

The art of talent evaluation

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The word "nerd" first appeared in the English language in 1950. Dr. Seuss is the man to blame: If I Ran The Zoo's narrator included "a Nerkle, a Nerd and a Seersucker too" among his list of desired nonsensical creatures. By 1951, "nerd" was off and running: Newsweek was reporting its use in Detroit as a synonym for "square." By the 1960s, its use was widespread.

When he was a teenager, the first great basketball player ever was shy, gangly, bookish. He was interested in theology and studying to be a priest. He didn't play sports. He wore thick, horn-rimmed glasses to correct his drastic nearsightedness.

That's the first reason no one recruited George Mikan, even though he stood 6-foot-10 in high school. It's the reason he showed up to DePaul as a walk-on having never played a single game of organized basketball. He was a nerd before the word was invented.

In 1950, the year of Dr. Seuss's invention, the Associated Press voted Mikan the best basketball player in the first half of the 20th century. He had played for just eight seasons.

The first great player in basketball history was the product of the first great scouting coup -- the first time a coach saw something truly special in a player other coaches missed.

Seventy years later, scouting services abound. Websites rank players from age 10. Shoe companies funnel money to junior-high AAU programs. College basketball programs spend hundreds of thousands of dollars finding and evaluating the talent that ensures millions in ticket sales and TV revenue. Every coach in the country is looking for that one great underrated player, that one competitive advantage -- and killing himself to get that player on campus.

How Things Work Right Now

"You catch a kid on one day, and you catch him on another day, and how good is he really?" Pittsburgh coach Jamie Dixon said. "How good is he right now? How good is he going to be?"

These are the fundamental questions of talent evaluation. They are no easier to answer today than they were 72 years ago. Where do you even start?

At some level, coaches said, the rise of AAU has served as a handy, self-regulating market. The best players typically make their way to the best AAU clubs; if a player doesn't surface by the time he's in high school, he probably wasn't good enough.

Talent evaluation has come a long, long way, but even with more info and higher stakes, it remains an inexact science.

- Brennan: Finding the right player has never been easy. You'd think after all these years it

would have gotten simpler. It hasn't. Story »

- Brown: Follow along as UNC Wilmington coach Kevin Keatts takes you through a summer tournament trip and explains what he's looking for and what he hopes to avoid. Story »

- Fraschilla: How do coaches and scouts evaluate talent? Watch

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This process begins as early as fourth or fifth grade. That's when the most active and well-known AAU programs, many of which retain sponsorship deals with Nike and Adidas, begin combing their surrounding geographic areas for young talent. By the time players are in sixth grade, publications such as Hoop Scoop begin ranking the "best" talents in the country. Hoop Scoop's publisher, Clark Francis, charges college programs \$499 for his service. His rankings are based on impressions he forms at AAU tournaments and showcase events, where exposure is already on every player's -- and every player's family's -- mind.

So begins the talented young player's six-year journey through the thicket of modern recruiting. NCAA rules limit the time coaches might have with players, based on their progress through high school. Formal recruiting might not begin before a player's sophomore year. But at the grassroots level, the competition for rankings, exposure and the occasional glance from a Division I coach has already begun.

By the time players reach ninth grade, assistant coaches are already creating lists of prospective targets. The list might be as long as 40 players, but rarely longer.

Two factors are at work in its creation: A player's talent and the program's ability to recruit him.

"At some point, that's just what recruiting is, right?" Dixon said. "There's no point in trying to recruit a kid you have no chance of actually getting."

As one scout put it: "The first question is not 'How good is the player?' It's, Who do we know?"

Coaches trust the AAU market. They trust their contacts at the high school level. They have to. The sheer logistics of the process dictate as much.

The NCAA's largest open recruiting period, from Nov. 14 to March 31, coincides with the start and end of the college hoops season. Dedicating too many resources to recruiting during the season can prove difficult, even for high-end Division I staffs. That has made the summer periods all-important. Those summer periods are flush with AAU events. They are also strictly limited by the NCAA. In 2014, just one weekend in April was set aside for evaluation. All of July was labeled a "quiet period," save three weekends: July 8-12, July 15-19 and July 22-26.

Coaches show up to events during these periods -- at camps such as the LeBron James Skills Academy and AAU tournaments such as the Peach Jam -- for as long as they can afford. If they have targets at a number of events, they have to scramble between them.

Travel plans can be a nightmare. Large programs charter jets; coaches at small programs see if they can hitch a ride.

How much can be gained by actually watching players in these settings is up for debate, but most coaches and scouts don't pretend otherwise. By that time, they've leveraged their connections and whittled their lists down to a manageable size, and they're too busy competing with other programs for the player's attention to do too much in the way of evaluation.

"Not a whole lot of talent evaluation actually happens at these things anymore," one NBA scout said. "Coaches are mostly just holding hands."

How It Got This Way

It has never been easier to see a basketball player play basketball.

It wasn't always this way. By 1970, college basketball had elite programs with die-hard fan bases. More resources meant more assistant coaches with dedicated scouting regimens. In 1965, Sonny Vaccaro, then a young school teacher, created the Dapper Dan Roundball Classic and drew interest -- and coaches -- to the first national high school "All-Star" game. Even so, regional connections, primarily to high school coaches, prevailed. Camps existed, but instruction (and revenue) was the primary emphasis. The process was diffuse and decentralized. If a good player grew up in Indiana, he went to play for Bob Knight. That's just how it worked.

It wasn't until 1984, when Vaccaro -- then a Nike representative -- signed Michael Jordan to a watershed endorsement deal, that the first hints of a centralized grassroots landscape began to sneak through.

Vaccaro's idea, backed at various points by Nike, Adidas, Reebok and Converse, proved brilliant. He invited hundreds of the most highly touted prospects to a one-week camp designed to showcase their skills. Players got a number, and scouts got a program. Coaches loved it. Putting every top player in the same room saved time and effort. It also allowed a certain democratization: Small schools could afford to be at the big event, too.

The camps didn't exactly lead to efficiency on the court. The focus, at Vaccaro's marketing behest, was on individual matchups. Games were little more than pickup runs. The seedier sides of recruiting -- agents and runners, or "third parties," as the NCAA politely calls them -- rallied to the event.

Still, the idea thrived. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the NBA was firmly in on the action because more players than ever were eschewing college to go straight to the NBA. A massive influx of money and attention changed the grassroots landscape forever. The tipping point came in 2001, when LeBron James, the top prospect in the country, began to have his team's high school games broadcast nationwide on ESPN. The money in the system -- the tickets and sponsorships event coordinators were able to sell -- ballooned. Shoe companies desperate to land the next big endorsement began to dump brand loyalty dollars into camps and AAU programs by the truckload.

"We used to do a lot more camps, and they were just pure exposure camps," Marshall said. "Now the AAU circuit has totally taken over."

The prevalence of these events has led to the system in place today: The best players in the country (and the world) grow up playing each other and being compared, no matter where they're actually from. Sanctioned high school games are an afterthought. And even in these tightly restricted viewership settings, coaches still want to see as many players as possible.

"I tell my assistant coaches: I'm not paying scouting services six figures a year to sign our players," Marshall said. "I'm paying you for your opinion. I need your eyes on guys. And I need you to convince me to put eyes on them, too."

Two Paths

In April 1955, 13 years after George Mikan walked on at DePaul, Life Magazine updated the reading public on a new wave of 7-foot hoops stars. Headlined "Giants of Schoolboy Basketball," the feature claimed "the big boys, better trained and coordinated than they used to be, dominate the play in a big way."

"Once called 'goons' and thought too gawky, boys of [height] are now welcomed by coaches who use rope-skipping and other exercises to increase coordination," Life wrote. "By the time they graduate, colleges are fighting for them."

Eight players posed for this novel concept, with hands raised under the rim to prove their height. On the first page, second from the left, was Philadelphia Overbrook High School star Wilt Chamberlain, whom the magazine described as the "best prospect since Tom Gola." People always saw Chamberlain coming. His recruitment was a frenzied affair.

Bill Russell, on the other hand? The lone recruiting letter Russell received came from the University of San Francisco. Hal DeJulio, a longtime Dons recruiter, saw him play in a high school game, and when he offered a scholarship, the future Hall of Famer readily accepted.

Russell was totally raw, but he was also a product of the world Mikan had made. By 1953, Russell's freshman year at USF, big men were supposed to be big and burly, not 6-foot-9 and lithe. They were supposed to defend with their feet on the ground and score the ball with both hands.

The Mikan style was so predominant that in November 1959, on the occasion of Chamberlain's NBA debut, Life wrote that basketball "seemed to be growing stale because of all its big men." But Russell got to college basketball anyway, and then Boston Celtics coach Red Auerbach was thinking about the impact an athletic forward could have, and by 1970 Russell had won 11 NBA titles. How does that happen?

DeJulio had to see something in the player, and he did: crazy athleticism and fierce competitive drive. But first he had to see him play. Everyone had seen Chamberlain. No one saw Russell.

Different Tiers

ESPN RecruitingNation maintains detailed scouting reports on hundreds of the best high school basketball players in the country. By his senior season at Scott City High School in Scott City, Kansas, Ron Baker's profile read as follows:

"Will walk-on at Wichita State in 2011-12 and spend a redshirt year. Expected to be on scholarship starting in 2012-13."

And that was it. Next to Baker's name was "NR," which stands for "Not Ranked." The same abbreviation sits next to secondary lists for "position," "regional" and "state." Baker -- who requested a redshirt year when he committed, as a walk-on, to Wichita State in April 2011 -- couldn't have been more off the recruiting radar.

"Literally nobody knew who he was," Shockers coach Gregg Marshall said. "He had zero stars."

In 2013, Wichita State went to the Final Four. In 2014, it finished the season 35-1. Baker was instrumental in both. So was his backcourt mate Fred VanVleet, a guard from Rockford, Illinois, who began his recruitment well outside any top 100 list. The Shockers targeted him early, and by the time VanVleet shot up into the top 100 late in his high school career -- and other coaches tried to pry him away -- he was already set on Wichita State.

This is how the Shockers rose from the middle of the Missouri Valley conference to the level of the national elite: By finding players that fit their descriptions of what they needed well before anyone else knew how good they would be.

"Sometimes, I'll be in a group of friends or relatives, and someone will ask me about some top-ranked player," Marshall said. "And I'll tell them, I have no idea how good he is. I have no idea how those guys are being evaluated. We just aren't recruiting that kind of player. We want kids who we think have really high character, who are coachable, and who will get here and get better."

Different programs exist on different recruiting tiers. This is where the art of talent evaluation becomes more visible. Figuring out whether a program can recruit a player is, in some essential sense, about figuring out how good that player is -- only earlier than everyone else. Some programs, such as Wichita State, can foment national title ambitions without spending any time competing with Duke and Kentucky for household names.

For Pittsburgh's Dixon and his staff, answering those questions has often meant ignoring national recruiting rankings. Pittsburgh prefers to focus on specific areas of the country. Like Wichita State, it wants to know what kind of person it is recruiting, and it spends much of its time sussing that out. Then, Dixon and his staff find and focus on likely four-year players whose specific skills -- in his case, offensive rebounding -- fit in to solid baseline projections.

This sounds simple. It isn't. It's much easier to figure out how good a teenager is going to be next year than when he's 22.

"When a kid is 17 years old, [he] can change overnight," Dixon said. "Overnight for us is, say, the middle of July to the middle of September. That can be a huge difference for certain kids, physically and mentally. And some guys just get better later."

The centralization of top 100 lists can make talent evaluation seem almost scientific. Expectations are attached. Dixon, like all coaches, is on the lookout for any new, slight advantage. But one need only look at the players who never made it to the top 100 -- or players who were never recruited, or players who have solid four-year careers without NBA fanfare, or 16-year-olds phenoms who stop growing, or Stephen Curry, or Baker and VanVleet -- to realize just how much art remains.

This past March, after Wichita State ended its previously unbeaten season at the hands of Kentucky's intensely hyped recruiting class, Aaron Harrison, one of 2013's top-ranked guards, offered Baker a direct evaluation.

"He told me, 'You are a bad, bad, bad boy,'" Baker said in March.

Where's The Science?

With so much at stake, why isn't the process more scientific?

Drew Cannon was wondering the same thing. As a 15-year-old statistics obsessive, Cannon got a summer internship with recruiting writer Dave Telep. Telep, formerly of ESPN.com and now a scout for the San Antonio Spurs, was interested in bringing advanced data into his annual prospect rankings. For seven years, Cannon accompanied Telep to summer recruiting events. He took statistics -- only a recent development -- from events such as the EYBL and ran them through projection models in Excel. Underrated players would "jump off the page." He found gems by doing simpler calculations, such as compiling every All-State player from every state in the country.

All the while, what he heard on the recruiting trail drove him a little bit crazy.

"Every event I was at, the question was, 'What position does this guy play?'" Cannon said. "Is he a one or a three?"

In 2010, writing for Basketball Prospectus, Cannon outlined a statistical basis for skill-based recruiting. It didn't matter what position a player was supposed to be. It only mattered what he could do on the floor. Assemble the right combinations of skills, and a team could be successful, whether it had too many "tweeners" or not. A year later, a researcher with the same premise won the 2012 award for Best Evolution of Sport at the prestigious MIT Sloan Sports Conference.

Cannon represented an exciting future. Years after the analytics revolution in baseball, as NBA teams poured millions into their own statistical teams and college basketball was being rethought on a per-possession basis, Cannon was offering legitimately new ways of looking at recruiting. Publicly. At age 21.

When Cannon graduated from Duke in 2012, Butler coach Brad Stevens hired him to his staff. A year later, when Stevens accepted the head coaching job for the Boston Celtics, he took Cannon with him.

Cannon proved there were ways, even in the woolly world of modern talent evaluation, to make some sense out of the data. And there are advantages to be gained: Players can be

over-ranked based on their potential. Productive players with limited ceilings can go overlooked. Players who struggle to be seen can show up in numbers. Players can be spotted earlier and more accurately.

"One of the biggest advantages [with using a model] is it would pop guys out after one weekend, unknown guys who would end up top 100 at the end of the summer," he said. "That's a huge advantage for a program if you can start recruiting a player five months before everyone else."

The question now is: Will anyone pick up the baton? What is college basketball's new scouting inefficiency? Where will the science come from? Programs? Scouting services? Will it come at all? What, exactly, does the future of talent evaluation look like?

Nothing Is Exact

How did everyone miss on Mr. Basketball? It wasn't just the glasses. Mikan's anonymity was the product of his environment, and the conventional wisdom that dominated at the time.

In its first 50 years, basketball evolved slowly, but it managed to codify one major piece of doctrine: Tall guys couldn't play. They were helpful for tip-offs -- which came after every made basket -- but otherwise written off as, in the words of that 1955 Life Magazine feature, "goons." Good players were quick, agile and savvy.

DePaul coach Ray Meyer thought differently. In 1938, Meyer, then an assistant at Notre Dame, saw Mikan at an open tryout in South Bend. Mikan had been awful and schooled by much smaller players. By 1942, Mikan had never played in an organized game. Meyer was the first coach to see potential in Mikan and in tall players generally. He took Mikan as a walk-on, devised the Mikan Drill and spent the next four years proving himself correct.

"He taught me right from the beginning that it was easier to coach and develop a smart kid than it is to develop a dumb one," Meyer told the Chicago Sports Review in 2007.

Meyer had discovered and exploited college basketball's first true market inefficiency. Seventy years later, those market inefficiencies still exist. They are smaller and harder to find. Production versus potential. Specific skills versus versatility. Athleticism versus know-how. How do you rank them? Which is more important to your program?

For most coaches, the market's biggest and most exploitable gap is still the one Meyer spotted in Mikan: character.

"We have a lot of things we recruit," Marshall said. "Defending, rebounding, can you impact scoring on the offensive end? All of that. But above all of that is whether a player knows how to play and grow with teammates. Does he share the ball? Does he want to be a part of something bigger than himself?"

But how do you know? There are plenty of reasons coaches spend so much time staying in touch with recruits -- contact is a constant reassurance, after all. But their attempts to figure out character, and from a distance, play a major role, too.

Coaches can see more players than ever before. But they see these players in more sanitized and less natural settings. Then they hop on a plane and go watch another 100 guys. Half the time their minds are already made up, and they're just there so the player sees them in the crowd. What can you really learn? How do you make sense of it all?

And oh, by the way: Your million dollar salary is on the line.

"It's an inexact science," Dixon said. "You err on the side of good kids who want to get better."

This is talent evaluation in the 21st century: Simple in theory, mind-boggling in practice. We've come a long way since a nerdy, gangling Mikan proved the value of height, but with higher stakes than ever before, coaches' jobs haven't gotten any easier.

In some ways, finding talent has never been harder. Inexact doesn't begin to describe it.