

## Fundamental questions

What's wrong with U.S. basketball? Kids aren't learning how to play

By Sekou Smith

[sekou.smith@indystar.com](mailto:sekou.smith@indystar.com)

July 5, 2003

Soon Eddie Enriquez will be overrun by a gymnasium full of 14-year-olds in shorts and T-shirts, all of them willing to push their young bodies to the brink of exhaustion this summer to reach one goal.

"Right now their goal is to dunk (a basketball), and they'll do whatever it takes to do that," Enriquez said, laughing at the eager innocence of his future clients. "That's what this (strength training) program does: It improves your explosion, quickness and what have you."

What seems harmlessly like business as usual for Enriquez, a Houston-based athletic-performance specialist, is troubling on many levels for basketball pundits from across the nation.

Basketball purists argue that years of pint-sized hoop dreamers fixating on alley-oop dunks and 3-pointers, rather than developing basic basketball skills, have eroded the game's foundation in this country at the grass-roots level.

Hundreds of live examples have been on display in Bloomington, Ind., since last Sunday, when the Amateur Athletic Union's Under-16 national tournament began. As that tournament winds down this weekend, the focus shifts Downtown to the Nike all-American camp, a more exclusive event on the summer-basketball calendar that runs today through Thursday.

Solid, fundamental basketball is scarce during these events.



Jon Bollier of the Spiece Top Dawgs talks with coach Kevin Leising before their Amateur Athletic Union title game in Bloomington, Ind. Little time is built in for practice in AAU basketball. -- Matt Detrich / The Star

In an effort to improve that situation, USA Basketball, the sport's national governing body, has created an 11-person committee to examine the fractured state of youth basketball. The group will attempt to determine what steps can be taken to reverse a dangerous trend in which the skill level of the international competitors surpasses that of their domestic counterparts.

"We missed the mark here in America teaching the game the last 15 years or so, and we have to correct that," said committee member Quinn Buckner, an Indiana Pacers consultant who is also on USA Basketball's executive committee.

"We want to get back to teaching basketball at the fundamental level. Not only teaching the children, but teaching the people who are teaching them to make sure that the players that come from the American basketball system are as fundamentally sound, if not more, than the players that come from the international programs."

To work toward that goal, USA Basketball wants to become more involved on the summer-basketball circuit. But there will be roadblocks.

The prestige associated with wearing a red, white and blue uniform in the summer has been replaced by the Nike swoosh or the three stripes of Adidas. The two sneaker industry giants control not only which players go where during the summer, but in some cases, what high school or college the best players will attend.

#### Outside influence

A glaring example of shoe-company influence occurred last week. Al Jefferson, a Prentiss, Miss., native and one of the nation's elite senior prospects, declined an invitation to play on the prestigious U.S. Junior National team in favor of a summer spent with his Nike-sponsored traveling team.

"He made some prior commitments," Jefferson's summer-team coach, Larry Stamps, told The New York Times. "Obviously, he respects USA Basketball a lot. But we all have to make tough decisions sometime in our life."

The goal for Jefferson and the rest of the Nike campers over the next six days is simple: Impress the scores of college coaches and NBA scouts in attendance and watch your stock rise.

Invitations to the camp are coveted. And reputations can be created and destroyed in an instant for the nearly 150 campers who spend the majority of their time here playing pickup games with little structure. Yet in the minds of impressionable teenagers, a week at Nike camp dwarfs anything USA Basketball could offer.

"The last five years have been an educational process for (USA Basketball)," said Sean Ford, executive director of men's programs for the organization. "During that time our national teams have gotten younger and younger, with so many of the very best (teenagers) opting for professional basketball at younger and younger ages."

Ford wouldn't address Jefferson's situation specifically, but he reiterated his belief that the organization remains one of the nation's best training tools for basketball's future stars.

"We like our track record with players who've competed in the USA Basketball system," Ford said. "The last three Final Four MVPs -- Jason Williams, Juan Dixon and Carmelo Anthony -- played for USA Basketball the summer before they earned their MVP awards."

Assigning blame

Trying to find a single culprit for youth basketball's state of disarray in the United States is impossible.

The easiest targets are the summer-team coaches, whether they are AAU or shoe-company sponsored rent-a-coaches. These men are often more influential than the high school coach, but without the responsibility of making sure a player's skills are being improved during the summer.

Blame can also be directed toward NBA teams and college coaches for showering attention on the most gifted athletes.

"We're all to blame," said Pacers scout Al Menendez, a man who has spent 40 years coaching, scouting and studying the sport at every level. "It's easy to say AAU coaches, travel-team coaches or whatever, are the problem. But when the NCAA put in that 20-hour rule limiting the hours coaches have to work with their teams, that was the final nail in the coffin.

"In summer basketball, there's too much of an emphasis on winning. There's too many tournaments. They never practice and they're never taught anything. Someone has to teach them technique and actual skills. Someone has to teach them how to play the game."

By the time players reach A.J. Ratliff's age, 17, they better have already learned what they can because the teaching component disappears.

Ratliff, a North Central standout and one of the state's top seniors, said he'll play in about 150 games this summer with two teams. When asked how many times those teams will practice for such a busy schedule, he laughed.

"About once a month," Ratliff said. "It's AAU, I mean, you just kind of go out and play."

Were it not for North Central coach Doug Mitchell, Ratliff said he might be playing even more basketball during the summer.

"Coach Mitchell is good about reminding you that sometimes you need to take a break from all the AAU stuff and just work on your game individually," Ratliff said.

"Some people think you can just play AAU and get better, but it's not realistic.

You have to be able to go into the gym and work on your skills individually. That's why it's good to have such a good coach behind me."

ESPN analyst Jay Bilas, a former Duke player, said the only way to change the culture of the game is to start with the coaches, at every level.

"The focus needs to be on individual skill development, rather than all of these national youth-team competitions," Bilas said. "The charge of every coach in America is to teach our kids how to play, not just how to run plays.

"Everyone has to work together to reach an acceptable solution to what has become a major problem."

Call Star reporter Sekou Smith at 1-317-444-6053.