

How To Evaluate Talent – Part 1 - 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 then 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.

In Part 2 of this series of articles, I will talk about skills and basketball intelligence, two talents which can be trained and influenced a lot better than either physical or mental talent.