

Money Players

What are the differences between the U.S. and European developmental systems?

Marc Isenberg visited the Reebok Eurocamp in Treviso, Italy, to find out.

He discovered a system that has much to envy, and some parts to be ignored.

A thorough exam of the Euro

By Marc Isenberg

“Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one’s lifetime.”

—Mark Twain

We have a dysfunctional development system in the United States. The Redeem Team might have gotten USA Basketball back on track last summer at the Beijing Olympics, but the problems run deeper. Youth development is lagging. There are too many disparate and self-serving agendas involved.

Yes, we want to be competitive and mold fine young men and women. But we also want to use basketball as a vehicle to drive revenue. Just like politics and business, we start out with great, noble concepts, then sell it, milk it, bid up the price and finally wonder why things go awry. It’s the American Way.

When a problem emerges in college athletics, the response is often predictable. Downplay controversy. Absolve blame. Shoot the messenger. Form a “blue-ribbon” task force. Rinse. Repeat.

Basketball isn’t life or death, but for those who care about the game, it’s important to make meaningful change. Time will tell if this moment is different from all the other failed reform movements.

Several months ago, my good friend Fran Fraschilla – ESPN analyst, former college coach and international expert – and I were talking about the differences between development in the United States and abroad. He suggested that I attend the Reebok Eurocamp in Treviso, Italy (where he has served as a coach for the last five years), this summer and observe firsthand. Italy. Basketball. Friendly people. Incredible food. Fascinating history. *Fantastico!*

Fraschilla served as my unofficial guide for the Reebok Eurocamp in Treviso. Not only did Fran and I spend countless hours talking about global basketball issues, Fran also engaged several coaches, scouts, GMs, players and agents in our never-ending discussion.

The purpose of my trip was simple: to learn more

about international basketball and to evaluate the pros and cons of development in the United States and abroad.

Eurocamp was founded in 2003 by Pete Philo, former college and European player and current Minnesota Timberwolves scout. The format is simple: bring 48 top European players, ages 18-21, together to showcase their abilities in front of scouts and general managers repre-

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senting teams from around the world, including the Euroleague and NBA. Philo and his staff run a great camp, which has steadily become more influential.

Here are some of my de Tocqueville-like observations from my European adventure:

Practice: European basketball places emphasis on practice. An odd contrast: A giant banner of Reebok endorser Allen Iverson hung in the La Ghirada gym. Like a catchy song that’s stuck your head: “We’re talking about

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practice, man. We’re talking about *practice*. We’re not talking about the game.” Exactly. Practice is everything to European players. Fewer games, more practice. Sounds boring, but that is precisely why European basketball improved at an amazing pace. Coaches understand the importance of practice. European players buy in.

Competition: The NBA pre-draft camp was criti-

cized because the agreed-upon format and player agents conspired to keep players from going head-to-head. At Reebok Eurocamp, players participated in intense skill workouts in the morning, then played games the rest of the day. Houston Rockets GM Daryl Morey even tweeted: “The Reebok Eurocamp: Where 5-on-5 happens. Congrats to the Reebok organizers for their radical idea

of having the prospects play basketball.”

Competition breeds success. If players want to be the best, they have to *beat* the best. I am a players’ advocate. I try to view things through the players’ lenses. When it comes to the pre-draft, I believe NBA teams – which are investing millions in their draft picks – have every right to see players go head to head. Come on agents, let your clients play ball.

Appreciate this: I have a low tolerance for high levels of gobbledygook and deceit (*see*: recruiting, NCAA press releases). Our system engenders certain levels of entitlement. We build ’em up (recruiting), buy ’em on the cheap (TV exposure and apparel) and then tear ’em down and then attempt to build ’em back up. It’s nuts.

Fraschilla observed: “I honestly get emotionally down when I leave Eurocamp. I hate leaving the passion these players have for the game. They are not just passionate about basketball, they are passionate about improving. They have a tremendous respect for coaches and your basketball knowledge. You feel appreciated.”

The hungriest thrive: Right now, foreign players are hungry. Consider this: Around World War I, Jewish-Americans were known as the best boxers. Why? They were poor and hungry. Eventually they rose up, joined country clubs and got

soft. Hey, it’s the American dream.

After the Orlando Magic lost to the Los Angeles Lakers in the NBA Finals, Magic center Dwight Howard said the most important thing for next season is to “stay incredibly hungry.” Easier said than done, of course. But hunger is critical to success.

Basketball as a cultural exchange: NCAA rules

Q&A with Eurocamp executive director Pete Philo

How did you get interested in international basketball?

My interest in international basketball first started with my playing experience. I played professional basketball in Denmark, Lebanon, Poland, Croatia and Iceland. I have run basketball schools in several countries. I became an international scouting consultant for the Dallas Mavericks for three seasons. I just finished my fourth season as international scouting coordinator for the Minnesota Timberwolves. When you travel the world playing, coaching and observing basketball, you formulate a much greater appreciation for the international game, not only how it's played, but also the players and coaches who bring an incredible passion for the game.

Why did you found Reebok Eurocamp?

Our original idea was to start a European "big man camp" and do a "five-on-five" camp as a sidebar. After the first year it was clear that the international players would benefit from a "predraft" style event where all of the top talent could compete against each other. Reebok was eager to be a part of the basketball movement taking place in Europe. From there, it blossomed

into a world-class event that has become a staple on the global basketball calendar.

What are your favorite moments from this year's camp?

On the second night we had an all-star game. Our top 20 players in the camp competing against each other. Most of them will play in the NBA one day. The gym was filled to capacity – all 30 NBA teams in attendance, all major media, over 100 of the top European clubs, agents, coaches all in one gym. Packed house and the best talent in the world (U-20) all on the court at one time. That's a great feeling.

I also love the closing ceremony. The players truly support each other. There's no ego. When a player received an award, he was loudly cheered by everyone, even his greatest competitors. When we started the camp, I didn't realize how big a deal it would be to honor the players, but there is an incredible appreciation among European basketball players. The closing ceremony is an opportunity to enjoy what just happened throughout the week, and to discuss the experience and all the great moments.

What lessons do you think U.S. players can learn

from foreign players?

There are many nuances that go into making a professional basketball player. The simple answer is respect. Without respect, it is impossible to understand what is really happening, not only in the world, in general, but also in the global basketball community. U.S. players can learn that without a solid foundation of fundamentals, they will not reach their full potential. Foreign-born players maximize their talents by paying close attention to every detail. For European players, practice is a not considered a chore but is treated with great respect. They have to develop much greater habits, especially at the most critical basketball development ages, from 14 to 18. This is what helps them build a solid foundation to work with. You hope American players get the type of coaching that instills respect for the game, but unfortunately, there are a lot of factors that make it more difficult for our kids to focus like their European counterparts. American players have incredible natural ability. But the U.S. basketball community doesn't come close to providing the training infrastructure that elite basketball players need to develop into professional basketball players.

have, unfortunately, conspired to reduce the impact of foreign players in American basketball. NCAA rules view many foreign players as professionals simply because they play on teams with professionals. These players are born into a developmental system that is far different from ours. Arturas Karnisovas, who played collegiately at

Seton Hall and professionally in the NBA and in Europe (he now scouts for the Houston Rockets), pointed out: "The NCAA system penalizes players who are very good and can play on the high level early in their careers. The fact that 17- or 18-year-old players can play against older men should not stop them from being eligible to play

in NCAA." If the NCAA bothered to notice, our summer club system professionalizes U.S. players just as much, if not more, as European players. We just call them "amateurs."

We're missing a valuable opportunity to improve college basketball and the development of American players who benefit, on and off the court, from being around European players. Karnisovas believes Europeans tend to be more "independent and self-sufficient." We need more of these players in college basketball. And we should be sending more U.S. players overseas for basketball and cultural exchange programs.

Developing greatness: One Eurocamp player commented on college basketball: "It seems so absurd. Why would I want to go to an American university and only be allowed to play 20-30 hours a week? And why can coaches only work with players two hours per week? That makes no sense. How do players improve? Here, we work out

with our coaches four, five hours per day."

So Europe is developing great basketball at the expense of education? Hardly. The player continued: "I go to university because I want to get an education, not because I want to play basketball. There, I am just a student." Yes, you can be a student *and* an athlete. Being a "student-athlete" is a bit more tricky.

Becoming an elite athlete is not normal. Someone once said that Olympic gold-medal winners train 12 hours a day for 12 years. And so do the losers.

Competing at the highest level of basketball – or any sport – is a relentless, unbalanced pursuit.

In order to form a more perfect basketball union: Yes, it is easy to criticize basketball development in our country. There is no perfect system. European basketball is worth examining, but it is not the complete answer. There are flaws in that system as well. For example, European players are the property of clubs and federations, where they are not just traded, but are bought and sold.

And Europe does not have college basketball, which, despite its many flaws, is still a great game and a great opportunity for its players.

Kevin Wieberg, who heads the nascent NCAA and NBA joint initiative, iHoops, told *USA Today* that the partnership is "designed to combat a trend in which the secondary school structure has become less important in the development of young basketball players."

Yes, it is an unfortunate trend that high-school basketball has become devalued, but this has more to do with budgets in high schools (the ongoing financial crisis is wreaking havoc on sports funding) and the reality of college recruiting (summer is the best, most cost-effective way for schools to evaluate players.)

Bob Hurley Sr. was one of the Eurocamp coaches. In the end, we need more Hurleys coaching in both high school and college, more than we need news conferences, rules and even partnerships. But, hey, the partnership is finally moving forward. The NCAA and NBA reportedly invested \$15 million each. Let's hope they get a decent return on this investment.

The discussion continues on MoneyPlayersBlog.com. Share your thoughts on how to improve the development of the U.S. player. Or e-mail me at marc.isenberg@gmail.com.

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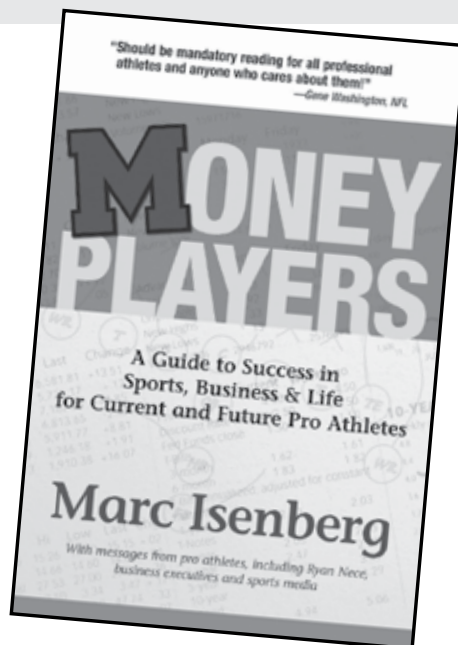
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