

**AAU State Final Profiles**

**Coaches Not at Loss for Words When Discussing Braham's Potential, Skills**

By MICHAEL JOHNSON  
Chronicle Sports Writer



Ron Braham

Potential. Skilled. Athletic. These are just some of the words that roll off the tongue of Winston Lake 13-under AAU coach Ken Haggins when describing guard Ron Braham.

But wait, there's more. "The kid just has tremendous hustle," Haggins says about the starting point guard that will be playing in Concord next week for the state finals. "He's a very coachable kid who understands the game. He reminds me a lot of Michael Cooper (the former Los Angeles Lakers guard) in that he plays the passing lanes so well. And he hates to lose."

If Haggins sounds a little excited about him, it's because he coached Braham in the Youth Basketball Association at Winston Lake this fall. As the swingman, he led the Bucks to a surprising second-place finish in the 11-12 age group, losing in the finals the undefeated Blazers.

Now Braham and his new teammates are paying for a bigger stake, the North Carolina AAU state championship. The 13-under squad will be playing for the right to play in the nationals in Memphis, Tenn. this summer.

Braham, now 13, feels the accolades he has received for his game are owed to hard work. Despite the praises he receives on his athletic ability, Braham remembers how he was the first time he picked up a ball.

"I was real nervous and I didn't play all that well, so I've been working hard on my game the past few years," Braham said. "I've always

worked on my defense, so that's always been the strongest part of my game."

Haggins' excitement over Braham is not confined to himself. John Alexander, head coach of the 13-under Amateur Athletic Union team, feels that Braham's best days are ahead of him.

"Ron is such a quick athlete. He doesn't miss too many plays, but when he does overplay his man, he is quick enough to come back and make the play," Alexander said. "He does such a great job in the passing lanes and he anticipates so well that he keys a lot of steals for us."

The wiry Braham is the point man in the Lakers press, and teamed with Reggie Hunt and David Mickle, gives the Winston Lake team a formidable unit in the backcourt. Braham scored 27 points recently in a 96-33 win over the Raleigh Stars and has been among the team's leading scorers throughout the season.

But Haggins sees room for improvement in his star, even on the

defensive end. "We want Ron to become a better player when he's not playing the passing lanes," Haggins said. "He plays a little too much in the lanes and we want him to play more straight-up defense."

Both Haggins and Alexander also think Braham has to improve his outside shot for the Lakers to do well this weekend. A slasher most of his playing days, Braham now faces the basket and will have to play more on the perimeter as larger players will roam in the lane as Winston Lake advances.

Braham has also learned the difference between AAU ball and the YBA.

"It's a little more fun playing (in the YBA), where here it's more competitive," he said. "Plus, you have to travel, play more games and in hotels overnight, which can be fun."

An example of the intensity is seen with Haggins, who continually gives his YBA star advice on what to do on the court. Haggins said he is pushing Braham to be the best player possible.

"The plays we run here are not much different from the ones we ran, so he should know the plays better than anyone on the team," Haggins said. "I push him because I know how good he can be and I expect him to be a great player."

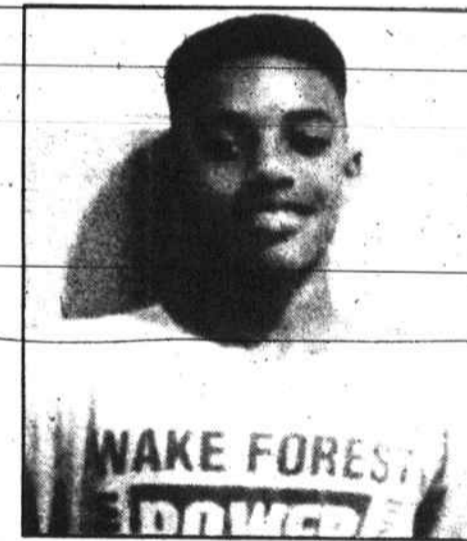
Braham will be asked to do even more this upcoming weekend. But the youngster believes he is up to the challenge.

"We have a talented team, and I believe we can go all the way," he said. "We're still learning to play together, but as long as we work things out, we can do it."

**Central Shooter Has One-Track Mind**

**▲ Steele's firepower sparks undefeated Hornets**

By MICHAEL JOHNSON  
Chronicle Sports Writer



A.J. Steele

When he comes off the bench, he's about one thing — shooting the ball. Whether it's from five feet or twenty-five feet away, when A.J. Steele is in a groove, any shot is a good shot.

And that's the way Carolina Central AAU basketball coach Walter Faye likes it.

"A.J. can probably get about ten assists a game, but he knows that's not his job on this team. He goes in to score," said Faye, whose Hornets squad will be in Concord this weekend for the North Carolina AAU Boys 13-under finals. "The only thing I tell him is wait and swing the ball around a couple of times to get in his rhythm. And when that happens, that's when he lights it up."

Despite being a reserve, Steele is the Hornets' second-leading scorer behind Marcus Oliver and its chief perimeter threat. Faye, who said Steele is "starter who comes off the bench," called his super-sub key contributor to a team that has gone undefeated headed into the finals.

Imagine when Steele feels comfortable playing on the perimeter. This is the first time the 13-year-old has played a guard position after being either a center or power forward in the Central YMCA's Youth Basketball Association.

"It's still taking a getting used to playing out on the outside, because I still have to work on my ball handling," Steele said. "I'm used to playing in the lane, but I'm trying to make that conversion to guard. I think it's coming along."

Steele started playing ball at age five and has graduated into stardom during his time in the Central YBA. Using his quickness and size, he dominated in the middle. But one instance last year changed that when Faye saw Steele make a play that convinced him he had a guard in the making.

"On one play, A.J. was playing in the paint and he instinctively ran to the baseline to cut off a pass and drive to the other end of the court,

and I thought, 'What great anticipation he has,'" Faye said. "Because he was bigger than some of those kids, he always played inside. But he is a natural guard."

When he was assembling the first Central basketball team, Faye couldn't wait to get his hands on Steele. He immediately made Steele a guard and, looking for firepower off the bench, put him on the bench to give his team some much-needed punch.

Steele admitted it took a little time getting used to come off the bench behind Carter Williams, but now looks at it as an advantage.

"I'm able to watch the game, see how it unfolds, and I can see what mistakes are being made on the court," Steele said. "I can see what Carter or somebody else is doing wrong and try to help out."

In the Greensboro Easter Invitational championship game, Steele came off the bench and hit five of his first six shots, including four 3-pointers, against the Greensboro Gators. That sparked a Hornets run that led Carolina Central to a 62-40 win. Faye said that has been indicative of the play Steele has given them all year, even though he struggled throughout the tournament.

"When he is his rhythm, he will make 65-70 percent of his shots. His shot is like silk when it goes in. But when he rushes, he has missed every time," Faye said. "A.J. shot the lights out in Greensboro (for the Greensboro Invitational) and in Gastonia, but now he has to

make adjustments in his game when his outside shot isn't falling."

For Steele, that means putting the ball on the floor and not relying on his outside shot. For added experience as a ball handler, Faye has moved his star shooter to the point guard slot for certain stretches. Steele has easily made the transition to playing defense on the perimeter, becoming one of the Hornets' top defenders.

Overall, Steele and Faye believe the transition has been smooth.

"This is the position I will be playing later in high school, so it's better for me to do it now than later when I won't have much of a chance to," Steele said. "I think I have done well coming off the bench. I want to help this team any way possible."

Even if it means being a sixth man.

"As long as I get my minutes and help the team out, I don't care if I start or not," Steele said. "I just want to win and go to the nationals."

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