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Young players need to be careful not to expose their weaknesses

By Clay Kallam
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There's a difference between getting exposure and getting exposed -- and it's one that young players and their families need to understand.

Spring, summer and fall, teams build their schedules around the NCAA's viewing periods, during which college coaches are allowed to watch players. Organizers brag about how many schools will be at their tournaments and AAU coaches plan their itineraries accordingly.

But does it really matter if a 13-and-under team is playing in a big tournament with Geno Auriemma and Pat Summitt in the main gym? And does anyone outside the small circle of friends notice if a middle-schooler goes for 20 and 10?

The answer to both questions is pretty obviously no.

College coaches start to zero in on players after their sophomore season in high school, and the players who emerge at that point are going to wind up getting what they deserve.

And that phrase -- getting what they deserve -- is crucial. Not all talented basketball players will get scholarships. Very few will play for a BCS school. A tiny minority will ever play professionally -- overseas or in the WNBA.

So for the vast majority of players, "exposure" is meaningless. They're just having fun playing the game, and trying to get better so they can have a good high school experience. Of course, the college-bound players are also trying to get better and want a good high school experience. So, prior to that summer after the sophomore year, there's really little difference between the two groups.

But often girls are pushed, by coaches or parents, to get out on the circuit as soon as they can. At age 12, many travel to play in national tournaments. This does serve a limited purpose: It challenges a young player and lets her know where she stands against other kids her own age.

Far more important, however, is something that is too easily lost in the glamour of trophies and tournament titles: developing skills.

It's one thing to have talent; it's quite another to spend the hours and hours honing that talent.

Veteran coaches know all too well that everybody gets excited for games and will work hard to win. They also know that most players will focus in practice and give a good effort 90 percent of the time. The serious player is the one who puts in the hard time when no one else is around. She's the one making 250 jumpers a day on an asphalt court in August. She's the one doing solo sprint work on the track in September. And if she's really lucky, her parents and coaches couldn't care less if she travels to Atlanta for a tournament when she's 13.

Sure, exposure is nice, but even if a college coach happens to stumble across a national tournament game with younger kids, what that coach is going to notice isn't the dominance of the better athletes -- that's expected. That coach is going to look for fundamentals: Can the girl go both ways? Can she finish with her weak hand? Does she defend? Does she have good form on her jumper?

The young player who always goes right, can't make a left-handed layup and has an outside shot that looks like it was put together with spare parts from a '65 VW may be scoring all the points and getting all the rebounds. One other thing is also happening: She's getting exposed.

If the goal is to impress college coaches, exposure doesn't mean anything until a player is fundamentally sound in all aspects of the game -- and that doesn't come without hundreds of hours of skill work. And, just to be clear, playing in a tournament every weekend doesn't count as skill work, nor does practicing a 2-3 zone and five different inbounds plays twice a week.

On top of that, young girls should be playing against older kids as much as possible. Sure, the star on the under-12 team can rip it up against those her own age, but the sooner she starts challenging herself by going down to the high school open gym and letting some faster, stronger, smarter 17-year-olds work her over, the better it will be for her game.

The goal, after all, is to be ready the summer after her sophomore season. That's when exposure matters, and that's when scholarships are won and lost. But for a younger player, too many games, too many tournaments and not enough time spent on fundamentals will turn getting that exposure into getting exposed -- and college coaches will quickly move on to watch the girl who has a complete game to go along with her raw talent.

Clay Kallam is a columnist and contributor to ESPN's HoopGurlz.com. He is the founder of Full Court Press, an online magazine devoted to women's basketball; the author of "Girls Basketball: Building a Winning Program"; and a voter for several national awards, including McDonald's and Parade All-Americans and the Wooden Award.

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