

The hoopster superhustle

July's high school meat market fuels November's college teams

Camper No. 191 lunges at an errant pass, sweat trickling down his 6-foot, 1-inch frame in spite of the air conditioning in Cincinnati's Shoemaker Center. The 17-year-old knows his shot at NBA glory begins or ends on this court. Talent will help him catch the eye of college recruiters standing on the sidelines at the Adidas All-American Camp, but he has to be lucky, too. If he doesn't make the steal, he's out of position and the scouts will write him off as just another schoolyard hack. He swipes the ball and scores an easy layup. A few recruiters check their guidebooks, putting the name Travis Young with the number. For Young, it's mission accomplished, until the next make-or-break play.

During a 27-day period every July, tens of thousands of Michael Jordan wannabes ages 13 to 18 gather for similar auditions at basketball camps and tournaments across the country. The payoff comes this month, as college programs choose their first wave of new recruits based mainly on their performances at these off-season casting calls. The stakes are high: Teenagers who impress can win scholarships worth more than \$40,000.

Since 1993, when the National Collegiate Athletic Association cut the amount of recruiting college coaches could do during the high school season, the number of summer camps and tournaments has mushroomed from 80 to close to 275.

And the rise of such programs has had a profound impact on everyone in the recruitment process, from coaches and players, who have grown dependent on the system, to inter-

mediaries, who profit in a big way from the events' success.

On the floor of Shoemaker Center and other camps, hoop dreams flourish and youthful bodies are inspected and assessed in an atmosphere more meat market than training ground. It's both the good (say defenders) and the bad (say critics) of our national sports obsession. It's also big business, American style: a world where kids are the product, coaches the buyers, and event directors and hangers-on the middlemen who must work the system, know the right people

and out hustle their opponents to succeed.

THE EVENT DIRECTOR

Bobby Kortsen, the Adidas camp's event director, dresses casually but acts like a buttoned-up salesman. He's holding court on a beat-up sofa in a

THE PLAYER. Ohio guard Travis Young (above) has head-turning moments, but he needed summer camp to better his college chances.



CULTURE & IDEAS

dorm near his camp's basketball facilities. A college coach drops in to ask about a highly touted California high school player. Is he at the camp? Kortsen says the kid isn't there, then smoothly changes gears, talking up a couple of other kids instead. By the time the coach leaves for the courts, he seems interested in Kortsen's new "products."

As event director, Kortsen is the first person college coaches seek out when they get to a summer event. He has the power to build up or tear down a kid because college coaches are prohibited from talking to players at these events. Says Steve Lavin, interim head basketball coach at the University of California-Los Angeles: "There are certain key people whose judgment you respect. I would ask a director who is good, but I would never sign somebody without seeing him."

Kortsen, who spent more than a decade as a high school and college basketball coach, also makes good money. Though he won't say how much, he admits to bringing in more than a top college assistant's \$100,000 annual salary. Each summer, 450 kids pay \$330 a pop for the three-day camp event, coaches shell out \$60 for a directory of campers and 40 or more teams pay \$500 each to play in the tournament he runs. As a sideline, Kortsen owns a gym in Columbus, Ohio.

During the winter, the event director crisscrosses the country networking with high school coaches to make sure he gets a few blue-chip players at his camp. Without them, college recruiters won't come. Forging bonds with top prospects is part of the job, but it can cause problems for teens. Sonny Vaccaro, formerly director of the elite Nike All-American Camp and now head of Adidas's ABCD Camp, recently admitted buying clothes for New York's Lamar Odom, one of this year's top high school players. The NCAA can do nothing to Vaccaro, but Odom could lose his college eligibility.

THE PLAYER

Travis Young's biggest advantage is knowing Kortsen. A senior at Zanesville High School in Ohio, he hopes to study business management, but his divorced parents can't afford to pay for college. His older brother, Edwin, who was a top player in the state last year and now plays for the University of Dayton, was a magnet for recruiters. But Young isn't

quite in the same league. So he went to camp to improve his chances.

Young met Kortsen through his brother, then worked as a coach and referee at Kortsen's gym. Though NCAA bylaws prohibit event directors from giving tuition waivers or free transportation to players, Kortsen skirted the rule by including Young's camp tuition as part of his salary. The teenager also got a free trip to play for a Kortsen-organized team in a Las Vegas tournament (legal under NCAA rules because

4,500 go on to play Division I basketball—a teenager has a better chance of getting accepted at Harvard. With such bleak odds, critics argue that the hype of summer coaches and event directors can give many kids bloated egos and unrealistic expectations. "Kids get into these camps and do well, and all of a sudden they think they are the best thing to happen to basketball," says Milton Barnes, until recently an assistant coach at the University of Minnesota. "You can't even talk to them about what the truth is



ROGER MASTROIANNI FOR USN&WR

THE DIRECTOR. Bobby Kortsen (right) must bond with kids to recruit top players for his camp.

Kortsen wasn't running that event).

When talking to recruiters about Young, Kortsen moves into selling mode. The kid is "one of the best-kept secrets in Ohio," he tells them. Hundreds of college scouts attend the Adidas camp and the Las Vegas tournament, and Young did well at both events, triggering strong interest from Marshall University, Xavier University, Washington State and Youngstown State. Last week, he took a full scholarship from Marshall in Huntington, W.Va.

The vast majority of Young's fellow campers will not be so lucky. Out of 540,000 kids who play in high school, only

about their abilities." Free goodies showered on elite athletes by companies like Nike and Adidas don't help. Though gifts of apparel or equipment are prohibited at camps, the NCAA has received reports that some shoe companies still dodge the rules, sending merchandise to top players after they've gone home.

THE COACH

When Barnes arrives at Kortsen's camp, he's wearing a shirt embroidered with the University of Minnesota insignia. His choice of attire isn't accidental. Because recruiters are prohibited from talking to players, the only chance he has of attract-

ing a potential star's attention is to stand on the sidelines and hope the player will notice the big M on his chest.

Barnes, who this fall became head coach at Eastern Michigan University, doesn't like the summer season. He must judge a lot of talent in a short time—he attends more than a dozen camps and tournaments and judges 25 to 50 kids at each during the four-week summer season. Also, the freewheeling, no-defense, playground-style basketball displayed at the camps makes it difficult to assess

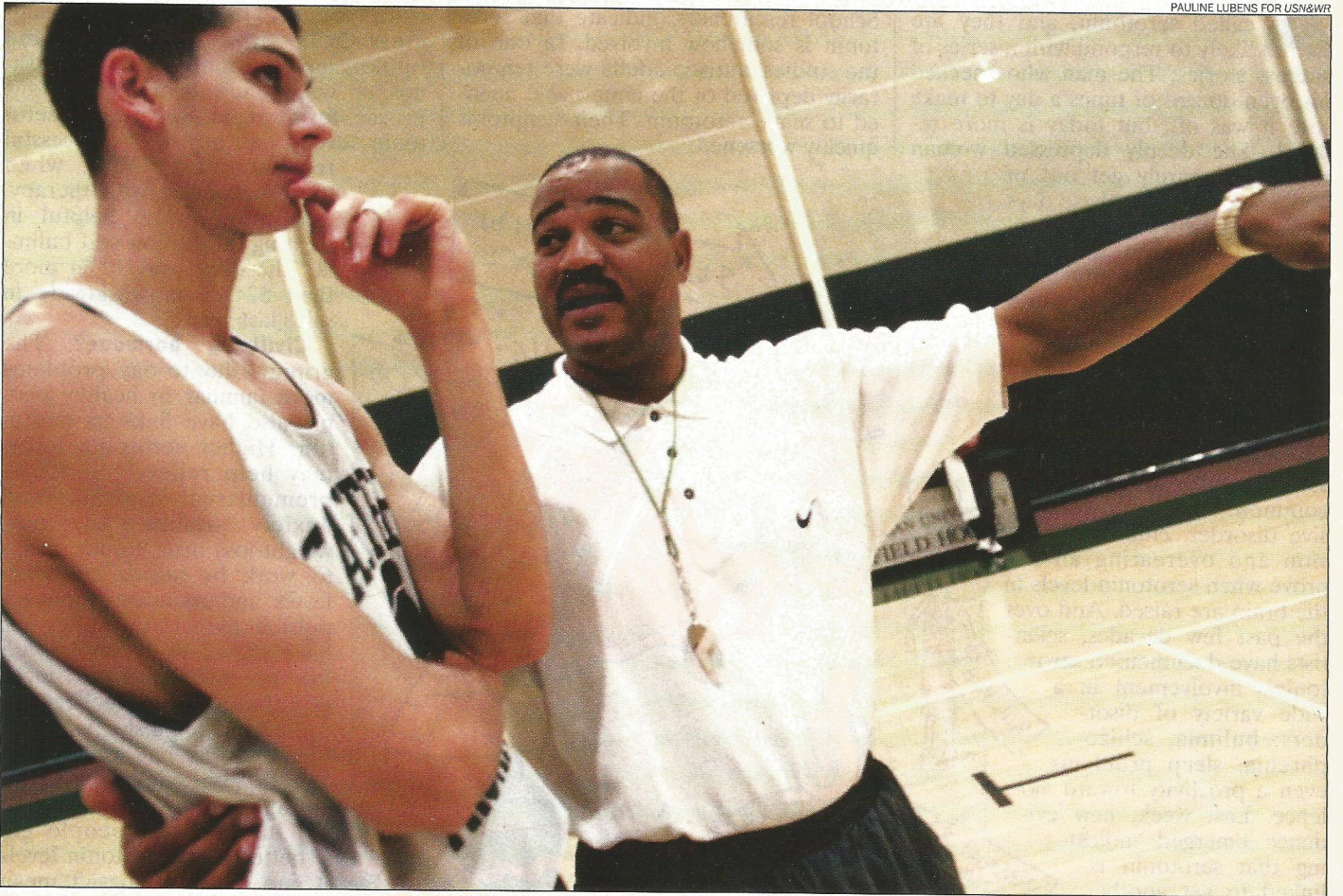
St. Francis, Pa., to Syracuse University. Eley also says he played with the NBA's New Jersey Nets—but a team spokesman said there was no record of his playing there. Eley and other hangers-on, who either prepare kids for camps or organize summer teams for tournaments, use this circuit as a way to make money or to advance their careers.

Eley, for example, helps high schoolers hone skills like shooting and footwork for \$35 to \$45 an hour. (He adds \$10 per hour if a kid needs special work.) He prides

but also to teach the whole ball of wax."

Yet in some cases it's not clear who benefits most from such relationships—the kids or the adults. Take Troy Weaver. Recently hired as an assistant at the University of Pittsburgh, his only coaching experience was running a summer team out of Washington, D.C. But it just so happened that one of the players on Weaver's summer team was Attila Cosby, a 6-foot, 9-inch prospect in whom Pitt had a strong interest. Not long after Weaver was hired, Cosby announced his

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THE COACH. Milton Barnes, Eastern Michigan University coach (right), makes difficult player decisions on the summer circuit.

players. "You don't know enough about a kid as a person [from seeing him at a camp]," he says. "You can evaluate athletic ability, but you don't get a sense if a kid is coachable." Still, Barnes, who now heads up a relatively small Division I program, needs the summer events. They are his main way of casting a wide net in his search for serious ballplayers from across the country.

THE OUTSIDER

Not everyone at the camps is a coach or player. Joe Eley bills himself as a basketball consultant and boasts of having relationships with coaches at colleges from

himself on his ability to improve athletes' chances of snagging a scholarship. For some kids, Eley offers his services gratis or finds sponsors to pay for top players to attend camps and tournaments across the country. The players, in turn, enhance his reputation on the circuit.

Critics believe this system gives summer coaches and consultants undue influence over vulnerable teenagers. But Eley argues he just helps kids who don't have the means to get exposure on this nationwide circuit. "I'm always in line with the rules, but the rules can hold some people back," he says. "My job is not just to educate with the basketball

intention to attend the university.

A coincidence? Weaver concedes his relationship with Cosby and other players helped him get his job at the university but insists the main reason he was brought on was his character. For some kids the summer season creates "too much exposure," he says, but when coaches and directors play straight up and "establish a relationship of trust and values," teenagers can avoid heartbreak. Under the current system, players must hope for the right mentors or be prepared for the worst. ■

BY JOSH CHETWYND IN CINCINNATI