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America needs more 'teaching' from its coaches

By Jay Bilas
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I have been watching more high school and junior basketball than ever, and I am worried about what I see. The canary in the United States' basketball coal mine has not yet died, but it is starting to teeter on its perch.

No reasonable basketball person can refute the fact that the fundamental skills of American players are slipping, and so is the American game. I believe a primary reason is an increased emphasis on coaching the game, and a decreased emphasis on teaching our kids how to play the game.

Pete Newell, the legendary coach and teacher, has often said that basketball is "over-coached and under-taught". He is absolutely right, and that is finally catching up with us, as is the rest of the basketball world.

Generally, "coaching" consists of team preparation, the devising of game plans and schemes to defeat opponents. When you are coaching, you are dealing with strategies, different offenses and defenses, and putting in plays to take advantage of the skills, strengths and weaknesses of your players. The measure of a coach is the quality of the development of his system, and has been distilled into winning.

"Teaching" consists of instruction and training of individuals in the fundamental skills of the game, and in teaching players how to play, instead of how to run plays. The measure of a teacher is not in winning, but in the fundamental soundness and skill level of the players taught. A player with excellent fundamentals and skills can play successfully in any system.

Generally, American players are less skilled than their European counterparts. The United States produces the best "athletes" in the game, but not necessarily the best "basketball players".

Here are the reasons why American coaches, at all levels, have gotten away from teaching, and have gravitated more to coaching.

Immediate Gratification of Coaches: Coaches, especially at the grassroots and high school levels, seem more interested than ever in winning rather than developing well-skilled and fundamentally sound players. They are impatient, and too focused on winning games instead of developing players.

Where's the Love?

Here's 10 players Jay Bilas feels aren't getting the publicity they deserve this season: [Andre Emmett](#),

Texas Tech

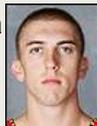
Please say this out loud ... at least five times: "Andre Emmett is one of the 10 best players in America." He has no position, and he has no peer in having a knack for scoring around the basket. Emmett is strong, athletic and can find his way to the rim. He has pull-up ability, leads the Big 12 in scoring at almost 23 points per game and shoots 58 percent from the field. Emmett is strong and quick enough to garner 2.3 steals per game, second in the Big 12, and has scored over 20 points in eight contests. Emmett should be on everyone's All-America list, but wasn't even voted to the preseason All-Big 12 First Team.



[Marques Green](#), **St. Bonaventure**

Green is out of the same mold at St. Bona as Shandue McNeill and Tim Winn. He is a small, pesky defender who gets up underneath you and averages almost three steals per game. But he is not just one of the best on-ball defenders in the country, Green can score. He leads the Atlantic 10 in scoring (22.1 ppg), assists (7.5 apg), 3-point field goals (3.2 per game) and free throw shooting (88 percent). Green can penetrate, has a terrific shooting touch from the perimeter, and is an iron man who never stops moving, and never comes out of the game.

[Steve Blake](#), **Maryland** For a guy who has won a national championship, hits big shots, and is on his way to becoming



It takes time to teach and instill discipline. While it may seem more important to spend the majority of time in practice working on the execution of halfcourt offense, or putting in new set plays, it is far more important to develop the skills of your players. Coaches do not have enough time with their players anymore, which means that floor time cannot be wasted.

High school coaches get less floor time than ever to teach, and less and less access to their players. Players now play an excessive amount of games over the summer in AAU competition, which means that they play many games and have far fewer practices.

While young kids are busy traversing the country to play in AAU competitions, they are spending hour upon hour running up and down the court in a helter-skelter atmosphere where, 95 percent of the time, they do not have the ball in their hands. What this does is cement bad habits -- and habits, good or bad, are what players revert to under stress.

If these same players were in focused practice environments instead of in so many games, they would spend the majority of time with the ball in their hands, working on their skills and footwork.

Increased Specialization: Basketball in this country has become over-specialized, and players have become "systematized".

Kids are identified by size and body type into positions way too early on in their development and are "coached" differently. As young kids, players are told, "you are a point guard," "you are a power forward," "you are a center." Then the guards and big guys are separated, sent to opposite ends of the floor, and coached to work upon different skills that are specific to position.

In Europe, players are encouraged to work on the same skills, whether small guard or big forward.

The result of this specialization is that our players are boxed into positions, and therefore limited. Why should kids be labeled and limited into being "point guards" or "shooting guards" and coached to be only that? A point guard is coached to be a primary ballhandler, while a shooting guard is coached to be a scorer and therefore limited in making the "transition" to the point. Similarly, big guys in America are used as screeners, rebounders and low-post robots. Very few programs in America, college, high school or lower level, produce versatile and skilled big men who can dribble, pass and shoot.

We cannot expect the players to combat this trend. Players want to play and

just the fourth player in history with 1,000 or more assists, Steve Blake gets too little respect. Blake is currently in the top 20 all-time in assists, and is climbing fast after having put Maryland's assist mark in his pocket long ago. He is averaging over 11 points per game, dishing out 7.5 assists, hitting almost 40 percent of his 3s, and can guard people with his long arms, savvy and determination. He has led a bunch of newcomers into the top 20 with an eye on the ACC title. Blake is a winner, pure and simple.

Jameer Nelson, St. Joseph's

Nelson is the poster child for the importance of winning to the reputation of a point guard, and how thankless it seems to be a junior or senior in college basketball today. While observers are falling all over themselves to praise freshman, just as they did with Nelson two years ago, the junior Nelson has toiled in near obscurity. All he has done is lead his team to wins in every conceivable way a point guard can lead. Nelson is a poised penetrator and handler, can get by people, and shoots the ball well enough to make you pay if you back off of him. Nelson averages over 20 points per game, hits 47 percent from the floor, and leads the Atlantic 10 in steals. He has been called upon to score more, and he has responded. He is also getting his teammates to guard people, which is the only way St. Joseph's is going to win consistently in the long run.

Reece Gaines, Louisville

Last year, Gaines was the first Cardinal player to average 20 points or more since Darrell Griffith did it for the "Doctors of Dunk," yet would seem only to get attention of he robbed a bank. Gaines is a 6-6 strong athlete, with long arms, and great defensive and scoring abilities. Gaines can bench press over 300 pounds and he is a great anticipator on defense. He has taken a hit on his scoring level because he is acting as Rick Pitino's primary handler, yet is still averaging almost 18 points per game to go with his five assists. Gaines remains one of the nation's best defenders, averaging over two steals per game, and knocks down his free throws.

Jarvis Hayes, Georgia What does this kid have to do to be recognized as one of the very best in the country? He has led two leagues in scoring (the Southern Conference and the SEC) and is one of the most athletic and explosive wing guards in the country. Mark this down ... Jarvis Hayes is the best pro prospect in the SEC. Hayes averages 18 points per game on 55-percent shooting, can shoot from three, get out in transition, and put the ball to the deck and punch the lane. He almost never turns the ball over, and shares the ball with the pack of athletic wings he plays with. While you're watching out for Georgia, make sure to watch out for Hayes.

Mike Sweetney,

Georgetown Another in a long line of Georgetown big men, Sweetney will play on the next level. He is in the top five in the Big East in scoring (19.9 ppg), rebounding (9.2) and blocked shots (2.7). He is a load inside, gets great position, and can move. Sweetney is mobile enough to



will do whatever the coaches tell them to do because, ultimately, the players want to play out on the floor, and coaches control playing time. Doing what the coach tells you to do is a necessary element of gaining playing time at any level. And we cannot expect players to simply work on individual skills on their own. We would not expect kids to educate themselves outside of a classroom environment, we certainly cannot expect it in sport.

European programs approach teaching differently. Players are not limited in how much they can practice, and therefore spend from 60 to 90 minutes in the morning working on footwork, shooting and ballskills. The same players then practice another 60 to 90 minutes in the afternoon on more team-oriented concepts. There is no separation of big guys and guards, every player works on the same skills. As a result, European players are generally more well-rounded and more fundamentally sound. And they are more coveted by coaches at all levels.

Shoe Companies and AAU Basketball: Contrary to popular belief, the shoe companies and AAU programs are not full of bad people looking to exploit kids. As in any endeavor, there are good people and bad people in those organizations. However, it is clear that the goals of the shoe companies and AAU programs are at odds with the proper teaching and development of fundamentally sound players.

Whether well intentioned or not, shoe companies are in the business of selling shoes, not growing the game. While the major shoe companies have "grassroots" programs, they are more interested in growing their influence than in growing the game. The best evidence of that is in the national camps run by Nike and adidas every summer. These camps are designed to showcase players against the best competition, not improve their skills. Instead of running stations in the morning or early afternoon, where the players would spend time at each different basket in the gym working on individual skills, they play games all day.

The coaches and scouts evaluating these players would much rather watch the kids in one game per day and get the chance to evaluate skill levels through station work. And the kids would be better off as well. But teaching is not the goal.

The same goes for AAU programs. Far too many AAU coaches are more interested in playing and winning games, rather than teaching young players the skills necessary to be successful players. While young kids are travelling the country playing games, they are not able to practice or work on their games. It is really that simple.

Skills 'Players' Need to Have

Fundamentally sound players need to be able to handle the ball, shoot the ball, pass the ball, and use their feet. Unless a player has these basic skills mastered, he will be limited and therefore easy to guard and difficult to play with.

point the Hoyas' press and reminds you of a poor man's Elton Brand.

Edward Scott, Clemson Scott leads the ACC in scoring and is fourth in assists, and could play anywhere. He is an old-school point guard that looks to score, never picks up his dribble, and can go left or right to score. He has excellent mid-range pull-up ability, can score on the break, and has excellent range on his shot. Scott has led the Tigers in scoring and assists in nine of Clemson's 10 games, and does it while being the primary target of opposing defenses.

Emeka Okafor, UConn This kid is a young [David Robinson](#). He is a Renaissance Man and an old-school, dominating inside presence, and we should all be screaming from the rooftops about his ability to impact a game without needing the ball to do it. Okafor averages over 17 points per game on 58-percent shooting, and has the potential to be a very good offensive player because of his work rate and his aptitude for the game. His greatest impact, however, is on the defensive end of the floor, where he is Russell-esque in his play. Okafor leads the nation in blocked shots, sending over 5 per game back where they came from, and he alters countless more. He leads the nation in rebounding (12.9 rpg), and is the finishing point for around eight defensive possessions per game. Okafor is getting better and better, and he may be around for a while, because he gets it.

Matt Carroll, Notre Dame Carroll simply knows how to play, and he is an outstanding shooter with a quick release. Carroll is ambidextrous around the basket, uses his head, and makes plays out on the floor. He averages almost 19 points per game on 48-percent shooting, drills it from three-point range, and knocks down free throws. Carroll can pass the ball, and consistently stretches the defense, makes the right play, and provides Mike Brey a calming influence on the court. Carroll may never be an NBA pro, but he's a hell of a college player, and he's a terrific leader.



Here are the basic skills needed by every player on the court:

Ballhandling: If a player cannot handle the ball with either hand, he will get attacked and overwhelmed by the defense because he cannot go anywhere off the dribble. To be a competent ballhandler, a player needs to be able to control the ball with either hand, and know the proper use of the dribble given the situation. Once a player knows when and how to dribble, how to set up his man to make a dribble move, and has the basic skills and footwork, he becomes much harder to guard, and much more valuable to any team.

The best way to become a better ballhandler is to handle the ball more often. Repetition is the key to success as a ballhandler, whether it is doing game speed drills in dribbling around cones or executing the footwork and handling of a spin move, rocker step or reverse pivot. Ballhandlers must also learn to handle the ball playing against a defender. That is the only way to learn how to protect the ball, use the body, and learn to set the defender up for counters. If you want to make players better handlers of the ball, make them handle the ball. And make the big guys handle it in the same situations you ask guards to handle it.

Shooting If you cannot shoot the ball, you will always be able to get an open shot, because nobody guards a substandard shooter. Like ballhandling, the best way to become a better shooter is to shoot the ball over and over again at game speed. The motto for shooters in practice should be "game shots, game spots, at game speed". Shooting "game" shots over and over creates muscle memory, and provides confidence to the shooter.

The first thing shooters must learn to do is to look at the basket when they catch the ball. Defenders must believe that you are a threat to shoot the ball, and nobody will by that if you don't look at the basket, and no good defender will go for a shotfake. In looking at the rim, a player will be able to see what is going on under it as well. To be a good shooter, a player has to use his feet effectively to create space and get open, and must be ready to shoot as the ball arrives. Good shooters go straight up and down without drifting, and therefore don't have to shoot at a moving target. They have their shooting hand under the ball, and the elbow under their shooting hand. The motion should be up and not out in order to shoot a soft ball with good trajectory and velocity.

Whatever shot a player wants to perfect, the proper repetition of that particular shot is the key. No player can get that proper repetition by simply playing in games, but must be made to do it in practice.

Passing: No skill in American basketball that is more neglected than passing. Good coaches will tell you that the quality of the pass determines the quality of the shot. That is absolutely correct. In order to score, the defense has to be moved, and the pass is the most effective way to move a defense.

Players need to be taught how to properly throw two-hand chest passes, overhead passes, bounce passes with either hand, and to pass with exactness and imagination. The first rule of passing is that, if you have a clear path to an open player, pass him the ball. You do not pass-fake to open people, you pass the ball to them. Passing should not be a last resort, after you have exhausted all possibilities to obtain your own shot. Rather, you should pass the ball to get your team the best quality shot. Watch any game, on any level, and see for yourself how many times passes are made only when all other avenues have been closed. It happens a lot.

If a player cannot pass, he cannot play, and the ball dies in his hands.

Footwork: Basketball is played with the feet, and every phase of the game is dependent upon good footwork. In any game, a player plays 90 percent or more of the game without the ball. Learning how to play with your feet, offensively and defensively, is of vital importance for basketball players at any level, and an area in which youngsters need the most attention and instruction. Without attention to detail of the footwork necessary to execute basic moves in the game, and to create space, the player is severely limited.

The United States has the best athletes, the best coaches and the most basketball resources in the world. We need to spend less time coaching, and more time teaching, especially at lower levels of the game. We need to encourage coaches to teach, not just to coach, and for players to practice, not just to play. There is no reason why our best athletes cannot be our best players. If we do a better job of teaching, the level of play in the United States will skyrocket, and the game will be better for it.

Arizona Still No. 1

Each week this season, I have been voting in ESPN.com's "Power 16" poll. As a result, I will never again complain about the top 25 polls and their voters' choices. Aside from the fact that ranked teams get more exposure and their highlights on SportsCenter, I have never thought that the polls were of any real value. Plus, voting in weekly polls isn't just difficult, it is downright ridiculous, and it doesn't make any sense to me.

For example, when Arizona lost at LSU, the Wildcats immediately dropped several spots in the polls. Even though the Wildcats' loss was right before Christmas, without Luke Walton, and Arizona played uncharacteristically poorly, the 'Cats still had the last shot to win. Perhaps because we are conditioned to do so, everyone dropped Arizona down, even though we know that every other good team in America will lose a few times before the end of the season, and that Arizona is better than many of the teams we vaulted ahead of them.

A weekly poll is simply a grotesque snapshot of our emotions about teams, dropping the ones that have disappointed us, and lifting up the teams that may not be playing as well, but have not yet stumbled badly in front of us.

We did it to Kansas, which lost a few games that should have been won. Yet when the Jayhawks started playing the way we all thought they would in December, they were out of the top 20, or just on the fringe of it. Even when the Jayhawks lost to North Carolina and Florida, I knew that there were not 20 better teams in the nation than Kansas. Wayne Simien's shoulder injury is a lot better of a reason to drop Kansas in the polls than a couple of early season losses.

We did it to Texas, who committed the sin of losing to Notre Dame in a great game, and then to Arizona in Tucson. The Longhorns are still a legit threat to make it to New Orleans, but dropped way down in the polls. We did it to Georgia, which lost a few early without all of its players, yet the Bulldogs are building toward something really big in Athens.

Similarly, even though Arizona lost to LSU, the Wildcats are still better than everyone else in the long run, and still has the most potential to be great before the end of the year. Lute Olson has quality depth and quality

seniors. Most teams cannot match that, and most teams won't. While there may not be a truly dominant team as in years past, Arizona is still the team to beat.

Here are my best bets to reach the Final Four, why they can make it, and what may keep them home watching it on television.

Arizona: The Wildcats are big, deep, athletic and have experienced leaders. A weakness may be in halfcourt offensive execution. Arizona scores so easily off of turnovers and offensive boards, but need to become better in halfcourt games.

Alabama: The Crimson Tide has played a tough schedule, and have done well against it. The Tide can guard people, rebound, knock down free throws and can compete with anyone. Alabama's problems are on the offensive end, where the Tide shoots only 42 percent as a team, and just 31 percent from deep. If Alabama can upgrade its offensive production, it will take a lot of pressure off of its defense.

Duke: The Blue Devils may be young in spots, but with the experience levels of Chris Duhon, Dahntay Jones and Daniel Ewing, the freshmen can come into an established culture and blend. Duke can really shoot it, and the Blue Devils can pressure the ball. Concerns rest inside, where big and athletic teams will look to pound the offensive glass and drive the ball to combat the overplay. Duke is very good, and getting better, but still very beatable.

Pittsburgh: Pitt is strong, methodical and tough. The Panthers are led by one of the most under-appreciated corps of guards in the country, and have balance inside as well. Although Pitt has yet to play anyone great, it did beat Notre Dame impressively on Monday night and its only loss came against another legit contender (Georgia). Ben Howland's team can really defend and run its patterns. A weakness is shooting, where Pitt ranks near the bottom of the Big East in 3-point and free-throw shooting.

Texas: The Longhorns are deep, strong and can score better than any team Rick Barnes has coached. The only stumbles have come against top ranked teams, and Texas is still the Final Four favorite it was in October. Texas can still guard people, holding 7 of its 11 opponents under 40-percent shooting. While Texas is a better scoring team, the Longhorns are streaky shooters, and must do a better job of scoring consistently in the halfcourt.

Oklahoma: Don't count out the Sooners. They are still tough, still tenacious defenders, and still dangerous. Ebi Ere and Hollis Price are the only Sooners to lead the team in scoring this year, but Oklahoma made it to the Final Four last year without being a great offensive team. It was just that Kelvin Sampson had the luxury of going to Aaron McGhee when a score was required. The Sooner question marks are inside, where Kevin Bookout and Jabhari Brown have to produce more offense.

Kansas: The Jayhawks are national championship material ... if healthy. The best starting five in America is not an exaggeration, but Simien is needed to make that true. With Simien, Kansas is more than good enough to cut the nets down in New Orleans. Without him, it will be a lot to overcome. Assuming he gets back soon, Kansas' question marks are 3-point shooting and its ability to get out in transition with so little depth. If KU can consistently score in transition and in its secondary break in postseason play, and knock down a few 3s,

they'll be in New Orleans. Mark Cairns, the KU trainer, is looking like the Jayhawks' MVP.

Oregon: Okay, the Ducks laid an egg against Cincinnati and lost at home to Arizona. But don't get too worked up over that, since Arizona is the best team, and no Oregon team has won on the east coast since 1978. Ernie Kent needs to schedule annual trips east to get his team used to smash-mouth basketball, and playing in different arenas. Oregon can score in transition, and has one of the best tandems in the country in Luke Ridnour and Luke Jackson. To win at the highest level, Oregon needs to become a better rebounding team (that means you, too, guards!). The Ducks give up too many second shots.

Notre Dame: The Irish have skilled players who can spread the floor and score with ease. Mike Brey has a terrific passing team, and can count upon Chris Thomas, Matt Carroll, Danny Miller and Torin Francis to put up numbers. Whether Notre Dame can get to New Orleans will depend upon its defense (see: Big Monday loss to Pittsburgh). The Irish are not particularly quick or strong on the defensive end, but can still guard better than they are doing now.

UConn: The Huskies are very good and getting better. With Emeka Okafor down low, there is no excuse for any player not to get out and defend with confidence and abandon, because Okafor will erase a lot of defensive mistakes. Like most good teams, halfcourt execution is the main thing that UConn needs to improve upon. Halfcourt offensive prowess separates teams in the NCAA Tournament.

Georgia: The Bulldogs have big, athletic wings, who can really score and defend. Jim Harrick has a team full of matchup nightmares, and with Steve Thomas and Chris Daniels back playing again, Georgia can beat anyone in the country. The Bulldogs have to rebound the ball better, and get out and force more turnovers to be their best.

Mississippi State: The Bulldogs are undervalued, and have tough players at every position, size, great rebounding ability, a defensive mindset, and a star in Mario Austin. Derrick Zimmerman is a tough point guard, Timmy Bowers and Michael Ignerski can shoot it, and Austin anchors the team. Mississippi State needs to consistently hit perimeter shots, knock down free throws and deny penetration to be in New Orleans.

Indiana: The Hoosiers run good offense and can really shoot the ball. With Tom Coverdale, Kyle Hornsby and Bracey Wright spreading the floor with superior range and shooting ability, the Hoosiers are hard to guard. To win, Indiana has to get consistent production from Jeffrey Newton and George Leach, on both ends.

As for some darkhorses that have a chance to win four straight in March: Don't forget about Illinois, Florida, Texas Tech, Missouri, Kentucky, Marquette, Michigan State, Creighton, Louisville, Wake Forest, Maryland.

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