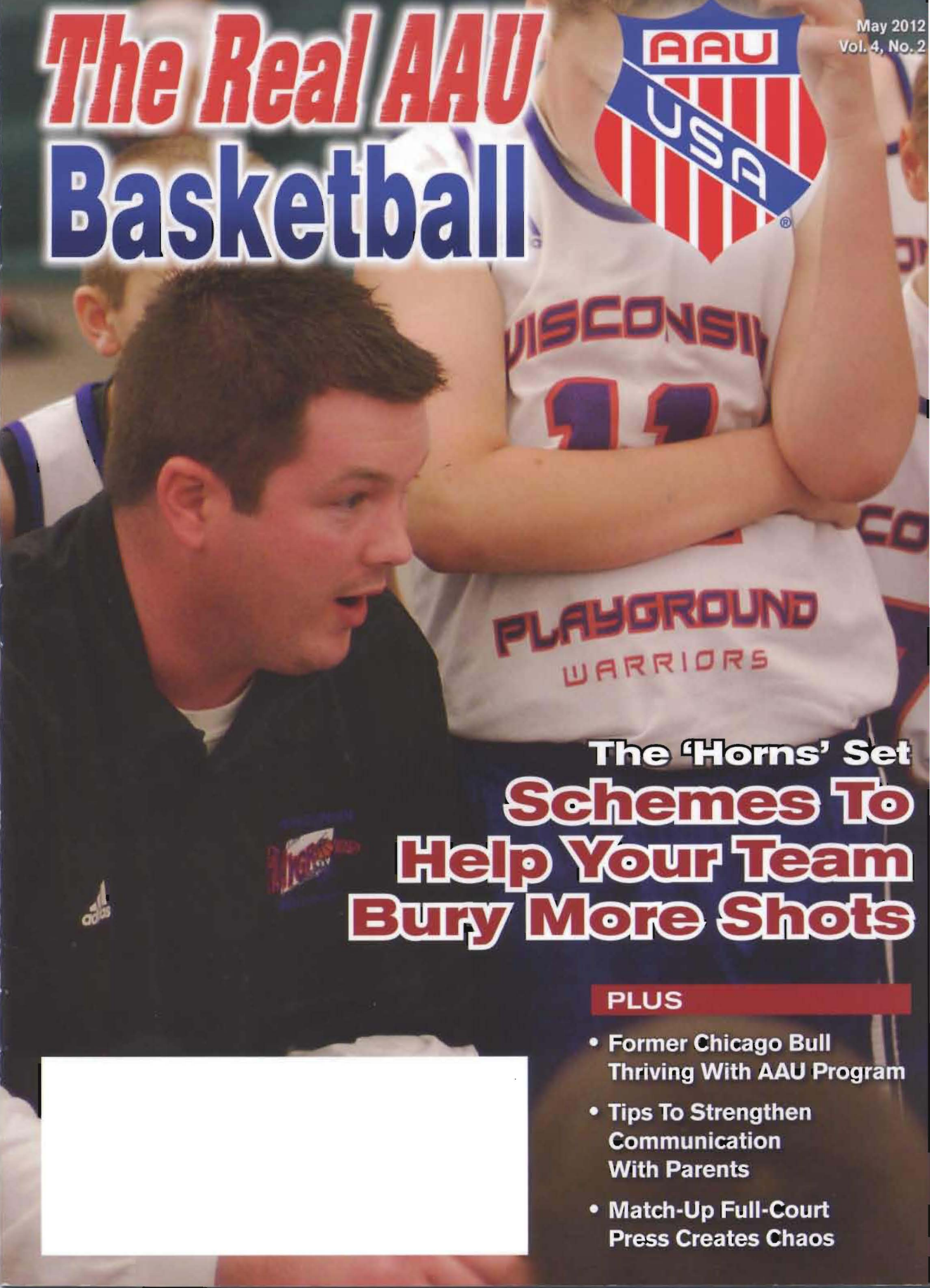


The Real AAU **Basketball**

May 2012
Vol. 4, No. 2



The 'Horns' Set Schemes To Help Your Team Bury More Shots

PLUS

- Former Chicago Bull Thriving With AAU Program
- Tips To Strengthen Communication With Parents
- Match-Up Full-Court Press Creates Chaos

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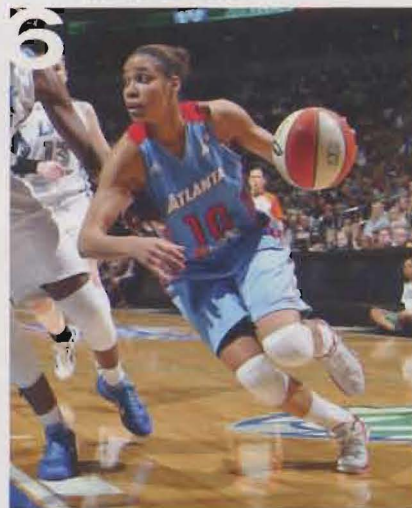
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POSTMASTER: Please send change of address to *The Real AAU Magazine*, Attn: Bree Greenawalt, PO Box 624, Brookfield, WI 53008-0624 USA

RISING TO THE TOP

Former Chicago Bull
Dickey Simpkins quickly
is building a winner with
Next Level Performance

By **Kevin Hoffman**, Associate Editor

It's logical to assume because former Chicago Bulls forward Dickey Simpkins was a member of one of the greatest teams in NBA history, he learned a little something about breeding success.

While that's likely true, a winner was built long before then, when Simpkins was a young man playing basketball at a Maryland high school and traveling on the AAU circuit. It was there he learned the principles that helped him establish Next Level Performance (NLP) based near Chicago and develop it into a national force only years after its creation.

"In ninth grade, a guy came up to me after a high school game and asked about playing AAU," Simpkins recalls. "I went and showed up, and a lot of things I do with this foundation was learned from my experiences playing AAU basketball and from my AAU coach."

NLP was created in 2006 as a training company. Simpkins says he started it because it accomplished what he wanted to do in coaching and training by teaching children about skill development and basketball on and off the court.

During the winter of 2007, the parents of the children he was instructing asked him about coaching AAU basketball.

"At first I kind of didn't want to do it but they continued to ask about it," Simpkins says. "I said, 'If I'm going to do this, I'm going to show AAU, travel basketball and every-one how to do it the right way.'"

That year, NLP hit the AAU circuit with one team and since then has expanded to 10 teams with five at the high



Former Chicago Bull Dickey Simpkins (center) maintains close contact with Next Level Performance players, teaching them to play basketball the right way.

school level. The program achieved success in just its second year when its 17U team finished sixth at the AAU Nationals in Orlando.

On top of that, NLP has helped 31 team members move on to play college basketball. That includes the University of Illinois' Brandon Paul, who was the 2009 Illinois Mr. Basketball and recruited in high school as one of the top guards in the nation.

The reputation as Chicago's fastest growing AAU program is nice but Simpkins is dedicated to maintaining his core values within NLP. That means taking a unique approach and working with children in a way benefiting them beyond the hardwood floor.

"I'm really proud of the fact that we stick by our principles in our foundation and how we go about things professionally as a team, and I won't jeopardize, compromise or sacrifice any of those things just to get children to play for us," Simpkins says. "I'm proud we can find the diamonds in the rough."

Building A Winner

NLP started playing AAU basketball in 2007 with a group of guys Simpkins says nobody knew about. The 17U team was all the program had, giving coaches an opportunity to focus all their attention on this new crop of players. Most programs start with younger players and work their way up, Simpkins says, so NLP had the challenge of working with high school players who already had developed their own styles and tendencies within the game.

"We had one team and we basically collected a group of guys people didn't know anything about but they wanted

to play and their parents wanted them to play,” Simpkins says. “Basically, we wanted to build the foundation of where we’re a family and we’re a foundation based on skill development and learning.”

Competing the first year wasn’t too difficult, Simpkins says. The group took the floor and gave the game everything they had, and some children were playing up from their age level. Paul was one of those playing up and it helped Simpkins develop a foundation to help the program blossom to five teams in its second year.

That’s a significant accomplishment, especially for a program trying to compete in the Chicago suburbs littered with AAU organizations vying for the area’s best talent. Because the program got off to such a fast start, and because it was backed by Simpkins’ name, it made recruiting players easier.

But that’s not the main goal, Simpkins says. He’s looking for talent, but he’s also searching for children who want to learn and strive to do things the right way. That’s the core philosophy, which Simpkins says won’t be compromised for anything.

“We want to help these boys grow and be men and be able to handle the real world when they move on from basketball,” he says.

Simpkins is proud of how the program began but its second year is when the AAU basketball world started to take notice. The 17U team fought its way to a sixth-place finish at Nationals—a feat relatively rare for a program still in its infancy.

Michael Murphy, a coach with NLP, says the program’s second season earned it credentials and placed it on the map nationally. NLP continues to find its way into the national spotlight, last year earning a second-place finish with its 16U team in the Division II Nationals.

“We go after a certain kind of child,” says Murphy, echoing Simpkins’ philosophy about working with the right type of player. “We want to make sure they’re not necessarily the most talented, but coachable, and accept what we provide for them and the benefits from that.

“One of the keys to our success is we do have structured offenses and we do work on defenses. If you do not have structured practices it makes it difficult and you’re not holding your kids accountable.”

Behind The Scenes

NLP’s accomplishments in such a short time are impressive but it’s not luck that brought the program to this point. Murphy says it’s finding

the best staff and implementing the right structure that’s going to help the players reach their full potential. It all starts with practice.

A team’s preparation should be taken seriously and few others put more time and effort into their practices than NLP. Murphy developed a practice format, which assures him the players spend some time focusing on all aspects of the game, including mental preparation.

Murphy advises all programs to start practice with a theme, which can include a motivation quote. Putting your players in the right mindset helps you get the most out of your short practice time.

But what’s most important is Murphy avoids wasting time on irrelevant drills or schemes not benefiting his players in the long run. It’s easy to assume because your player is 6-foot-4 he or she belongs in the post. But if the individual thrives on the perimeter, find opportunities to exploit that asset while at the same time working to strengthen the player’s weaknesses.

“We believe in taking advantage of our players’ individual strengths and putting them into positions where they can be successful,” Murphy says. “That’s a core philosophy we have as coaches. If we have a guy on our team that can knock down shots, it’s our responsibility to get that guy open or get him into his favorite spot on the floor to get him that shot.”

Murphy says NLP coaches identify key parts of a player’s game because they scout their own team members before hand. During the winter, coaches watch their players during games with their individual schools, allowing them to observe how a child has developed or improved their skills over time. It also lets coaches interact with the child’s parents, creating a “family atmosphere,” Murphy says.

Last year, the program had five high school teams with children from nearly 20 different institutions.

“We definitely want to see them on their high school team and in the



Next Level Performance, in its sixth year as an AAU organization, is quickly becoming one of the most successful programs in the Chicago area.

high school environment so we can support them and offer feedback," Murphy says. It also gives coaches a chance to scout other talent that's on display.

"We support a family atmosphere, and that's what we're looking for."

NLP is proud of the environment it has created for children and their families but much of the credit goes to the coaches. On top of the talented leaders that stand on the sidelines during each game, the program includes a strength and conditioning coach, personal trainer and a nutritionist to aid the children in their development.

That's not including Simpkins and his resume, highlighted by more than 10 years of professional basketball experience and three NBA championships with the Chicago Bulls.

"I believe the experience and knowledge of the coaching staff is definitely a key to our success," Murphy says. "The fact that we have a former NBA champion and his name isn't just on the program. He's actively involved in attending practices and games."

Game Time

NLP's structured practices undoubtedly help the team come game time but preparation runs much deeper.

AAU programs typically expand their horizons by joining tournaments throughout the country, expecting to get a taste of various styles of play. Murphy says his team mostly takes part in the same tournaments each year.

It's about the talent, not about the location, he says.

Part of NLP's strategy includes finding events that lure the region's best teams, testing their players against the top talent. That's a simple concept but many AAU programs say good games are hard to find and they're often drawn into events that don't live up to the hype. Some tournaments are known to have teams withdraw at the last second or they feature many outmatched programs,

which lead to lopsided victories.

Because NLP joins the same tournaments each year, it knows what to expect and thoroughly understands the level of competition its players are exposed to. The organization forms relationships with the tournament directors, allowing it to plan accordingly and take fewer risks.

"We want to play in tournaments that have quality teams and those tournament directors have done a nice job in putting together a quality field and the organization of the tournament is very impressive," Murphy says. "You develop a relationship with the tournament directors and we have someone who handles that, and



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Next Level Performance, shown during a game in Indiana, joins many of the same tournaments each year, assuring its players they will face the area's top talent.

he gets to know them very well. The partnership keeps (the quality teams) coming back."

Murphy doesn't need to venture far from Chicago to find a variety of skills and talent, which keeps his team mostly in Wisconsin, Illinois or Indiana. Scouting the competition at some of these tournaments can be difficult, but Murphy says the coaching staff makes a point to observe the teams before his players take to floor against them.

Scouting provides a little breathing room but it's often not enough time to prep players and get them on the same page before opening tip. Especially when so many teams in large tournaments play three or four games in one day.

The stacked schedule means NLP must be completely focused and ready for anything. And most of the time it is.

"On a Friday we'll try to see the team we're playing Saturday and go to that game. We take some notes on who is a good shooter or this guy is good off the dribble or penetrating," Murphy says. "We'll never go to a tournament we're not playing in and scout those teams. We'll also make adjustments as the game progresses."

NLP's approach isn't entirely unique, as most other programs conduct some sort of scouting and research before they face certain opponents or register for tournaments. What some with NLP do believe is the approach their teams take and the way they game-plan on the practice floor is a massive contributor to what the program has accomplished in just five years and where it could

be in the future.

Murphy and the rest of NLP are hopeful of the program's direction but it also shows strong dedication to the future of the players involved. He says NLP makes a concerted effort to choose tournaments that not only draw the most talent but lure college recruiters, giving his players a chance to showcase their skills.

That means coaches have to find a way to balance the "team mentality" with the child's desire to stand out for big-time college programs. It's been difficult for a few select players but Murphy says most of them get the big picture. The more they play as a team, the more they win, and the more they win, the more opportunities they get to take the floor in front of an audience packed with college recruiters.

"Sometimes it sends a mixed message because they're trying to get exposure and get on a recruiting list. The purpose is to get them there so they can earn it," he says. "We feel we've always stressed the team-first mentality and if the team is successful then we're going to be successful and continue to play more games."

"It's taken more convincing, but we have a track record now and we can point to previous players and say, 'this is what we believe in and this is why it worked. Watch ESPN on Saturday and you'll see our guys.'"

A Champion's Influence

There are more than a handful of organizations out there using the name of a well-known actor or athlete to boost its popularity but NLP is not one of them.

Simpkins, a member of arguably the greatest NBA dynasty of all time, is the founder of NLP and he's hands-on with the teams, helping them develop as children. It's true his name and popularity play a role in drawing players to NLP but Murphy says Simpkins makes a strong effort to go beyond just being a face for the organization.

"This speaks to Dickey Simpkins as a person," Murphy says. "He doesn't have to do all of this. He has many different things going on and he has four kids of his own, but I think this is his way of giving back to the game that's been good to him. He wants to teach them how to play the game correctly and think 'team first.'"

Simpkins isn't a stranger to the dozens of children passing through NLP. They all have his cell phone number and most text or call him when they have questions or need help. Murphy says Simpkins even makes himself available to those who were part of the program for a brief time before leaving, sometimes to play with an-

DICKEY'S CHAMPION PROTEIN SHAKE



Ingredients

- 1 protein packet
- 1 cup strawberries
- 1 whole banana
- 1/2 cup of juice, apple or orange
- 4 ice cubes
- 1 cup of cold water

Place all ingredients (start with the liquids first) in blender. Blend on low speed for 15-20 seconds then increase speed to high for another 30 seconds or until completely blended.

PRE GAME MEAL

- Grilled or baked chicken breast
- Broccoli or mixed vegetables
- Small garden salad with lite dressing (not creamy)
- Bake or broil potato



Dickey Simpkins' program includes a nutritionist, who helps the players maintain healthy eating habits.

other organization.

Simpkins' philosophy is to make this about youth development. It also is to make the program about more than just basketball.

Part of it is living a healthy lifestyle. Simpkins says he uses a nutritionist who helped him when he first entered the NBA. When his young group goes on the road for tournaments, he tries to make sure children understand how important it is to eat nutritiously. Time constraints limit most programs, forcing them to subject their teams to fast food or other unhealthy choices.

Simpkins says he also makes a concerted effort to include a little cultural education in the trips when time and location allows for it. That includes historical landmarks or sports museums.

"When I first started this I thought this would be a great opportunity for these children to get some cultural education," Simpkins says. "I definitely think it helps us grow together and it's a great bonding tool for the team and players. They enjoy doing these things and doing them as a group. It's very helpful in the long run."

Simpkins' attitude and presence both on and off the court have an overwhelming impact on NLP from the ground up. Those associated with the organization only expect his influence to grow as the program continues to increase in size and find more success.

"He's been a wonderful mentor to these children," Murphy says. "And once they're in college, it's not like he cuts ties with them ... and even those that need help or want to get an extra workout or help with the college search process, he helps them out. I've never seen him turn away a child and he's wonderful to all the coaches. He's more than just a mentor to us as far as how we handle our business and how we need to represent NLP."

Looking To The Future

NLP is in the midst of its sixth year on the AAU circuit, and though national championships and making a difference in the lives of Chicago's youth tops its list of priorities, it has other goals. Adding a girls program could be among them.

Murphy says many of the coaches have daughters who would like to get involved. NLP has expanded every year since joining AAU and most of that growth has come with younger boys. The organization last year added 14U and this year started a 13U team.

"There's always been talk of having girls and a lot of us (coaches) would love nothing more than to see them part of NLP," Murphy says. "We're always looking for opportunities to expand and we've never said no to that."

NLP is a proud organization and while helping those in its surrounding communities, it hopes to offer advice to other young programs looking to have the same sort of success early in their development.

Murphy's first bit of advice—have fun and key in on

the fundamentals. If players are going to grow and become dominant players on the court, it starts with passing, catching and shooting.

"If you have everyone in your program get better individually then you're only naturally going to get better as a team," he says. "Really stress the fundamentals. We stress that at every practice."

Murphy also credits a lot of the program's success to its organization and structure of game planning.

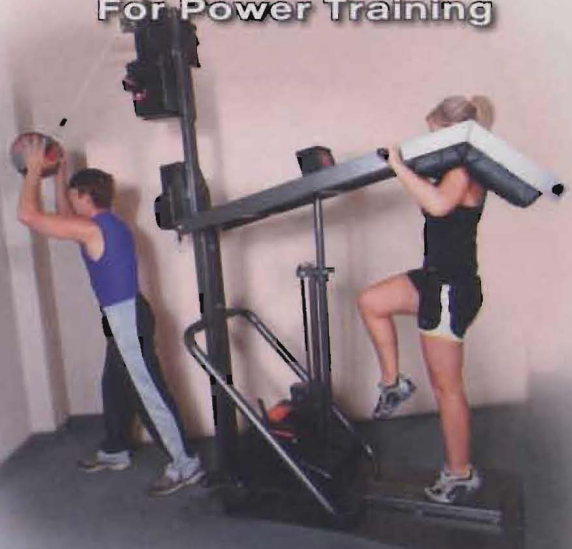
"We try to give players the freedom to take advantage of their basketball strengths but it comes in an organizational setting," Murphy says. "We don't just let children run down the floor and let them do what they want. You can catch an opponent off guard if you're organized on offense, you execute and get good looks at the basket."

Simpkins advises new programs to start small and build themselves into a winner, the same way his one-team AAU program started in 2007.

"Decide what kind of program you want to be," he says. "That will help you determine the type of players you want to get into your program. Start small and establish your foundation and grow from there."

"The best thing in this whole process is that we started with one team. Then it was trial and error."

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Getting The Most From Your Team Practices

There's no magic formula for piecing together the perfect AAU practice but there are ways to structure workouts designed to get the most from your team. Next Level Performance coach Michael Murphy says all you need to know is what your players are capable of.

"What we try to do from an offensive standpoint, for example, would be if your particular team maybe is not very athletic yet can still be a very good team that's fundamentally sound ... focus on that," he says. "If that's what your personnel is like, why waste your time doing things that aren't part of your game?"

Murphy has five tips regarding practices:

1. Be prepared. If you want to develop an effective practice, you need to plan ahead. That means drafting some ideas and writing them down on paper before you arrive at the gym. Make sure your 3-on-3 and 5-on-5 groups are determined before practice begins. Also, visualize matchups and how both the team and individual player benefit from scrimmaging against a particular teammate.

Being prepared has an impact greater than just organization—it shows commitment, Murphy says. Showing your dedication to the program and team earns recognition and respect from your players. It helps set the tone for practice and lets everyone know you take it seriously, and they should do the same.

2. Develop a daily theme. Much like a favorite song or sports flick can get you fired up for a game, brainstorm a way you can motivate your team for practices.

Murphy says his squad often starts practice by reading a motivational quote and giving players a chance to comment on it. It's something he says can be referenced throughout practice to help maintain focus.

3. Include useful drills. One of the most common mistakes coaches make, Murphy says, is implementing drills that do not serve the overall philosophy of the program. If your team thrives in zone defense, it might not be helpful to waste time repeating drills that emphasize man-to-man principles.

"We only use drills that reinforce basketball fundamentals and the offensive and defensive concepts we are trying to teach," Murphy says.

4. Know your team. "Don't try to fit a square peg into a round hole," Murphy cautions.

Each player has his or her individual strengths—guards might be better off the dribble and some "post players" are more effective on the perimeter. If that's the case, don't force your players to sway from those, abandoning an otherwise valuable asset to your team.

"If you have a four-man that can shoot but struggles with his or her back to the basket, work to address this weakness but take advantage of the strengths," Murphy says. "Put that player in pick-and-pop situations."

5. Move quickly between drills. Murphy advises teams to spend five to seven minutes on most drills and no more than 10 to 12 minutes on others. This keeps the pace of practice flowing and helps maintain the team's focus. It also ensures

you get the most out of your short time with the team by addressing a variety of skill sets.

Next Level Performance Practice Format

Murphy says organizing an efficient, effective practice is just as important as designing a winning game plan. Here is how Next Level Performance structures its practices to get the most from its players.

- **Full-court passing drills:** Start out with something fundamentally based to get your players breaking a sweat. (Five minutes)
- **Dynamic stretch:** Next Level Performance always stretches after the initial warm-up. The players never walk into the gym and begin practice by stretching. (Seven to eight minutes)
- **Fundamental skill work:** The players then work on ball handling and passing skill development. This is done with all players, regardless of position or size. (10 minutes)
- **Position breakdown:** Players work on skills and fundamentals specific to their positions. The posts work on moves with their backs to the basket and the wings practice on the perimeter, dribble-drive moves, shooting off screens and other skills. (Eight to 10 minutes)
- **Shooting work:** Murphy says both groups work on shots that come from within the team's offensive scheme. That could be shooting off ball screens or picking and popping. (Eight to 10 minutes)
- **Team offensive concepts:** (10 minutes)
- **Team defensive concepts:** (10 minutes)
- **Review plays, five-on-zero:** (10 minutes)
- **Controlled scrimmage:** (25 minutes)
- **End-of-game situations:** The squad will practice various situations, like down two points with two seconds left on the clock and the ball out of bounds on the sideline. (10 minutes)
- **Conditioning and free throws:** Murphy says any conditioning drills are done with a ball to reinforce fundamentals. (10 minutes)
- **Review:** The team gathers for a quick meeting to review the day and examine what's next on the schedule. (Five minutes)



Coach Michael Murphy attributes much of the program's early success to its detailed practices, which stress fundamentals.