

## How To Evaluate Talent – Part 3 - By Rob Meurs

*By Rob Meurs*

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

*In part 1 and 2 he talked about physical, mental feel for the game and skill level aspects of talent in this part 3 I will go into what influences the chances of a young talent to grow into a big time top level player and where can it go wrong.*

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 to big but he won't tell you, he uses all his money to sent 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 player.

#### 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 then 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.