

AAU Basketball is Terrible, Here's How to Fix it

(Spec work)

By Grant Simms

I don't know exactly when it was, but I remember seeing a video where a bunch of AAU players were playing no defense against each other, and they were just taking turns trying to dunk. Very similar to what goes on in the NBA All Star Game. Unfortunately, stuff like that is the norm now. American basketball culture used to be associated with grit, rough streetball, taking the ball to the rack, and fighting for every inch. Now people look at American basketball players, and think the Care Bears have thicker skin. We have now reached a point where there hasn't been an American MVP since Steph Curry, and in a few years the top five best basketball players in the world might all be international players.

This isn't news to most basketball fans, and I think we all agree something needs to change with how American basketball players are developed. But do not fret, there is a solution. I believe the answer lies...in youth soccer. In Europe, the best soccer teams have established youth soccer academies all over the world in order to scout, and train, the best talent they can find. They organize these players into youth teams that play competitive matches against the youth teams of other prestigious clubs. The games matter, and the players receive, both professional coaching, and professional training. They get paid like the pros, and they are, from the age of 7 sometimes, expected to act like pros.

By adopting aspects of this system in America we can start to divert athletes from a path where they learn that basketball is a "Look at me! Look at me!" kind of sport, and instead put them on a path where they are taught the true nature of basketball, which is that it's a team game, where unselfishness is often the difference between a winning and a losing player. These days many NBA players aren't learning this lesson until it's too late.

Therefore, I say enough! It's time we make a change, and get back to raising basketball players the right way. To do this I suggest we create a mini NBA for young athletes. In doing so every NBA franchise will create its own youth team. First, let me outline its basic structure:

- Each franchise will have 3 youth teams. Teams A, B, and C.
- Each team will have 15 players. 45 players total.
- Each franchise youth team will operate like a private boarding school, that can both educate, and house players.
- All players will have their living expenses taken care of, and they will also have an additional salary on top of that. Franchises will award a player's additional salary based on skill. For example, team C players will get 2,000 a month, and team B players will get 5,000 a month. From there all players will be ranked by various scouts belonging to each franchise. The 10 lowest ranked team A players will get 10,000 a month. The top 5 team A players will receive 20,000 a month.

Now, how will these players be found? Tryouts. However, franchises will not hold individual tryouts. The NBA Youth League, as it will be called, will hold independent tryouts yearly in every single county in the US. This process will begin in March and continue throughout May. Then, the players considered to be talented enough in each county to play in the NBA Youth League will go through one more tryout in June and July. This will leave the exact quantity of players large enough to fill any open spots in the NBA Youth League. In the first year of this league, there will obviously be a lot of spots, and in the following, much fewer. Many younger players will likely take up roster spots in consecutive seasons. Therefore, the quantity of players that are brought into the league will always fluctuate.

Furthermore, once players are selected they will be drafted into their new team during the last week of July. The draft order will mirror that of the official NBA draft. This is a key difference from current youth basketball leagues like Overtime Elite. Players who join the NBA Youth League will already have their rights belonging to the parent NBA franchise. That

is to say, once a player is drafted into the NBA youth league two things will happen: either they will be cut from the team, or they will sign a professional contract with their parent franchise. In this sense, it is literally a direct pipeline into the NBA. It is also different from most youth soccer academies in that a draft exists. This allows for parity to continue throughout the NBA even at the youth level.

When a team's youth franchise drafts a youth league player that player can then sign a professional contract with that professional franchise as soon as they turn 16 years old (with some restrictions which I'll go over later). There are other special privileges a franchise gets when they draft a player. For example, say the Milwaukee Bucks draft a 14 year old prospect into their youth team. This player is then restricted from ever playing for another youth team franchise (there is an exception to this which I will go over below). A player may forfeit their contract at any time and go play somewhere else, but, if they choose to return (they also must try out again) from then on they will only ever be allowed to play for the Bucks in the youth league. Also, only players playing in the youth league will be allowed to join the NBA from 16 and up. Players not belonging to the youth league still must be 19, and must enter the NBA from the regular draft. This provides an incentive for players to play in the youth league, and it also discourages switching teams.

Other important rules include:

- There are no trades.
- Teams will take on the same names, and jersey colors of their parent franchises.
- Players who are believed to be underperforming are placed on probation, and must re-tryout with incoming athletes. If an athlete on probation is not reselected they are cut from the youth league. A player cut from the youth league one year may re-tryout in the following year. If they are selected, and allowed back in, they will re-enter the prospect draft, and may play for a different franchise. That is to say, only players who willingly leave the youth league are restricted from playing for different teams.

- A franchise must construct their youth teams by representing 5 different age groups. Meaning, NBA Youth Franchises must have at least 5 14 year olds, 15 year olds, 16 year olds, 17 year olds, and 18 year olds spread throughout their three teams. Teams may sign more than 5 players to each of these age groups if they wish, but they cannot go lower than 5.
- If a player signs a professional NBA contract before the age of 18 there are special rules that apply to them. That player is not allowed to play in NBA road games (Playoffs included). That player cannot play more than 25 minutes in a game. That player will be required to continue, and complete their high school studies. These restrictions are removed once a player turns 18, and graduates high school. Players will also sign 5 year contracts, and any player signed before the age of 18 cannot be paid less than 10,000,000 dollars a year.
- All professional contracts signed by youth team players will not be pre set, as is the case with the current NBA draft. Players will be able to request contracts based on their market value. However, those contracts will not count against a team's cap space for the first 3 years of the contract.
- A player, once they graduate highschool, if they are not offered a contract, or decide not to pursue a contract, may go and play in any other league if they want to.
- Players cannot play in the youth league if they are starting a season being at least 19 years old.

Those are the most important technical aspects. Following those rules, both allow for athletes to train in an environment that is both immensely challenging, and rewarding. This solves the problem of players not having elite competition, and it forces players to learn team basketball. However, how do we make the players care about the games they're going to play in, and what will be the format of the games they play?

The format is as follows:

- Teams will play 33 games in a season, and play each team in their division twice.

- Quarters will be 10 minutes long.
- Teams will be organized into playoff brackets in the same way the NBA is. However, the series will only be 3 games long.
- Champions will receive a 500,000 dollar prize to split amongst themselves. Only Team A champions receive a cash prize. Team B, and C will have their own individual playoffs.
- Team A regular season games, and playoff games will be televised. Team B and C games will not be.

If a league like this were created it would change American basketball forever. Could you imagine if a youth team could have drafted a player like Chet Holmgren when he was 14, and then the fans of that franchise would be able to watch Chet grow until he made his NBA debut? Fans already get attached to rookies, and allowing players to be developed by their team from the age of 14 would only increase this adoration. Franchises would also be able to develop far more pro ready athletes. They could train them specifically for the NBA. They could give them NBA coaching, have NBA players mentor them, and so much more. Training like this could help basketball avoid busts like James Wisemen, Marvin Bagley III, and Karl Anthony Towns (Just kidding, but seriously though, can the guy stop fouling...just once!).

In addition, I would argue putting all of the best American basketball prospects together in a league backed by the NBA, with prospects wearing NBA logos, would bring back the incredible atmosphere college basketball once had. It would help re-establish the United States as a top breeding ground for the best NBA talent, and at the same time create an amazingly entertaining product to watch. Even just thinking about it gives me goosebumps. I know this would never happen though...there's probably more money in the current AAU system than there ever would be in developing basketball players correctly, and these days that's usually the only thing that matters but...a guy can dream can't he?