



# Taking Canadian basketball to new heights

Danilo Djuricic is considered one of the best shooters in the world for his age. He recently announced his commitment to Harvard University, which had been recruiting him since Grade 9. CONTRIBUTED

## WE THE NORTH

### Who's holding court? These homegrown ballers have got next

Sean Deasy

It's no secret basketball is on the rise in Canada. It seems only fitting, since the sport's inventor, Dr. James Naismith, came from the Ottawa Valley.

Today, from neighbourhood playgrounds to pro arenas, more Canadian players are embracing a game that for so many years was overshadowed by hockey and, well, every other major professional sport. Now Canada can boast world-class athletes and coaches, who are honing their skills right at home and taking their country to new levels. Here's a glimpse of just some of the homegrown stars helping to put Canada on the basketball map.

#### Kia Nurse: Rising talent

Kia Nurse, a 20-year-old guard for the Connecticut Huskies and the Canadian national team from Hamilton, Ont., participated at

the 2014 FIBA World Championship and won a gold medal at the 2015 Pan American Games. Seems young for such accomplishments? Nurse has always outperformed for her age. She began dribbling a basketball at age four, and was playing in a competitive league by age seven.

As a teenager Nurse won 10 provincial championships between her high school and club teams. Still in high school, she was invited to train with Canada's national team as a future prospect. Nurse played so well she earned a spot on the squad. Now she's set to take her game — and Canada — to new heights.

#### Dwight Powell: True power

Talk about real power — both brain and brawn. Not only is Dwight Powell a power forward for the Canadian national team and for the Dallas Mavericks, he's also a graduate of prestigious Stanford University.

He grew playing basketball in Toronto inspired by the Raptors and Canadian icon Steve Nash, but didn't get serious until middle school. He was a standout in high school in Florida, and went on

to an illustrious college career. As a senior Powell earned first-team All-Pac-12 honours for the second straight year, and was named to the NCAA All-South Regional Team. He was also named the Pac-12 Scholar-Athlete of the Year.

Now he's looking to help Canada grow in stature on the global basketball stage.

#### Alyssa Jerome: Canadian U-18 phenomenon

What do you do growing up with

a passion for basketball? You compete with anyone and everyone to get better. That's just what teenage phenom Alyssa Jerome has done in her hometown of Toronto. Did it work?

Jerome tried out for her provincial team — and made it. She then tried out for — and made — the national team. And in just her second year, she led the U-17s to a world championship. Now she's the No. 1 ranked U-18 player in Canada — at just 16. Now she's poised to take her game — and her studies — to the next level south of the border: She has just committed to Stanford University.

#### Danilo Djuricic: Shooting star

This is a baller whose shooting for the stars. Not only is six-foot-eight Danilo Djuricic a key player for the future of Canadian basketball, he's also one accomplished young man. The A-student recently announced his commitment to Harvard University, which has been recruiting him since he was in Grade 9. Considered one of the best shooters in the world for his age, Djuricic helped guide the Canadian team to a silver medal at the U-18 FIBA Americas in 2015.

Djuricic, 17, who grew up in Brampton, Ont., was inspired by other hardworking Brampton ballers like Anthony Bennett. The forward is looking to continue to polish his game and, after graduation, has dreams of making it in the pro league.

#### Natalie Achonwa: Power broker

Natalie Achonwa knows how to get things done. Not only was the forward selected ninth overall in the WNBA draft by the Indiana Fever, but at just 23 she's already a two-time Olympian who has won three international medals with Team Canada. She is also the youngest player ever selected to the Canadian senior national team at age 16.

Achonwa was recruited as the first ever international player on the Notre Dame Fighting Irish women's basketball team. In 2011, Achonwa was named to the big east all-freshman team and was selected big east freshman of the week in her freshman season. In her junior season, she was named as an honorable mention for the Associated Press all-America team.

The Guelph-Ont.,-born baller is now looking forward to what the Canadian women's team is about to unleash on the rest of the basketball world.



Clockwise from top left: Kia Nurse, Dwight Powell, Alyssa Jerome and Natalie Achonwa. CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS





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