



Ohio: Neale's Team Bring It Shining On AAU Circuit

Tucker Neale transitioned from a Colgate University basketball standout to a successful coach on the AAU circuit who has placed several athletes in Division I programs.

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At the end of the high school basketball season, many players share a common choice: go to camps throughout the summer and continue development or tryout for an Amateur Athletic Union team and showcase their skills during tournaments around the state and country.

Both routes offer players the opportunity to improve their basketball skills. Camps provide individual instruction and gives drills to continue working at once the camp has ended. AAU teams and tournaments challenge athletes to improve their skills by playing against top flight competition.

For one team, teaching skills on and off the court, in addition to exposing junior high and high school players to competition, are both part of the program.

The Score More Athletic Club's (SMAC) Team Bring It recently returned home from a two-state tournament trip.

"We just returned from Tennessee and Louisville [Kentucky]," said SMAC Executive Director and coach Tucker Neale. "We were down in the southern parts for the last eight days. In Tennessee, we ended up in the final eight out of 92 teams.

"We were 4-1 and beat a team called West Coast Premier out of Los Angeles, California, who is considered one of the top three girls programs in America," he added. "[We] had a good showing down there. We played in front of [University of Tennessee coach] Pat Summitt, [who] actually watched a whole game of ours. It was an NCAA exposure event and we were seen by over 130 schools."

After a brief respite, these young ladies will be heading east for the final tournament of the summer. Then, it will be time to report for preseason workouts at the high school level.

"Basically, August 1 is when everything kind of shuts down," Neale said. "Our last major event that we're attending is going to be in New York City and that's the 26th through the 28th of July. It's the Big Apple Tournament of Champions. It's at Fordham University and that'll be our last opportunity to go out there and be seen by a lot of schools and show what we have.

"I really expect we have a chance to win that thing."

Neale's team is loaded with college prospects. He has two players committed to Bowling Green State University in Northwest Ohio and several other athletes looking to continue their careers at the collegiate level.

The nucleus of Neale's Team Bring It is comprised of talent from across Northern Ohio. North Royalton senior Jessie Tamerlano, Strongsville High School standout Brittany Ready, Taylor Ruper of Trinity and Uniontown Lake's Lauren Myers anchor the guard positions. During the last high school season, Myers averaged 14.6 points and 2.9 assists per game.

An addition to the squad has allowed Team Bring It the opportunity to do just that. Not only are they threats on the perimeter, but the guards have a post player to distribute the ball to when their shots are not falling.

"We picked up a girl named Allison Papenfuss. She's from Anthony Wayne High School over by Toledo," Neale said. "She's a very, very pleasant addition. She committed also to Bowling Green along with Jessie. They're actually going to be roommates. She's stepped up and played very, very well.

"[She] could've played at the major college level, but wants to stay close to home and doesn't want to go too far away," he added. "Bowling Green will be a great fit. She's a major-college player. She can go up and grab the rim, a very athletic kid and has been a solid foundation for us."

Neale has been a coach in the AAU system for 13 years. Prior to taking his seat on the bench as a coach, Neale was a player. The Colgate University graduate set numerous school and Patriot League records. His 2,075 points and 469 made free throws are the most all-time at Colgate. For his efforts, the 1990-2000 All-Decade Patriot League guard and 1994 Patriot League Player of the Year was inducted into Colgate's Hall of Honor in 2004.

Using what he learned as a player who benefited from AAU competition to better himself and a background in education, Neale has formed a network of players who have gone on to collegiate careers at The United States Military and Naval Academies, Princeton University, the University of San Diego and many points in-between.

"AAU is great at pointing out your weaknesses," he said. "You see so many kids that can do so many things. If people think AAU is the complete answer, they're completely wrong. I think if you look at it and realize it's a tool to get better, [that's] definitely part of the overall picture. It increases your court-awareness. It increases your speed and it makes you see kids from different areas that you would never see in a normal high school setting.

"I'm more of a teacher than I am a coach," Neale added. "I think that's the benefit of our program. We try to spend a lot of time teaching kids and developing them from young ages. The best coaches are teachers. Teaching is in my blood and I love the game, so that's where the coaching competitiveness comes from."

Giving players the opportunity to showcase their skills is one part of the formula for Neale's success. Finding programs that fit the needs of the individual is another important factor when accepting offers to play collegiate sports.

One of Neale's former players, Rachele Fitz of Trinity High School, helped the Marist Red Foxes win a first round NCAA Tournament game. Fitz scored a school-record 649 points, an average of 18.5 per game and shot 55.6 percent from the field. She was the Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference Player of the Year as a sophomore and Rookie of the Year in 2006-2007.

Though many of his players receive scholarships, Neale has several athletes who have chosen the small-college route. For those players, athletic scholarships are not available. However, a foundation created to

honor Neale's mother, the late Cathy Neale, aims to help those not receiving athletic scholarships achieve the dream of a college education.

“We give away three scholarships every year for kids that have been in the SMAC program for at least three years,” Neale said. “My mom’s life was all about giving. She spent a lot of time giving to people throughout her life. Our goal to keep her name alive was to give something towards college for kids.”

Matt Florjancic currently works as a freelance reporter and sports announcer for WOBL and WDLW in Oberlin, Ohio