

Exposure Is The Name

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ment is the recruiting package of the year for high-school players. Most college coaches do their evaluations at this time." Henighan saw just how competitive the basketball world is when he played in the Five-Star Basketball Camp in Pittsburgh a couple of weeks ago.

"Most of the players were from up north and they were saying they had tournaments all the time and that they got a lot of exposure," Henighan said. "We need to get as much exposure as possible to keep up with them."

"We've been traveling so Josh can play basketball since he was 12," Kaye Henighan, Josh's mother, said. "We need to help him and his friends get as much exposure as possible." For Paul, Russell and Edwards, each 11-year-olds with plenty of time to impress college scouts, the lure of AAU basketball is the competition. Paul used to dominate his local league, but felt the only way to improve was to play against better players, thus the trips to Hickory where he plays for the Hickory Express. Ditto for Russell and Edwards.

"My cousin, John Alexander, coached an AAU team in Winston-Salem and wanted to know if I wanted more exposure and more of a challenge for Dovonte' and I said sure," Darryl Edwards explained as to why his son skipped recreational basketball in Chapel Hill to play for the 11-and-under Winston Lake Lakers before being picked up by the Express for the national tournament. "Dovonte' needed a challenge. I wanted to get him involved in something that would get him out there with some of the best players to see if his ability was a hoax or not. You want to measure yourself against quality competition."

That was the driving force in Henighan's decision to play for the North Carolina Express and the Durham Eagles this year. Without the higher level of competition offered in AAU play, he doesn't think he would be the player he is today. "I think I'm a better player because of playing AAU," he said. "I got to play against better players and I saw where I stood against them and what I had to work on to get to the level they were at."

Around Winston-Salem there is not a lot of attention on basketball, so maybe you don't get the competition you would in a place like New York or Memphis where they play a lot and learn what they

need to do to improve," he said.

Under AAU rules, a player can play for any team within his or her association. The North Carolina AAU Association encompasses the state, making it legal for a player to play for any AAU team he chooses within North Carolina. Allen compares it to college recruiting in the sense that what attracts a player to a particular team depends on personal preference or intangibles, such as a coach's or association's reputation, the caliber of teammates or a team's track record. Or it could be the chance to practice and play against top-quality competition, as Henighan decided.

"People think AAU is nothing but the games, but the practices are just as competitive," Allen said. "The practices are probably as intense as any a kid could go through, so a kid is going against a better caliber player to push himself as far as he can go."

One of the reasons Kaye Henighan stretches the family gas and tire budget to let her son play in Durham is the belief that high-level competition will make him a better player. "I don't know about playing time, but Josh will be a better player just from practicing against those guys in Durham," she said. "At least four of those guys went to the NIKE Camp. Josh has to practice against one of the best point guards in the nation in Courtney Alexander. I think practicing and playing against those boys is only going to be beneficial for him."

Questions have arisen in Winston-Salem, as no doubt in other cities, about the dilution of talent within a locale when players are allowed to play anywhere they choose. Allen says there are two ways of looking at the controversy.

"You could say, yes, I would have a better team if I took the best kids in Winston-Salem and they played here," he explained. "You would have a powerful team on paper. But would you really have a team or would you have a bunch of stars?"

"Sometimes it might work and sometimes it might not," he said. "You have to have team chemistry. That is one thing about AAU, if you don't have true chemistry, you can't win. The other way to look at it is that for every kid that doesn't stay and play, you have in a sense created in opportunity for another kid to play. If we had one strong team certain kids may not get to play."

Kaye Henighan has been involved with AAU basketball since Josh began playing as a 12-year-old. Her status as a board member of the Winston Lake YMCA, one of the oldest AAU clubs in the state, gives her keen insight into AAU basketball in Winston-Salem.

"I think Winston-Salem could be more competitive if we could put our best players on the court at the same time, but there are so many choices right now that we can't," she said. "I guess the deciding factor has to be whether you want to put a team on the court that will win a national tournament or whether you want to give as many kids exposure as possible. The latter appears to be what most people in Winston-Salem think. That is why teams pop up every now and then. If some kids aren't able to make Team X, then someone will start a team just to give them the opportunity to play on that level. You can't say that is bad because you are talking 60 kids versus 12 or 15."

"We need to pool together and get all the top talent together," Butler said. "It was happening for a while, but this year a couple of guys started other teams and it diluted the talent. One reason teams pop up, at least in Winston, is because of having the national tournament here the last two years."

Human nature being what it is, people may perceive AAU basketball as a quality program for youngsters and want to be a part of it, which may explain, in part, why the Triad has become, as Allen says, a hot bed of AAU basketball in North Carolina. There are several teams in the Winston-Salem area plus teams in Kernersville, Greensboro, High Point, Lexington and Thomasville. That's a lot of teams to share the limited talent. With that many teams and coaches, and especially with players, some at impressionable ages, in essence being recruited and allowed to choose where they play, what keeps the AAU from running amok?

"The checks and balances are the coaches," Allen said. "Since these teams play within one area, if a coach is paying a player it is not likely to be kept a secret. You would be surprised how the coaches police themselves. If a kid got something they probably wouldn't keep it a secret. If the state association finds out, we will investigate and sanction coaches and players."

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