



June 25, 2012

Middle School Is Basketball's Fiercest Recruiting Battleground

By ADAM HIMMELSBACH and PETE THAMEL

CHANTILLY, Va. — Coaches sat scattered across the bleachers at a basketball tournament here this month, interested observers determined to find the next big star.

With their polo shirts emblazoned with team logos, they could have passed for college recruiters out to woo top players. But these were coaches from some of the elite private high schools in Washington, and the players they were watching were in middle school.

The high caliber of high school basketball in this region and the resulting pressure placed on coaches to win have fostered a fierce recruiting environment focused on players who are much too young to drive anywhere but to the basket.

Although private schools recruit middle school students in other major metropolitan areas, both openly and discreetly, the minimal regulation of the practice here and the desire to uncover the next Kevin Durant — a product of a Washington-area private school who has blossomed into an N.B.A. star with Oklahoma City — has led to an aggressive pursuit of players beginning with fifth graders.

All of this, though, is a gamble, done even though coaches realize that, because of teenagers' natural growth process, players who are stars in sixth grade may never make it past the junior varsity in high school.

"It's kind of flattering," said Marvin Lykes, whose 13-year-old son, Chris, is being recruited by several high schools. "But it's kind of weird, too."

The courtship of junior high players by private schools has become so cutthroat that it has spawned tales of coaches' throwing one another out of gyms, traveling across the country to recruit middle school prospects and ingratiating themselves with local travel teams, independent teams made up of higher-level players, in an attempt to gain better access to players.

"They can call as many times as they want, and some of the top kids playing for me get a little annoyed by the calls," said Zach Suber, who coaches a highly successful travel team for players 14 and younger for the club D.C. Assault.

In contrast, the [N.C.A.A.](#) places limits on when college coaches can scout and engage with high school recruits. And coaches at public high schools are restricted to players who live in their schools' districts. Now, some longtime observers of basketball in the Washington area are wondering if the recruiting atmosphere around private schools is too permissive.

"For the good of the game, it needs a good, long, hard look," said Morgan Wootten, who won 1,274 games in 46 seasons as the coach at DeMatha Catholic High School in Hyattsville, Md., before retiring in 2002.

It is common to find as many as 15 coaches from Washington-area private schools watching a summer tournament game involving middle school players. Suber said nine of his players were recruited to the ultracompetitive Washington Catholic Athletic Conference, which features traditional powers like DeMatha, Gonzaga College High School and Archbishop Carroll High School.

Pete Strickland, an assistant coach at George Washington University who began his career as an assistant at DeMatha, said that high school recruiting in Washington was more frenetic [than college recruiting](#) because of the career goals of the young assistants involved.

"It's almost like Nixon's White House," he said. "There's a lot of guys with blind ambition."

Suber said the schools used a "shotgun approach" to recruiting, focusing on as many players as they could, not just the stars. That means continual communications from coaches to players through social media, letters and phone calls. The process can be overwhelming for parents.

But players at a recent tournament seemed to enjoy the attention. Chris Lykes said he was "flattered" when he saw a coach watching him from the bleachers.

Andre Boykin, a 6-foot-3 center on a 13-and-younger travel team affiliated with the club Team Takeover, said: "It's pretty cool to say a coach comes to my games. I know that's when I've really got to play my hardest."

Rhonda Green, whose son Samuel is a 6-5 eighth grader, said that high schools first began speaking with her about her son when he was in fifth grade and already 5-11. She said that when Samuel was in sixth grade, he asked, "Why are these coaches asking me to come to the camps?"

The family considered 13 schools but chose Bishop McNamara, in Forestville, Md., because Samuel preferred to attend a coeducational school. Rhonda Green said that even the local public school called to recruit him at one point. She stressed that 90 percent of the schools respected the family's time and space.

Samuel's father preferred DeMatha, and Rhonda Green, an elementary school principal, wanted Samuel to go to Gonzaga. After making extensive lists detailing the pros and cons for each, they

allowed Samuel to choose.

“A contented cow gives good milk,” Rhonda Green said, stressing that academics and how Samuel would fit in socially were a higher priority than basketball.

The Washington Catholic Athletic Conference permits its coaches to recruit middle school players. The league’s commissioner, Jim Leary, said there were restrictions — like not allowing coaches to visit homes — so the process would not feel like college recruiting.

But many coaches argue that it can be more competitive than college recruiting because there is no limit to how many games and practices they can attend.

In the Interstate Athletic Conference, which includes renowned schools like Landon, Georgetown Prep and Episcopal, coaches cannot initiate contact with a player. But once a player shows an interest in a school, communication can begin.

The high schools, some of which cost more than \$30,000 a year to attend, do not offer athletic scholarships, but do provide need-based financial aid.

“Basketball ability isn’t supposed to play any role in how much aid you receive,” said Herb Krusen, the coach at Georgetown Prep. “It’s not supposed to, but I think at some of these schools, it does.”

Tony Thompson, who coaches Team Takeover’s 13-and-under team, said Washington-area private school coaches have traveled to Pennsylvania and Virginia Beach to watch his team.

Eric Edwards, who was an assistant at Bishop O’Connell High School in Arlington, Va., for five years and is now a coach with Team Takeover, said he followed local players to tournaments in New Jersey and Ohio when he was at O’Connell. He said the school eventually began reimbursing him for mileage.

“Division I guys have a dead period,” Edwards said. “There’s no dead periods when it comes to high school recruiting; it’s year-round. If you’re recruiting one of the best kids, you can go to every single one of his practices and games, whether it be in North Carolina or New York City.”

Coaches often invite entire travel teams to practice on their campuses. This can result in rival coaches, uneasy about losing traction with a prospect, arriving uninvited. Edwards said he went to Paul VI Catholic High School in Fairfax, Va., to watch a prospect whose team was working out there, knowing he would be thrown out. He said it was worth it because the player saw him and knew he was interested.

“I’ve seen Catholic league coaches practically square off with one another in a gym,” said Andy Luther, the coach at Landon School.

Many of the top middle school prospects in the Washington area already attend private schools. Teams are then put in the awkward position, Luther said, of re-recruiting players in their own programs. Two of Team Takeover's 13-year-old stars, Chris Lykes and Aaron Thompson, are honor roll students at the Bullis School in Potomac, Md. Still, coaches from other schools are pursuing them, and both said they would consider all options.

"I want a school that's going to let me go in and just play," Aaron said. "They don't run a lot of plays; they just let me run up and down the floor a lot and be the floor general."

Of course, the recruitment of such young players is an imperfect science. A boy who is a burly 6-2 in eighth grade can be a dominant center. But if he stops growing, he could end up sitting on the bench for most of his high school career. Edwards said that when he coached at O'Connell, he spent hundreds of hours recruiting a guard once considered among the top middle school players in the nation. The player enrolled at O'Connell but transferred last winter midway through his junior season after his playing time decreased significantly. What happened?

"He peaked," Edwards said, "as an eighth grader."