

How To Evaluate Talent – By Rob Meurs

As borders open across the globe and the world becomes smaller, talent evaluation has become an area of major investment for elite clubs.

In 1998 Dirk Nowitzki was drafted by the Dallas Mavericks as a relative unknown, (certainly in the USA) and a player who had not even played in Germany's top division. Fast forward to 2006 and NBA and European clubs have dozens of scouts scouting the globe for top players, making the chance of unearthing another Nowitzki-like secret seem slim at best.

One of the best in the international scouting business is Rob Meurs.

Meurs was the first to make international scouting a full-time job and has worked for numerous NBA, NCAA and European clubs. After being a player and a coach in the Netherlands for many years, he started to scout international basketball about 18 years ago.

Prior to becoming a full time scout he worked for 10 years as a teacher and curriculum developer at the military school for physical education in the Netherlands.

In this series of articles, Meurs explains his philosophy on talent evaluation, an issue that is vital for basketball coaches at all levels.

From the junior club level to senior national teams, coaches at all levels need to be able to identify young players who have the ability and potential to play at an elite level.

What is talent?

When FIBA Europe asked me if I had an explanation why many talented young players who we saw in the past at the national U16, U18 and U20/22 level never live up to their expectations, and some of them even completely disappear, my first response was; 'Were they really that talented, or did we label them talents while they never had the potential to become a top player?'. My second thought was, 'what is successful?'

Before any discussion about talent evaluation begins, it is necessary to define the word talent. I don't know if there is a real definition, but if you want to talk about players being successful or not in the future, you first have to come to a point, what is talent?

There has to be a correlation between talent and level of success down the road. Is successful, making the NBA, or is becoming a star in Europe also a success? What about a player who never becomes a star, but has a long career with a top club like Real Madrid, Fortitudo Bologna, Efes Pilsen, ASVEL Villeurbanne, ALBA Berlin; is he successful?

If you go to any national team youth tournaments you will find players who are very talented and will go on to have very good careers, but they will never be NBA stars. It's important to make the distinction that looking for talent does not necessarily mean finding NBA superstars, or impact players at top European

levels, it can mean players at different levels and in different countries in Europe.

I think we all agree that talent isn't just one thing, but that you can look at several different aspects of talent. We all looking for the next Michael Jordan or Dirk Nowitzki and even these two players weren't or aren't perfect in all aspects of talent. We are chasing a utopia, 'The Perfect Player'.

I divide talent into the following four main subjects; physical, mental, skills, game intelligence or feel for the game.

Physical Talent

Usually I start to evaluate players when they are 15 or 16 and than I look in the first place at things which will be very difficult or impossible to change such as physical talent.

You can't teach size or being long, but also the bone and joints structure can't be changed. The structure of the muscles is almost impossible to change; you can't go from slow to fast twitch muscle fibers. It's obvious that a player who is explosive and quick has better tools to play basketball than the slower player.

That doesn't mean you can't train physique, with weight lifting you can get stronger, bigger and gain more body mass. With agility drills you can get a little quicker reactions and little better coordination, but you can't change your body type and you can't get faster muscle fibers. Quickness is very hard to train and hardly gives significant improvement.

I look at body type, agility, quickness, leaping, strength and coordination. I look at the shoulders, bones, joints, body fat, structure of the muscles, size of the hands and feet, length of the arms and legs and height.

I think there is an ideal physique for basketball players a good example of player coming close to that is Serbia's Darko Milicic.

He has the physical tools to be a great basketball player because he has a very good frame with great shoulders, pretty long arms and legs, tall, good strength, not too heavy and he is coordinated, quick and athletic. For me he is a player with excellent physical talent, not necessarily an overall talented player.

One of the countries which select players at an early age based on their physical talents is Serbia. They even have some specialised coaches whose main responsibility is testing the physical potential of young players (10-12 years old). They have developed a series of tests, which they use to select players (or even before they are players) for different basketball programs.

Mental Talent

Another factor which is very difficult to change in players is mental talent, what goes on in their heads. Even sports psychiatrists are busting their brains about how to measure it and how to influence and/or train it.

I divide mental talent into 3 different parts.

The first is what most people look at as work ethic and toughness; dealing with the physical part of the game, continuing to play/practice when you are sore, tired, banged up and when they play you physically and real hard. Personally I prefer the tough and hard working players, because you can rely on them and

they always will give you something, they won't quit. When they also are a little nasty it's even better.

The second part of mental talent is how much can a player take and how will he respond. For example how he reacts to losing and winning, to criticism, (media) hype, teammates who screw up, referees, his coach, the fans and injuries.

The third I can't really define, but I call it the x-factor, how bad does he want to win and how much is he willing to give up to reach his ultimate goal(s) to become the best, the number one.

What will he do with his social life, other hobbies, other sports, school, time he wants to put in, etc. For those players it's all about one thing "ME" and nothing else. Everybody has to adjust and center around this athlete and has to serve to his ultimate goal. These athletes also have a very high level of self confidence; they know (not think) they are the best and they act as they are the best.

This athlete constantly set high standards for himself and keeps on raising the bar, he can work a whole year to get 1/100 of a second faster to beat his opponent or in basketball, stay an hour after every practice each day to practice the three-pointer so the next season he shoots one percent better.

In both sports and other work, nobody gets to the top of their profession without a singular attitude to success and the willingness to make sacrifices. Whether it is not spending any time with your family to walking over people to get to the top, whatever it takes to be the best. In sports these people are often seen as asocial selfish persons and most of the time not seen as likeable persons. However it doesn't necessarily mean a bad person off the court or outside the gym.

For me the most important is the x-factor which can make the difference between a good player and the very small top of the absolute best, the last one which we as scouts are looking for.

How do I try to find out more about the mental factors?

I observe and evaluate the behavior on and of the court; try to talk to players, coaches and journalists. I look at his reactions to team mates, coaches, referees and fans. What will he do after something goes wrong, will he put his head down or will he put in the extra effort? What kind of body language, shake his hand and look at how he is dressed. Is he concentrated, what kind of emotions and does he fight. Will he quit, is he going down with the team, can he step it up, carry his team in difficult moments and is he a leader or a follower, but most of all I go by my intuition.

I love the tough nasty son of a gun who everybody hates to play against, someone like Ben Wallace.

Most of the mental aspects are very hard to train or can't be changed at all. In psychology it's in general accepted that most of these factors are formed at a young age and become more or less final during puberty.

It's a combination of genetics and environment.

When a person gets older he can till a certain extend rationalise his or her behavior, but the personality will not change unless there is brain damage. I think for coaches who work with players up to 15-16 years old it's very important to work on behavior, mental training/forming, discipline etc.

I believe that some parts are also related to physical talent, when a soft player gets physically stronger and bigger sometimes he also will become a little tougher and harder for himself and others.

I personally think that most of the success of an athlete comes down to his mental talent(s) and still we know so little about how to evaluate, predict and influence.

Feel for the game

A key aspect of identifying talent is looking for players who have a feel for the game. Feel for the game is not only the feel a player must have to make the best decisions, find the best solutions in a split second and understanding the plays, but also to know himself, what he can do and what he can't do on the court and knowing your own teammates and your opponents.

How many times a coach gets frustrated because his big guy wants to play PG and starts to dribble the ball and screwing up plays. Or the defensive specialist who also wants to show he can score and misses one shot after the other. Or the wing who is open and takes a 3 pointer while he can't throw a rock in the ocean, not realizing the leave him open because he can't shoot. For scouts and coaches it's important to know if the player can play within his limitations and if not can it be fixed.

Knowing your teammates strengths and weaknesses, his mood and if he is in the game or not. A playmaker who passes the ball to his big man who is posting at the left block, but who can't make a post move from the left block. Or the PG who sees his wing player is in the game and can't miss and will get him the ball all the time. Or the passer who sees that his teammate is within his shooting range and gets him the ball.

Especially in the NBA, but also at the top level in Europe the real good players do know all the strengths and weaknesses of their direct opponent, they study it and take advantage of it. I remember Chris Mullin with the Warriors, he could tell you exactly of all his opponents what their go to moves were, which angles they prefer, if they shot higher percentages from the left or the right side and so on. A player like Jason Kidd goes even a step further, he also knows of the defenders of his team mates what they can and can't do and used that to get his own players in the game and in higher percentage plays. Some players are great in recognizing mismatches and used that to their or their teammate's advantage.

Understanding of set plays and concepts of the game and know how to anticipate. Don't try to make every pass an assist, but look for the pass which can lead to an assist. Try to open up the defense with strong outside plays, so your big man comes open. When to run which play, see and take the right options. Remember the plays, but don't let it become completely automatic. Here we come to the creativity of a player, what has a lot to do with his skill level, but also finding solutions and the right decision in not prepared situations. Timing, angles and taking responsibility to do it different. Playing with the clock and possessions.

It's obvious that the position of the player has also to do a lot with his feel for the game and what will be expected from him. Play makers almost have to be an extension of the coach and have a lot of responsibility in decision making; beside they have the ball more in their hands than any other player. They are the start of a sequence of actions and plays which will lead to a basket. The big inside player is at the receiving end has to know when and where to post up and then decides which post move will be the best in that situation, but hardly has to think about other teammates even when it would benefit him.

Feel for the game has to do with cognitive and creative decisions, which partly can be taught, but also can be natural. It has to do with experience and age, but also with (basketball) IQ and brain models. The more a player has been in different situations the more he recognizes and knows how to solve it (in less time). Quickness of decisions is very important. Younger players are thinking and take more time to find (the

right) solution, you see them looking for a decision and then become too late with their action. Same for players coming from a lower level of competition, they also need time to adjust to the quicker pace of the game. The faster the game the more complicated it will become for inexperienced players.

It's not always easy for coaches and scouts to recognize if a player has feel for the game and for which part, how much, did he made the right decision, can it become better, does he has basketball IQ, were there other factors involved in his decision, etc. It takes more time then for instance evaluating the physical talent of the player, which you know in couple of seconds/minutes. You have to see him longer and in more different situations. As a scout and coach you have to really understand the game yourself and then try to think in the place of the player you scout. Would I do the same, look at the results of the actions, could he have done better, did his teammates understood, did the coach want him to play in a certain way, were the officials a factor, is he making the same bad decision over and over again, etc. Also external factors, what happened before the game, is his wife pregnant, did they pay him in time, how much pressure is there on the result of the game. Personality of a player, is he shy or not, ego, does he take risks, does he feel responsibility, can he communicate, are factors influencing his decision making. How does he come out of a time out? Does he pick up instructions of his coach or team mates? Does he communicate with his coach? Is he explaining plays options etc to a team mate? Will he watch games on pc or DVD? What does he do during practice, does he listen and then try to do it different, will he ask the coach to explain, is he picking up the board and draws something?

More than physical talent and for sure mental talent, feel for the game and making the right decisions can be trained till a certain extent, it's not easy and it will take time. Some players will never become good decision makers others can improve a lot, but in general they all will become at least a little better if it wasn't only for making the same bad mistakes over and over again. Experience is the key word, rehearsal, put the player and the team in many different situations, make them think, asked them for solutions, give them simple instructions, let them watch their own games and those from others and so on.

There are several different learning models and strategies which I don't want to go over in this article. One thing I like to mention is a cognitive computer program what has been used for the training of fighter pilots in Israel and has been translated to the basketball situation. In a very simple computer game (not a basketball game) the players learn to anticipate, make split second decisions, recognize situations, oversee complicated situations etc. The program makes the game more difficult when the player shows improvement. Why I mention it is not in particular the program, but more the concept of cognitive learning in basketball and how you can have more learning moments then just during the hours of practicing with the team and even more important it's possible the to improve decision making of basketball players.

Skill level

The skill level is the least complicated to recognize and to evaluate. It's pretty objective, is a player left or right handed, does he has a crossover dribble, can he shoot from beyond the arc, can he make a bounce pass, does he has a jump hook, can he make defensive slides etc. All scouts and coaches can see that, however the tricky part is not recognizing the skills, but at which level and in which circumstances is the player still able to perform his skills.

Are some skills more important for basketball than others? I think we all can agree on yes. A player who can't shoot or finish is immediately limited to becoming a role player. A player who can't dribble the ball can't be a creative one on one player. If you can't pass the ball it will be hard to play in a team concept and will cause too many turn overs. But a player, who can't block shots or is a limited rebounder, can still become a very good basketball player. I don't know if anybody ever ranked all the offensive and defensive

basketball skills, but it would be nice to have a survey among coaches and scouts how they look at this. It probably differs from country to country and coaching's philosophy, even when there will be a common sense on which skills are the most important.

Mental and physical pressure will absolutely influence the execution of a player's skills. A mini basketball player with very nice crossover dribble blows by his opponent of the same age, but at the next level he maybe can't do the same, because the opponent is a better defender or more physical. Also the stakes are getting bigger and bigger and can make the player think twice before he executes and therefore can't make the same move. Apart from the level of competition you can have 2 players with the same skill set and will evaluate and rate them the same, still one player can play as a high major player and the other only as a low major player. We as scouts and coaches have to anticipate if the young skilled player can do the same at the next level and/or older age and then rate him accordingly. Can he improve?

What is the definition of a good looking skill, how it looks or how efficient it is? For instance the ugly shooting small forward, who makes you cry if you see him taking a 3 point shot, but when you look at his percentages he is 40% from beyond the arc, is that a bad skill? Skill level is more related to, can he execute and is the shot, the dribble, the pass efficient, than does it look nice. Question for a scout/coach is can he be more efficient if he changes it, can we make him improve, can we make him do the same at the next level.

That brings us to two topics about skills that are important to predict if a player can improve. First physical limitations or extras and medical limitations can influence the final level of execution. Shooting is a good example; if you lack coordination it's a lot more difficult to become a good shooter. The player with limited rotation in his shoulder joint will never be able to shoot the ball as good as the player with a smooth shoulder. Think also of players with very muscular and physical shoulders/upper body who can't get the right form to shoot. Coordination, strength, quickness and flexibility have big impacts on learning and executing skills. The second one is learning models of motor skills. Some players will pick up skills from one moment to the other while a lot of players have to practice over and over again before they start to manage the skills, if they ever will manage it. I remember a classmate of me at the college for physical education, who after one demonstration of a gymnastic swing on the bar sat down, mentally rehearsed it and then went to the bar and did it, while it took me several days to manage it and I wasn't the worst learner of motor skills. I don't want to go in all the motor skills learning strategies and models, but it's an important subject if you want to predict the progression/future of players. Maybe this is something for another series of articles.

Where we all can agree on is that skills can be taught and most of the time to a good level. Teaching skills can't be done early enough, where physical training and mental training needs to start at the right and older age.

What we try to do is built automatism and blue prints of simple and complex motor skills. A player can't think about the mechanics of his dribbling, passing, shooting, etc during games, he just have to do it, like driving a car.

For scouts it's interesting to know from where the player comes, which country, club and who his coaches are and were. Differences in basketball culture, history, philosophy and style have a lot of influence on the skill level and skill set of a player. The former Yugoslavian countries put and did put far more time and effort on teaching real basic skills as footwork and the right shooting mechanics than a lot of Western European countries did or do. Europeans in general put more emphasizes on passing than the American basketball school. A country as Lithuania where basketball is almost a religion they practice hours and hours to develop one skill, while in my country they will sue you if you that as a (basketball)coach.

In general the skill level can be taught and that is where good coaching comes in and the willingness to spend time and effort working with young players.

Physical, mental, feel for the game and skills are the 4 aspects in talent evaluation, maybe you can add learning ability to that to make it complete. As coaches and scouts we know most of this and still we miss out on very good players and we rate players talented and they never develop and even disappear from the international scene. Brings us back to “what happened with the (so called) talented players who never lived up to their expected level”.

I talked already about the question: “Is the player we evaluated as a talent at a young age really a talented player or did we miss evaluated him”. Now I will look into the (external) factors which influence the career of a talented basketball player.

Decisions in career

There are plenty of external factors which determine whether or not a player will be successful, but it comes all down to making the right decision, like everything else in life. I don't say it's easy, many times you don't know what the outcome will be of your (career) decision, a decision which seems like a good one at the moment you take it, can easily turn out to be bad for a player's long term development. Career planning, when to make a decision, who will be involved, is there any reference, who has experienced it before, take your time one year doesn't have to be crucial for your career, what are your objectives in your career, can I trust them etc.

Coaching

In the whole process of a talented player to become a star, the coaches are a key factor. It is really important that when young player goes to a team, the coach is prepared to work with him and develop him in the right direction.

Does the personality of the coach and the player match with each other? Is he tough, demanding, honest, patience, hard worker? What is the track record of the coach with young players? Is there pressure on the coach to win a championship or not to relegate? Will he use the player in the right way so he will develop, or does he use him to fill the holes in his team? Is the coach a teacher or more of a game coach? Who are his assistants?

Just because a player is seven feet tall doesn't mean he has to play inside, he may be a potential small forward, but there are always coaches who don't (want) see that. In general I have seen mistakes in how coaches evaluate players and how they see them fitting into the team concept. It is really important that player slot into a system that suits them.

Clubs often bring in young players who they think are talented and expect them to contribute right away. But things can easily go wrong if that player and the coach is under pressure, the team loses a few games, and before you know it the player is rooted to the bench. A lot of coaches feel they aren't hired to develop players but to win games, a lot of times that's a conflict of interest, especially if the coach doesn't have the backup of the club.

There are some coaches (and parents), who whatever it takes want to change the player. Make the 6-8 wing player a PF or the uncoordinated big kid an outside shooter so he can become the next Nowitzki.

Playing time

Do I have to explain this?

Hours of practicing

It's obvious that more hours of practicing give a better result. Over Europe and even club by club there can be a huge difference in the amount of hours they practice with (young) players. In general (there always exceptions) countries like the Netherlands, Denmark and even England might have 3-4 times a week 2 hours of practice time, while in Spain, France Italy there will be at least 5 times 2-3 hours a week and in the Baltic's and the former Eastern Europe they might practice 5-6 days a week twice a day. Talented players in countries/clubs where they practice significant more hours, have a much better chance to develop in a top player. It has to do with basketball culture, social/economics, availability of accommodation, professionalism etc if you can have more hours of practice available for youngsters.

Level of competition

To develop a young player he has to play on a challenging level, if you are a really talented player of 16 years old you are better of surviving every night against 18 years old than dominating every game at your own age level. Also if you always have better competition, like in Spain or Croatia than in Ireland and Finland you will for sure develop at a higher level.

Playing style

If you are an up tempo player and go to a team that plays a slow, half-court game, that's not going to help you that much. You may become a better half-court player, but probably not if you are a guy who wants to fill the lane and run and gun. Like the French teams, they are loaded with athletes and play an up tempo athletic style basketball, if you are part of that team as a slow half court guy who wants to post up, you're never going to see the ball and probably won't develop your game.

Physical factors

Being a dominating athlete or physical bruiser at the youth level doesn't guarantee a player he can do the same at the pro level. Many times a player gets away at the age of 16 by being a better natural athlete or being natural so much bigger and stronger, that he isn't forced to work on his game, he can rely to much and easy on his physical dominance. The older he gets the more other players are starting to catch up, maybe because they physically develop slower or maybe they were forced to work harder and finally compensate with better skills and the advantage the young physical player had is gone. It can even differ from region or country to country, Mediterranean's are earlier physical mature then Western European kids.

Money

Money is a factor in basketball for all players, but it shouldn't be a factor for young players, unfortunately many times it is and can have negative influence on the development of the young talent.

There are some good agents, advisers, parents, coaches and others who will tell the kids that money will come later and now is the time to develop, but a lot of them have \$ signs or better now a day's € signs in their eyes. Invest first in your future before you try to cash in. If I want to get a job as a lawyer, I have to go to school and university to study for a several before I become a lawyer and can make good money. We

underestimate that in basketball a lot of kids (parents) go crazy when they see the (big) contracts. How many times it happens that a young player get his (overpaid) first paycheck and think he made it already, is satisfied and stops working to get better. After his first contract is over we hardly hear of him again.

More than ever, basketball is a business and is played by the business rules, success and money. If a player contribute to the success, winning of a team the sky can be the limit, playing time, fame, bonuses and better contracts, but does the player and the team fail it's exit no matter if you are the experienced veteran or for sure the young player. Basketball business isn't nice, it's tough and over my dead body and a lot of times ran by owners, board members who are more fans than professional basketball workers, one day a hero next day without a job or at the end of the bench. If that is difficult and effect the veteran, how bad will it effect the young player.

A new era in European basketball are the (big) contracts signed with huge buy outs for young players, what makes it almost impossible for the player to move around if that should be better for his career (with the exception of the teams who understand and are willing to invest time and even losing money). Several teams do it because they want to secure the future of the club by binding the talented players to their program, but also a lot of teams and/or directors/ managers of the teams don't see basketball as a game, but as a factory to develop players into a product what can make the them or the team a lot of money. Is it morally right or wrong I don't know, but it for sure can have a huge impact on the future of the young prospects.

I am not against people/clubs making money in basketball and also understand that basketball is business, but it shouldn't stop a young player developing and taking away his chances of a career even when the club would lose money on it.

Fame/Hype

Another influence on players is their environment and the people around them, the parents, friends, coach, general manager of the club, the media, they can really screw up players. People start to talk to him, hey you're the next Nowitzki, the media start to hype him and people are always around him. Unless he is really strong mentally and he can look through that, he will keep on working to get better and stay with both feet on the ground. It happens a lot, especially in the USA with the hype in high school and college, not in the last place by agents and big companies who want to sign the players into a contract with them. In the US more than in Europe the influence of TV networks like ESPN, CBS, FOX etc have a huge impact on the hypes around young players, what absolutely will have its effect on the them.

It also influence coaches and scouts. When a reporter of a big US Sports network starts to write that he has seen the next NBA 7-3 super star in a tiny little place in Kazakhstan everybody rushes to Kazakhstan not to miss out on this kid and before you know the whole thing is blown out of proportions. The kid rushes up the lists of the mock drafts, his agent shows everybody his one in a lifetime game where had 43 points and 26 rebounds against a bunch of midgets, photographers fly to Kazakhstan to show pictures of the next Andre The Giant in front of a small farm in the middle of nowhere, newspapers write about the poor farmer family who have hit the jackpot, everybody starts to talk about it and before we knows he is drafted in the NBA lottery. Two years later, after collecting his millions and going from one team to the other, sitting on the bench missing his farm and goats back home, nobody ever heard of him again. The kid lived a happy and wealthy life, the reporter of the big US Sports Network write the last story on the once considered super star and how it all could have happened and the agent is counting his money of the fees of the endorsement contracts. Hype Hype Hype.

Cultural Background

In general speaking cultural background is a factor in talent evaluation which affects their mental talent.

For example the difference between a Serbian and Croatian player. An average Serbian guy comes to a team in Germany and shows big confident, because he is Serbian he grew up in a tough survival environment and has the attitude of I am the best and I will show them something. He demands the ball; 'I'm the Serbian guy, the one that's going to score every basket' and everyone believes it pass him the ball and he starts to overachieve. The Croatian guy is different, because he comes from a background where they didn't have to fight to survive, but could hang out with his friends at the beautiful Adriatic coast. So he comes over there, is a good player, looks around and starts to socialize and be nice. He doesn't ask for the ball, but waits until he gets it, he runs his plays is a real team mate, plays OK, everybody likes him, but in the end he never lived up to his potential.

Average Lithuanian players are overachieving, because they are as tough as nails and they go all the time for 150%, but their basketball skills and level might be low. If you take a guy from the Netherlands (where I am from), we have never been in a tough situation. Even nowadays Dutch players are spoiled in the way they live. Everything runs smoothly, luxurious life style, you don't have to worry to much about money and even when you don't have a job you still receive money from the state. Everybody wants you to go to school, everyone takes care of you and there is a big social security. You don't have to fight for your survival, no need to be tough. Besides that who cares about basketball anyways in The Netherlands.

If you take a kid from the ghettos of New York or Detroit, he has to fight to survive. It is a little bit the same with Lithuanians and Serbians. They have always been fighters and I think that is definitely something that influences the chance of a player to be successful. It is not that they have more talent at the base than any other country, but they get more out of it by working hard and tough. That's why you see many successful Serbian and Lithuanian players in Europe at all levels.

If you have players from Lithuania and Serbia, you know they will succeed one way or another, they will do everything to win. Basketball is in the genes of all of them, basketball is/was also a way to fight and try to dominate the rulers of the past. If I can't beat you on the battlefield because it's not a fair fight, I beat you on the court. They find a way to show supremacy and therefore work real hard on skills, conditioning, toughness and playing the game. They put hours and hours developing one offensive move.

Young Spanish players are more developed in the game itself. They have understanding of basketball, how to play in a team, how to play offense and defense, transition and general concept of the game. It's all more organized like Spain is in General, professional at almost every level. I think they have a very good system to develop young players. If you get a player who came through a national team program in Spain or the farm system of the professional teams, you know he understands basketball.

I once coached in China at a camp where the players were thanking me before and after the game for giving them playing time. Follow the leader, respect your boss, maybe good in daily life, but not on the basketball court. Those players were extremely disciplined, did exactly what you asked them to do, never complained, but nothing more than that. They never asked coach can I take 100 shots extra after practice, or coach can we go over that play again, this way you develop robots and not young creative players and self responsible persons.

Environment

Environment is important. If you bring a kid from Africa to Europe, in many ways that is a huge culture shock. He has never been in a room with heating and will be cold in the winter, the food he doesn't

recognize and will not eat, new basketball shoes who might be 2 sizes too big but he won't tell you, he uses all his money to send back home or to call his family and therefore can't take care of himself, everybody speaks a language light years away from his own native tongue and so on and then the club and coach wonder why the kid looks so miserable and doesn't play well.

It's very important that a player fits into the environment and the culture. Nowadays a lot of players are being taken from different countries, the borders are wide open which is good because it can create opportunities and better basketball, but can also turn out to be bad and destroy the future of a young talented player and person.

From my own experience in Belgium, I know it is very important that besides basketball, you need a social net where you can catch them if they go wrong or get lost. Maybe a player has been with his parents and now for the first time of his life goes to another country on his own, he has his own car, own apartment, his own kitchen, etc. If you don't put something in place to help him to run his household, wash his clothes, help him to cook, how to clean his house and help him how to drive in traffic, he easily will get lost and it will affect his basketball and overall development as a player and person or maybe even worse.

I think there are so many things that can go wrong in the development of a talented player. A lot of players got lost, because things happen which we never thought about or anticipated before. I think we can really improve on that as teachers, as coaches, as members of the club, agents, media and fans, by thinking more about the consequences of (young) players coming in a complete new and different environment. Becoming a top athlete is more than training and playing, it's everything around it too. Growing up as an athlete, a public person, media, fans put a lot of pressure on young players.

Injuries

Sometimes players disappear totally because of injury. It could be a chronic injury, a career-ending injury. Sport at a high level is always bad for your health in the short or the long run. You have to really take care of your tools (your body and your head), like a carpenter does with his hammer, saw and other tools, if you want to have a long career and a normal life after your career. Still you are almost sure you will get an injury one day, ankles, knees, back, shoulders it all can happen. You can't rule out injuries, but you can minimize the chances to get injured, that the injury isn't that bad and that you can (quickly) recover.

A higher chance on an injury also has to do with your physical state and is not always something you can control. Skinny tall 7 foot + players are more vulnerable to injuries on back, knees and ankles than the 6-0. The overweight 6-5 guard has also a bigger chance to get a knee or ankle injury than the lean 6-7 guard.

I also think there is a very strong link between the mental and physical part in relation to an injury. I don't mean a fake injury, where a player thinks he is injured but it's only in his head, I mean that softer mental weaker athletes have a higher rate of getting an injury and they also will recover much slower.

Recovering from an injury is not only tough physical work, but also very hard mentally. The recovery goes slow, 2 steps forward 1 step back. The player can't play, has to do drills and exercises he doesn't like or who have no relationship to his sport and all together it's a tough daily regime. Once a player has been injured he needs time to trust his healed injury, what absolutely can influence his development as a player and even can chance him as a player.

The right first aid, medical treatment, reconstructive operations, exercises, drills, medicine, physiotherapy, braces etc all will have a huge impact if a player ever will come back from an injury or forever disappear from the top basketball level.

School, career and social life

In a lot of countries basketball isn't a priority, being successful in life and also feeling well are much more important. Parents emphasize school over sport, first you home work than you can go to the gym. Very legit, but it can stop the development of a young player if you compare it with kids who are in the gym hours and hours every day.

Also the social life of having boy or girl friends, going out, having other hobbies, playing computer games etc can really effect the development of young talented players. It's a choice nothing good or bad about it.

What is bad if drugs or alcohol come in the picture, which happens all over Europe, North, East, West and South. It's not a specific problem of athletes, but it will have a more devastating effect on his career then on the student who will become a It's a real problem and I and probably everybody around basketball can come up with many examples of young talents who stopped playing or developing because of drugs and alcohol.

For all kind of unknown reasons young players can stop playing basketball. They also can get other values in life, prefer another career, choose for security, start another sport, find the professional sports world to tough or unfair, don't like the coaches or the club they are with and yes then disappear from the international scene and we never hear of them again.

Very important is the opportunity you have to make a future out of basketball. Obviously if you grow up in a none basketball country like Norway even when you have talent, your chances to become a professional player are slim, unless a professional team in for instance Spain, or France find out about the player and bring him over or when the player decides to go to college in the US. The talented player in for instance Russia will have a real chance to built a career with playing basketball and for him it's easy to choose to make his money with basketball.

Transition from junior to senior

Growing up is in many ways for one faster than for the other. It's a whole psychological process to grow up also for athletes. Being with your junior teammates who are more or less the same age and have the same hobbies, music, friends, schools etc is complete different than playing in a team with grown up players, older persons, who have families and their own children, with different hobbies, values, being tougher, more business etc. It takes a lot of adaption of the junior player on the senior team, but also of the older players on the same team.

Talent at a youth level does not mean you will be talented at the next level. You can be dominant at the youth level but you have to develop and find a way to survive at the senior/pro level, if you can't do that and I am not only talking about basketball, a player will never develop to the next level.

Dealing with limited playing time, still stay motivated and fight for every minute you will get. How many times a young player sits on the bench and hardly get minutes, which he badly needs to get the experience and to become better, because we all agree that playing will develop a player to the next level. How many can deal with that and won't quit before the end of the season.

You can be good at the youth level and have the freedom to get the ball and make the play. When you get to the senior level with professionals and veterans, you're not going be the go to guy who is the first option. You might never get the ball in your hands, maybe as the fifth option.

Just bad luck

Better be lucky than smart. Being at the right place at the right time. Have that guardian angel on your shoulder. It's impossible to foresee the whole future there is always the unexpected. Murphy's Law. But hey that's life.

If you look at what can all go wrong with the career of a young talented player, it's even amazing that there are still players making it to the top. So we should not ask "why did that really talented player never made it to the top", but "why did that talented young player made it to the top", because that's by far more rare than not making it.

Still the most important is the player himself. If he is really talented and wants to be a player, he will find a way to become a player and being successful.

Oh almost forgot, BASKETBALL HAS TO BE FUN, from the little Benjamin till the old veteran and everybody in between. If not, forget to ever become a good player.