankings impact whether or not a player gets the opportunity for postseason recognition or all-star games. I'll give you that one, but only to the extent that the selection folks, coaches or media, are aware of them due to their ranking. They're not choosing them on that basis. In the end they still have to be a player. In fact, if Annie Airball is ranked 12th on someone's list and she doesn't play like No. 12 ought to play, she's judged on an even harsher scale. The number of unknown players who come from nowhere to the spotlight is smaller all the time. Not because they aren't ranked, but because the coverage has grown and the number of exposure opportunities is through the roof. The game is bigger and the world is smaller. You don't have to be ranked to be noticed; you just have to be good.

There are several different sources for rankings. You've got the paid services like Blue Star and All Star Girl's Report on a national basis as well as quite a few regional offerings that prepare and sell their lists to college coaches. You have media outlets, including ESPN HoopGurlz, that also evaluate and rank athletes. No matter who might be disseminating the information, the reality is that none of them are the definitive word on who the best is or who belongs on what list or even who can play at what level. In the gym, beauty is in the eye of the beholder. If someone sees things different than you it's not cause to mount an attack or question the virtue of someone's mother.

Besides, my own grandmother ranked me 10th and she only had 9 grandchildren. I wonder if Dad can make a call.

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