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Big Ben

Ben Simmons



Camp Report

For the second year in a row, the best rising seniors are big men. Ben Simmons and Cheick Diallo headline the Class of 2015, one year after a stellar group featured Jahlil Okafor, Cliff Alexander and others.

Simmons, Diallo a world apart

By Kevin Sloan

CHARLOTTESVILLE, Va. – A year ago, Cheick Diallo was a young prospect who came to the National Basketball Player’s Association Top 100 camp looking to make a name for himself. And oh, did he ever.

The then-rising high school junior played so well that he was named Most Valuable Player of the camp. His fast motor, high-flying, rim-protecting game caught the eyes of not only coaches and observers, but also recruiting gurus. He created a buzz around the country and began gaining notice amongst recruiters, coaches, national scouting experts, and other players.

So coming into this year’s camp in Charlottesville, Va., in June, he realized that he would now be a marked man. He also realized that with a really good crop of up-and-coming post players emerging from the high school ranks, he needed to work hard to keep improving and make himself a better player.

“The difference between last year and this year,” he said. “Last year, I came in good. But this year, with so many big men here, I wanted to come in better. And I’m not where I want to be, so I just keep on working hard.”

This year, one of those other big-name prospects came to Charlottesville for this year’s camp to make his name. And Australian native Ben Simmons did just that, earning the 2014 MVP award. In doing so, he became part of an unofficial rivalry with many other top players, including Diallo. Based on rankings from many of the recruiting organizations, most of the top prospects finishing high school over the past couple of years have been big men, as opposed to the guard-oriented game of the past couple of decades.

In recent years, we’ve seen a new crop of top-rated big men come through the Top 100 camp, including Kevin Love, Roy Hibbert, Jared Sullinger, Nerlens Noel, and Andre Drummond, as well as recent and current college players such as Mitch McGary (Michigan) and



Cheick Diallo, who’s originally from Mali, brings a big motor to the center position and the Class of 2015.

Cameron Ridley (Texas). Now Diallo and Simmons are coming into the spotlight.

Diallo, a 6-foot-9 senior from Our Savior New American in Centereach, N.Y., is a shot-blocking, run-the-floor type of player. Originally from Mali, he has developed a reputation as one of the best defensive players in the class of 2015. He currently ranks seventh in ESPN rankings overall and the sixth best post player.

Simmons, a 6-8, 225-pound senior from Monteverde, Fla., Academy, is ESPN’s second-ranked player in his class and position. He sees the court extremely well, can shoot, pass, and has tremendous court vision. Originally from Australia, he is the son of a former professional basketball player. He left the outback for Florida two years ago in order to pursue better competition as he

seeks to find a career in basketball.

Together, the two, as well as a few others who did not attend the Top 100 Camp – Ivan Rabb, Stephen Zimmerman, Diamond Stone, Elijah Thomas, Skai Labissiere and Carlton Bragg – highlight the Class of ’15 post players. This following the Class of ’14, which featured Jahlil Okafor (Duke), Myles Turner (Texas), and Cliff Alexander (Kansas), leading ESPN recruiting director Paul Biancardi to predict that the emergence of the young big men from recent years will impact the game more than did past years’ classes of big men.

“When you look at the class of 2014, the guys who are going to be freshmen in college, there’s some true keepers in that class in terms of big men,” Biancardi said. “We’re talking about the evolution of the big man.

Our top three players in last year's senior class were all center-forwards. Okafor is a true center, and we haven't seen that in the game in a long time. Myles Turner is a LaMarcus Aldridge type. And Cliff Alexander is kind of an old-school rebounder, shot blocker and finisher. So the college game this year is going to be exciting. And the emergence of those three guys shows me that's we're leading to an increase in good young big men with the next class."

One of the reasons Biancardi theorizes such is that more and more young post players are more athletic, more skilled and more well-rounded on the court than big men of previous eras. Many of them are learning ball skills and perimeter play at a younger age, which can help them as they progress, he says. Some of that depends on where they grew up, as in the case of Diallo and Simmons.

"They're trying to be more well-rounded," he explained. "At a younger age, people are trying to get them to do more things with the basketball. When you look at kids like Simmons and Diallo – they're a different type of big man. Simmons is from Australia, so he's been groomed differently than kids in the U.S. Simmons is skilled with great instincts for the game, and I think a lot of that has to do with playing in Australia because they keep so much of the fundamentals and they emphasize so much on shooting. But he hasn't seen the physicality of the game until he came to the States last year.

"And Diallo is from Mali ... he played some soccer before he came here. He's got great footwork and just a tremendous motor. He's a kid who really thrives on rebounding, running, defending and blocking shots. That's unique in itself because we don't find a lot of those kids around anymore, the kind that just lock into their motor. He definitely gets through and by and is ranked and rated because of his motor. He has physical skills but his motor puts him up there."

One of the many benefits of being ranked so highly by recruiting services is that the athletes receive invitations to events such as the Top 100 camp. As one of the attendees, they have the opportunity to play against the other attendees. In doing so, they can gauge how they stack up to the competition.

"The (number of) good big men is getting more and more," Diallo said. "You see them and some are better than me and I'm better than some of them. There's a lot of really good players in the Class of '15. A guy like Ben Simmons is a really good player. Playing against guys like him really helps me to get better."

"You're playing against the best players," Simmons added. "You can see where you're at, instead of playing a high-school team where they might have a couple of guys with top rankings. Here, everybody has a top ranking. So it's a great experience. You get to see who you're going against."

"This crop coming in at 2015, nine of our top 11 are power forwards or centers," Biancardi said. "Which is different than recent classes because usually it's the guards that control the top rankings."

Part of that reason, he contends, is youth development. He says the youth game depends on guards and for that reason, big men sometimes get ignored, which stunts their growth as a player. For reason, Biancardi says, youth coaches need to make sure they work on the big men to develop their game.

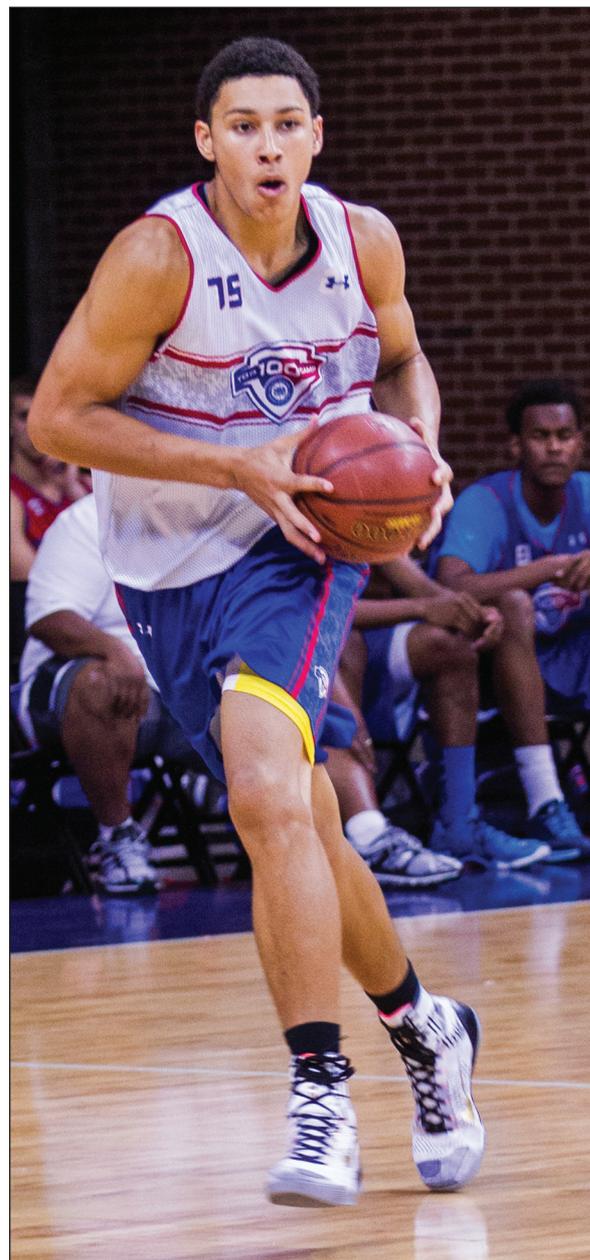
"The big men have to depend on coaches who can utilize their talents," he explained. "They also have to play big. Well, what does that mean?"

"If you're 6-8 or 6-9, you should be a rebounder. I don't care if you're a jump-shooter or a low post player, you should be the guy who rebounds. Use your height, your length, your reach defensively. I'd just like to see

the big guys just play big. They can have great impact on the game. It's exciting to see because for so long, we've had so many guards and wings controlling the game."

Because guard play has dominated the game for a couple of decades, big men have had to find a way to get their hands on the ball. Many players are working on skills that big men of the past did not necessarily work on, such as ball-handling, ball distribution, and perimeter shooting.

"The game is changing," Simmons said. "Because everyone's getting bigger. We're running a lot more. Back when Bill Russell was playing, the game was a lot different (for bigger players). Now there's a lot that goes into the game off the court; all the science of the game



Ben Simmons brings all-around skills to power forward.

and eating right and all that. I guess the big guys coming into the game now know they can't just be a typical big guy anymore. You have to add something else to your game, like a jump shot and hook shot.

"My dad (Dave Simmons) played professionally back in Australia, so he knew what skills I'd need in the future. He kind of raised me as a point guard even though I was one of the biggest kids on the team. That helped me a lot once I finally got to this stage. I'm able to dribble and pass the ball."

These skills have made Simmons one of the highest-touted prospects in the Class of '15. The LSU-bound forward moved from Australia two years ago to compete against a higher level of competition. In doing so, he displays a wide variety of skills that big men of the past didn't possess. As he mentioned, he can dribble,

distribute and has good court vision and awareness.

Diallo, on the other hand, is more of a rim protector with speed. He never stops moving, making him difficult to defend. He also is a tenacious defender and shot-blocker.

But Biancardi says that the two are beginning to understand the differences between the big man's game in the U.S. and the game they originally learned. And as both moved to the United States to further their game, it's becoming more and more apparent that both are taking the steps to improve their big man's games once they enroll in college.

"The two of them are different kinds of big men," Biancardi assessed. "For Diallo, he's learning that he can't just run around and be bigger and stronger than others, because there are guys just as athletic as him and just as strong. He's now beginning to develop a move against the set defense where he can actually score in a five-on-five setting.

"I think that for Simmons, moving here helped him realize how fast the pace of the game can be. Also, he's experiencing a physicality and athleticism that he did not experience in Australia. He's learned how to be more physical and still keep a sense of finesse. Both are gaining a lot out of playing in this country. Simmons is gaining the physicality and the speed of the game. Diallo will learn some moves."

Both acknowledge that they continue to work on their game to make themselves even better. While neither will say they keep an eye on the other top prospects' game in order to gauge their own progress, they will say they have seen others on video periodically.

"For me, I can't really watch somebody else and try to base myself off of them," says Simmons. "Whatever I can do on the court to make myself better ... I just try to be the best player I can be. But I definitely see some videos of them online once in a while.

"There are a lot of players I haven't played against," Diallo said. "Some are better than me and I'm better than some of them. So I've got to show everybody how good I can be. I've got to play more (against this type of competition). The Class of '15 has a lot of good big men. But it's not like they're pushing me. It's like we all push each other to be better. I keep seeing guys who might be better than me, so I keep working so that I'm better than them."

Biancardi said he thinks that type of competition might make the big man more impactful in the next few years. The work ethic is there, he says. But they have to know exactly what to work on in order to make this a big man's game again. Too many young players get hampered by the thought of being a perimeter guy and not working on post skills.

"It's great for young big guys to learn how to handle the ball," Biancardi explained. "To pass it, to shoot it, give a dribble handoff, run out and set a ball screen and pop. But I don't think they maximize themselves because parents or coaches try so hard to make them into a perimeter big man and they neglect the paint game.

"When you have that kind of size that these guys do, you can be great in different spots. Just don't neglect the post game. If you have a real good post game, you can be in demand. If you look at this class, you look at Diamond Stone, who's a rising senior. He's got the best low-post game in the class. People pay for low-post games. Chase Jeter is also very good. Diallo is very good near the basket but right now, Stone is probably the best. Ivan Rabb is getting better inside. I think kids sometimes get locked in on playing a certain position. That's the biggest mistake they can make. Try to become a really good basketball player in all phases. The coach will play you based on your skill level, not based on your position."