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Skill, not just size, matters in determining a position

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Some players are positioned for success; some, unfortunately, are not.

It all begins with the dance of DNA and the roll of the genetic dice. Basketball is clearly a game that rewards the tall, but it also rewards certain skills matched with certain physical attributes. For example, the ability to see the floor, sense the pattern of the game and make quick and correct decisions is what makes some point guards special -- but that skill set in a 6-foot-3 body that doesn't dribble all that well isn't going to work out. Similarly, a 5-3 girl who loves contact, jumps well and has a great nose for rebounds is going to find it hard to carve out a career as a power forward.

Of course, a 6-3 player who can see the floor, make good decisions, handle, likes the physical side of the game and anticipates where missed shots are going to go is going to be just fine no matter where she is on the court, but for the vast majority of players, the mix of size and skill is more important than either one separately.

A point guard, for example, can be tall, but it is harder for a tall player to dribble under pressure merely because the distance between her hand and the ground is greater than for a small player and the ball is vulnerable when it's traveling between those two. A small player can make life miserable for a tall point guard even if they are equally quick because the smaller defender will be able to attack the dribble much more effectively.

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Of course, size and strength can help offset that disadvantage, but for the most part, point guards aren't any taller than 5-10. As mentioned though, their physical attributes (above-average ballhandling and passing skills) must be matched with precisely the right mentality. A point guard must be able to grasp the overall objective of the offensive system (not just call out plays in a loud voice), have a great feel for spatial relationships, develop an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of her teammates and be able to lead and inspire her teammates on the floor, either vocally or by example.

At the same time, the point guard must also be able to create some kind of offense. The perfect point can hit the open 3, penetrate and also hit the mid-range jumper, but an imperfect one needs to do at least one of the three or the defense will simply not guard her and thus negate the rest of her skills.

A shooting guard, on the other hand, really needs to be able to put the biscuit in the basket, one way or another. Some are 3-point specialists and some score off the bounce, but all must also be able to handle well enough so that if the defense focuses on keeping the ball out of the point guard's hands, the offense doesn't come to a complete stop. Which means size is a factor here as well, because a player who is too tall will have trouble handling and will also have trouble defending the smaller opposing players.

Which brings us to another aspect -- matchups. Since smaller players are more common than bigger players, and smaller players tend to be quicker than bigger players, it's important to be able to defend

small, quick players. If a team is blessed with two 6-0 guards who are quick enough to defend 5-5 waterbugs, then it's not really an issue, but most coaches must mix and match to some degree.

For example, the Sacramento Monarchs have 5-10 Ticha Penicheiro at the point, and Penicheiro is one of the best passers in the world. But she can't really guard 5-3 Temeka Johnson or 5-8 Kelly Miller, so coach Jenny Boucek has to pair her with a quick 2-guard who can defend those smaller players. Alternately, a team with two tiny guards is going to be vulnerable to a team with a 5-9 2-guard with a mid-range or post-up game, so it may be that one of those small guards will wind up playing behind a bigger, but not quite as skilled, teammate just because of matchups.

Matchups are especially critical at the 3 (wing), where some teams with tall rosters are tempted to put a bigger girl on the court. The rebounding advantages are obvious, as are those on the block, but then again, having three players who can only score from the paint will definitely clog up the lane and make it easy to defend inside. So most teams look for a medium-sized player at the 3, and generally an athletic one who can jump well enough to rebound but can also defend out on the perimeter.

As for scoring, a classic small forward should possess a nice mid-range jumper, but sometimes coaches will go with a 3-point shooter or a slash-and-crash penetrator who gets all her points near the rim. The problem here is the necessity for versatility, and the fit with the rest of the lineup. If the point and the 2 can both shoot 3s, then the small forward doesn't need to; but if the shooting guard is the only other 3-point threat, then it would be very helpful if the small forward could also supply some long-range firepower. And the 3 must also be able to defend whoever the opponents throw out there: Do they go big with a 6-0 small forward who is a strong inside player, or do they have a surplus of guards and stick a 5-7 girl on the wing who can jump pretty well?

Again, the match between the skill set and the size is critical, and it changes with each level. A 5-8 small forward who specializes in getting to the rim and rebounding can most likely make it work in high school. In college, she better be a special athlete. At the pro level, she better have an up-to-date passport and a willingness to learn obscure foreign languages.

In the paint, of course, size and strength are crucial, but equally important is the aptitude for contact. Tall girls are taught, from a young age, to be careful and considerate of smaller girls and sometimes have trouble overcoming that indoctrination between the lines, but a tall girl who likes contact is going to be a much more effective post player than one who doesn't. Naturally good shooting is helpful (and there's no reason, by the way, that small girls should be better long-range shooters than tall girls), as is the ability to jump and jump quickly, but the combination of size and attitude is probably the best indicator of long-term success.

But here again, what works at one level might not at the next. That 5-10 power forward might be all-league in high school; that slender 6-4 girl who doesn't like to be touched could be a force at the same level. Both, however, will face problems at in college, though the solutions are different. The tall girl must simply learn to love contact, or her career will be brief, and the smaller girl will have to change positions.

Which brings us to a primary point: Young players first must be evaluated by relating their skills to their physical attributes, and then they must be trained accordingly. An important part of that evaluation, it must be remembered, is long-term goals. If a girl is not really a college athlete, then she can be very successful as a 5-10 inside player in high school and have a great career; it's only if she's looking for bigger and better things that she should make sure she learns to play on the perimeter.

Which means parents, coaches and players must take some time to think things through as they move up

the ladder. Is the girl a good enough athlete to play in college? Does she want to put in the time and effort to do so? If the answers to both are 'yes' (and the second is more important than the first), then a decision must be made about position and a careful match must be made between the mental and physical aspects of her game.

This also impacts the choice of teams she should play on. If a 5-10 girl has college potential, she shouldn't play on teams that make her play on the block; she needs to be a perimeter player sooner rather than later. If the 6-1 girl has been a point guard because she can see over everyone but has only adequate handles, the time will come when she needs to play the 3 or 4 -- and again, the sooner the better.

Usually, of course, it's the semi-tall girl who is asked to take one for the team and go inside even though her skills are better suited for the perimeter, but thankfully, the impact of European basketball is blurring the lines between positions and most youngsters are being taught to play all over the court. Even so, it's still important for everyone -- player, coach and parent -- to be on the same page when it comes to deciding where a girl should play.

As with everything in life, it's important to be in a position where you can succeed.

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