

“Ticking Time Bombs” — AAU and youth sports culture are creating catastrophic injuries

But, it’s not just an NBA phenomenon.

[Erik Evans](#) July 12, 2019 7:00 am



We’ve give the NBA some grief here for justifiable reasons, but one thing that you cannot do is accuse the league of being late to the game on a critical fact that has been ignored by the NCAA: [AAU is killing basketball, and it is doing so in more ways than one.](#)

From prep schools that are little more than eligibility mills, to handlers and street agents masquerading as instructors, [to the lack of fundamentals actually taught during to players and the fact that they simply aren't taught to value a team game or to win](#) — not when there are stats to pad:

Even if today's players are incredibly gifted, they grow up in a basketball environment that can only be called counterproductive. AAU basketball has replaced high school ball as the dominant form of development in the teen years. I coached my son's AAU team for three years; it's a genuinely weird subculture. Like everywhere else, you have good coaches and bad coaches, or strong programs and weak ones, but what troubled me was how much winning is devalued in the AAU structure.

Teams play game after game after game, sometimes winning or losing four times in one day. Very rarely do teams ever hold a practice. Some programs fly in top players from out of state for a single weekend to join their team. Certain players play for one team in the morning and another one in the afternoon. If mom and dad aren't happy with their son's playing time, they switch club teams and stick him on a different one the following week. The process of growing as a team basketball player — learning how to become part of a whole, how to fit into something bigger than oneself — becomes completely lost within the AAU fabric.

But, of all its sins, perhaps the greatest one of AAU is the insane workload on developing bodies and the lack proper training. Truly, the AAU is a broken and foul system.

It's difficult to tally how many hours of basketball today's athlete might play before he reaches the NBA. But consider that a parent could sign their child up for organized youth basketball as young as 7 years old -- and continue on that path all the way through high school. How many games might that equate to? Officials from one of the most prestigious teams on the Nike EYBL circuit estimate that someone who played consistently between 7 and 19 -- over a span of 13 years -- could easily play more than 1,000 organized games (which doesn't include club-team practices, or pickup games, or workouts with trainers).

It is to the latter point — physical injury and conditioning — where the NBA's ox is being most gored, and where commissioner Adam Silver is being vocal. The AAU workload and its lack of emphasis on holistic training and development of young players are creating an entire generation of players that are spent husks and “ticking time bombs” for catastrophic injury — even by the time they get to college.

Imagine a car with a powerful engine, one carefully engineered and maintained for years. But as powerful as that engine has become, the car's brakes and suspension are equally poor. So the car can't handle the stress that its engine puts upon it -- all akin to placing Ferrari's top racing motor inside a hybrid while making no adjustments to the car's frame.

Simply put: Today's players are faster, stronger and more athletic, the product of years of weight training, speed training, vertical jump training, skills training. But the brakes, the suspension -- their ankles, hips and core -- while often neglected, remain tasked with enduring the brunt of the body's force. “We would joke that half of

these athletes are so good that they could almost out-jump their ability to land,” says Blase, who is now Fusionetics’ director of professional and collegiate team services. Says Clark, “All the specialization is helping the player become more skillful and more powerful and more athletic, but at the same time they’re not working on the things that prevent injuries and help them recover.”

Call it the rise of specialization: as players are “majoring” in one sport at an earlier age, and doing so to the exclusion of other physical activities, you are seeing workload demands and horrible biomechanical training taking their toll — 11-year-olds with torn ACLs, 15-year-olds with 38-inch vertical leaps that can’t walk on one leg, chronic tendinitis in kids who don’t even need to shave yet.

And, even if someone is lucky enough to make it out on the other side, to earn a coveted scholarship or that chance at pro ball, far too many are physically broken, carrying the joints of a 50-year man, or precursory stress fractures, stiff with underdeveloped core muscles, or a ticking time bomb of shortened tendons. Younger and younger players, with more and more catastrophic injuries.

This is not unique to basketball, of course. You see the players that come out of IMG Academy’s football program. Look at the injury history of their players. We’ll leave aside Bo Scarbrough, who is only the most notorious recent Alabama signee to be chewed up by the IMG grist mill.

Let’s instead take a look at the [19 IMG players who were signed by P5 programs in the NSD19 class](#) — and look at their injury situation before playing a single snap of competitive college ball.

- Chris Akporoghene (OT, Tennessee) — Knee, out for Spring
- Shamar Nash (WR, Arkansas) - Hand, Limited
- Josh Delgado (WR, Oregon) - Hamstring, Limited
- Briton Allen (DB, USC) — Undisclosed injury, Limited
- Cameron Phillips (WR, Wisconsin) — Missed Sr. season with ACL
- Jaleel McRae (LB, FSU) — *Multiple* injuries, including knee and ankle

Fully 1/3rd of these IMG kids are coming to college on the heels of injuries — many of the serious variety — or they were immediately injured upon their arrival. Six out of 19 players; and, I should note that many of the 19 haven't even reported yet. Those six players represented just the early enrollees.

So, yes, this is a problem. One that the youth sports culture largely driven by AAU ball is at the heart of. And, it is one that ESPN's Baxter Holmes dives into firmly with both feet.

It is enough to make one ask, as Kobe Bryant did, "*How much is too much? How young is too young?*"

[This is an excellent piece of longform sports journalism.](#) And I encourage you to read it. It is well-sourced, thoroughly cited, and has plenty of great interviews in here. Part Two will drop later today on espn.com