

SPECIAL REPORT: BASKETBALL JOURNEYS

> THE RISE OF THE PROGRAM

Canadian basketball takes flight

Country's embrace of game has made it a hoops hotspot

SEAN DEASY
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Canada, once the sole Dominion of Hockey, is becoming a basketball nation. It is by no means usurping the frozen-pond passion, but the rising popularity of hoops north of the border is undeniable. From street fashion to packed playgrounds to the support of the professional game, basketball has become a ubiquitous part of our shared sporting culture. The men's and women's national teams are making a mark on global courts and Canadian-born players are making an impact on NBA and U.S. college rosters.

How and when did we fall for basketball? And more importantly, where is the sport going in Canada?

For Michele O'Keefe, president of Canada Basketball, the dawn of this era was the birth of the Toronto Raptors' franchise in 1995, and it was sustained by the emergence of a certain player from British Columbia.

"To me, what happened was that in Toronto there were now more games on television, so you could identify with these athletes on a regular basis," says O'Keefe, whose not-for-profit organization with 10 full-time staffers represents all basketball interests, providing leadership, co-ordination and direction in all areas of the sport. "Especially in the Greater Toronto Area, the Raptors would go to school visits or do a mall visit or they would have teams come in and do clinics. So they were real people, not just people you watched on television.

"Then a few years later you've got Steve Nash," she says of Canada's greatest ever basketball player, from Victoria, B.C. "He earns back-to-back Most Valuable Player in the NBA and kids can say, 'Wow he is Canadian, he's like me, I can relate to that.'"

Club structure

O'Keefe says there has always been a healthy structure in place to support the sport at the grassroots level in



JOSE JIMENEZ TIRADO/FIBA AMERICAS

The Canadian Women's Team celebrates their win against Cuba at the 2015 FIBA Americas Championship.

Canada. The only difference is now there is more demand.

She says Ontario set the pace back in the day. "The people who started club basketball back in the '70s should be put on a pedestal," says O'Keefe, who grew up playing her club basketball in the Niagara area.

"They were the ones who had the foresight to put the structures in place. A lot of them started in church leagues; they would play in the gym in the church basement and then they morphed into the schools and community centres."

Fundamentals first

Identifying talent and getting people into basketball will always be a challenge with a country as vast as Canada, but that has not diminished the growing interest of basketball here.

"It's so costly to travel, but what we have found in the last few years is that people are really keen and they're hungry for information," O'Keefe says.

"I think we have made some great progress with our coach education programs. There are a lot of parents

who volunteer their time to coach their little ones. And we are finally at a place now where it is easier for us to get them information instead of them just Googling 'what kind of offence should I run' or start mimicking whatever Duke [University's varsity team] is doing."

Coaching is one area where Canada Basketball is making great progress, she feels. "We're making it easier for coaches to get access to simple information that is age appropriate."

There are now programs for high performance athletes or athletes who are aiming to be university players, national team players or professional players.

It's also about making programs versatile enough to appeal to younger players. She points to the success of Steve Nash's basketball program, sponsored by Tangerine.

"The key component to that program is that it has modified drills and games fun for the kids to play," she says.

"So that you don't have some little peanut trying to throw a size seven ball at a 10-foot basket."

The future of hoops

What's on the horizon for the sport of basketball in this country? Canada Basketball's mandate now centres around three goals: capture the hearts and minds of Canadians; grow the participation numbers to rival soccer and hockey; get the national teams to the podium.

It's an ambitious yet straightforward vision and the key, O'Keefe says, is for Canada to host international events.

"They are very simple statements with a lot of programs and ideas beneath them for support," she says. "But one of the things that can hit a couple of buckets for us is hosting meaningful international events."

O'Keefe's organization is currently working on a 15-year hosting strategy. Her staff is currently in the process of securing partners to help bring those competitions home. And recent world-class sporting events in Canada have certainly helped pave the way.

"One thing that was very clear for us last summer," she says. "The Pan Am Games here in Toronto and then



Michele O'Keefe, president of Canada Basketball, says the sport's golden era has yet to come.

hosting the Women's Olympic Qualifier in Edmonton, there is no place like playing at home."

It ties back to Canada Basketball's first objective. "We can capture the imagination of all these little kids in the stands, and their parents want to bring them out to something wholesome and reasonably priced. Kids get a chance to get their faces painted and (get) little noisemakers and it is just an amazing opportunity."

The athletes, meanwhile, get to play in front of their friends and family. At hosted events there's the opportunity to conduct clinics for the community kids and the coaches, which can leverage the expertise of the national and international coaches who are participating.

"We provide an opportunity for the local coaches to learn from that," O'Keefe says. "So it's a technical legacy, so to speak. We're trying to find a way to bring those events home and to showcase what international basketball looks like in Canada."

Just the beginning

O'Keefe is delighted with the rise of basketball across the country. But she's quick to dispel the characterization that this is a golden age for the sport in her country. "You know a lot of people will ask me, 'What's it like to be in the golden years of basketball in Canada?' These are not the golden years, I tell them." To do so would be to accept that it will never get any better.

O'Keefe's pulse-taking of her sport is anything but that.

"We have incredible people in our pipeline and it's thick. It's not sparse," she says. "So I can see that Canada is very definitely a growing concern for basketball in the future. It's not a flash in the pan and we are not at the end of our story. We are just starting our story."

> UP AND COMING

WHO'S HOLDING COURT? THESE HOMEGROWN BALLERS ARE PLANTING THE FLAG

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, more Canadian players are embracing a game that was once on the sidelines. Now Canada can boast world-class athletes and coaches, who are honing their skills right at home and taking their country to new levels. **Sean Deasy** brings you a glimpse of just some of the homegrown stars helping to put Canada on the basketball map.



Steve Nash: Canada's pioneering MVP

You simply cannot begin to discuss basketball in Canada without mentioning Steve Nash. He is undoubtedly Canada's greatest ever basketball player. He is a two-time NBA MVP, an eight-time NBA All-Star and has the highest career free-throw percentage in NBA history. He brought extraordinary playmaking, ball-handling and shooting skills to the court throughout his 17-year professional career, and is the only player, other than Larry Bird, to shoot 50 per cent from the field, 40 per cent from three-point range and 90 per cent from the free-throw line in more than one season. The 42-year-old's dedication to Canadian basketball is unwavering. Becoming GM in 2012, of the men's senior team, Nash is courting a bright future for Canada. His desire to share his experiences stems from his belief that playing in the Olympics is the ultimate honour.



Lisa Thomaidis: National women's team coach

During her tenure at the University of Saskatchewan, Lisa Thomaidis' Huskies have won four Canada West titles, have consistently been ranked in the CIS Top 10 for eight years, and qualified for the CIS Championship six of seven seasons.

How do you build on a coaching career that includes being a four-time Canada West Coach of the Year, two-time CIS Coach of the Year and winner of three Canada West titles at the University of Saskatchewan?

If you're Lisa Thomaidis, you coach the women's national team to the country's first-ever gold medal in basketball at the Pan Am games. But Dundas, Ont.'s Thomaidis, who led her squad to a silver medal at the 2013 FIBA Americas Championship for Women in her first year as coach, is always looking to the next challenge.



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



Kia Nurse: Rising talent

Hamilton's Kia Nurse, a 20-year-old guard for the Connecticut Huskies and the Canadian national team, 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.



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.



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 of the NBA, he's also a graduate of Stanford University. He grew up 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.



Brady Heslip: The sharp shooter

Canadian star point guard Brady Heslip knows better than anyone what it's like to grow up in a true basketball family. His dad, Tom, was an All-Canadian at the University of Guelph and went pro, and his uncle is Canadian basketball icon Jay Triano. But the younger Heslip, who hails from Oakville, is intent on forging his own path. His hallmark is a remarkable outside game. In fact, the 26-year-old is considered one of the best pure shooters in the world — and he holds the D-League record (playing with the Reno Bighorns) for most three-point baskets in a single game with 13. The national team stalwart is poised for greater things for himself and his country.



Danilo Djuricic: Shooting star

This is a baller who's 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, was inspired by other hard-working 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.



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