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Class of '12

Coming Up Big

Clockwise from top left: Brandon Ashley, Andre Drummond, Cameron Ridley, Mitch McGary, Elijah Macon and Tony Parker

Center Court

An unusually high number of the top players from the Class of 2012 are big men. Andre Drummond, Isiah Austin, DaJuan Coleman, Mitch McGary and Kaleb Tarczewski could bring the big man back into basketball.

Big men, huge ambitions

By Kevin Sloan

CHARLOTTESVILLE, Va. – Tony Parker, a rising high school senior from Lithonia, Ga., sat in the stands in the John Paul Jones Arena and surveyed not only his surroundings, but 99 other basketball players.

He saw some of the best high-school players in the country on the two courts and many others sitting in the stands. The NBA Players Association Top 100 Camp was in session, and Parker was just pleased to be a part of it.

Parker got to line up against some of the best big men in the country, including several highly touted players such as Andre Drummond, Cameron Ridley and Nerlans Noel.

“This is probably the best big class in the U.S. in a long time,” said the 6-foot-9, 270-pounder who is ranked among the top 25 high-school players in the country. “There’s a lot of great bigs coming out of every state. It’s a great time to play against the best bigs in the country. This is a great camp to come to and match your talent against the best.”

Parker was right.

This year, the number of big men going through the recruiting process is attracting attention from college basketball followers. In a typical year, college-hoops enthusiasts might be able to name only a few top incoming big men. But over the next couple of years, that might be changing. Five of the top 11 players in the current ESPNU rankings of top high school players are big men.

Players such as Parker, Drummond (Oakdale, Conn.), Ridley (Fort Bend, Texas), Mitch McGary (Wolfeboro, Ind.), Shaquille Cleare (Houston), Adam Woodbury (Sioux City, Iowa), and Noel (Everett, Mass.) are beginning to make a name for themselves as the next generation of post players in the game. According to the ESPNU rankings, Drummond (6-11, 275) is the top-ranked high-school senior; McGary (6-10, 255) is fourth; Ridley (6-10, 270, who has committed to Texas) is 11th; Cleare



(6-9, 280) is 22nd; and Parker is 25th. Noel (6-11, 215) is considered one of the top big men of the rising junior class. Each of these players had the opportunity to face one other at the recent camp, an invitation-only event for the top 100 returning high-school students.

Nearly as impressive was the list of big men from the Class of 2012 who did *not* attend the NBPA Top 100 Camp. That list included fellow ESPNU top-100 players such as No. 2-ranked Isaac Austin (7-0, 200) of Mans-

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(right, with Nerlans Noel)

field, Texas, a Baylor-bound player who played here in 2010; No. 5 DaJuan Coleman (6-10, 280) of DeWitt, N.Y., who has continually shut down the assumption that he’s related to former All-American Derrick Coleman of nearby Syracuse; No. 6 Brandon Ashley (6-8, 215) of Oakland; and No. 9 Kaleb Tarczewski (7-0, 220) of Claremont, N.H.

Aside from Noel in the Class of 2013, top-ranked Julius Randle (6-9, 225) of Plano, Texas, was also absent here.

Still, the NBPA Top 100 Camp was the place to be to watch a collection of big men who could change the nature of college basketball for at least the 2012-13 season.

“It’s pretty cool how we’re invited to this camp,” McGary said. “It’s the top of the line. It’s not going to get any better than this. These are the best players in our class. I feel very privileged to be here playing against the top big men and top players in the country.”

“My first year (at the camp), we had a ton of guards and only a few really good big men, like Ed Davis,” said Los Angeles Clippers forward Brian Cook, who serves as a coach and instructor during the camp. “But this year it seems there are more tall, lanky guys here. A lot of them are very skilled, versatile and mobile. That’s great to see at this level. It’s very unusual to have this many really good big men (in the same class).”

Many of them are already familiar with one other.

Summer Basketball 2011

Some have faced each other on the court before the camp and anticipate that they will face each other again in the future. But for some, this was the first time they played against some of the top ranked big men in the country.

McGary and Drummond found themselves in the same prep-school league earlier in their careers, facing each other several times.

"We've got an idea of what move each other is going to make, or what side each of us likes to go to," McGary said. "So it makes it very competitive."

Ridley and Noel have faced each other on occasion. But for the most part, this camp was the first time many of them actually could gauge their skills against some of the top big men talent in the country.

"Till today, I'd never played against Tony Parker," Ridley said. "I just played against him for the first time. I also played against Drummond for the first time yesterday. There are a lot of good big men here. I think I did really well against the other post men. I think I outscored Parker (he did, 13-12) and played pretty good defense. That helped raise my confidence level, and it shows me that I'm as good as everyone else here."

With technology allowing for detailed scrutiny of basketball at all levels, the players are all aware of the national rankings.

But those rankings can turn out to be a bit of a disadvantage in a sense, said Cook, a 10-year NBA veteran who has played for the Lakers, Magic, Rockets and Clippers.

The ratings, he said, can become too ingrained in the minds of the players and detract from the progress they should be making.

"With today's media, sometimes attention gets put on guys who maybe don't deserve it," Cook said. "You have guys who may be ranked higher and may not be playing as hard. And you've got guys who may be a little hungrier and come in here and try a

little harder against those higher ranked players. You'll see them try to kick butt and take names. It gives you a chance to see how tough people are. The media sometimes put a little bit too much on guys sooner than they should."

Woodbury might have benefited from such a case during this year's camp.

Coming in as the nation's 57th-ranked player, according to ESPNU, Woodbury found his game late in the tournament and helped lead his team to the camp championship. He scored 10 points in the semifinals and 20 in the championship game and averaged 11.3 ppg. The effort resulted in him being named the MVP of the camp over more heralded players. As a 6-11, 235-pound post player who can score and pass, expectations have now been heightened for Woodbury based on his NBPA performance. Scouts are now watching him to see if he builds on this camp experience.

"His ranking could really go up because of the way he's playing here," Cook said. "Others may drop based

on the way they played. But that doesn't mean they aren't great young talents."

Cook sees this – dealing with higher expectations than players had to in the past – as one element of an off-court education for the young players. He said they also need to embrace on-court concepts such as playing hard on both ends of the court, having a good attitude and learning a niche or role.

Too often, he said, young players insist on being "the man." In a setting such as the Top 100 Camp or an all-star tournament, big men often find themselves in an unfamiliar situation (and at a disadvantage) because they're not the ones handling the ball. The guards are often "the man" on their own teams and tend to turn these matchups into a one-on-one game. Therefore, touches can be few for the guys in the post.

"It's tough to get these kids to not play one-on-one basketball," Cook said. "We want them to pass and play the game the right way. I think at any level, when you're on a high-school or college program – you're the man on

ment for the players. Many are so used to the one-on-one game, the concept of moving without the ball is an area of emphasis in the Top 100 camp, especially for the big men. Cook and his fellow NBA players are focusing on elements such as coming off ball screens, correct footwork, and fundamentals that will help these big men improve their game.

"The little things they're giving you are what they do in the NBA," Parker said. "The little things they did in the NBA Finals were basically a simple pick-and-roll on every play. Those little things are really, really big in the NBA, but they're not that big in high school basketball. It's so great for those guys to show you those type of things that helped them along the way and gets them playing time. They also take the time to show you how they play and their lifestyle. You learn and you learn and you learn and for me, it just sinks in like a sponge. So hopefully, when I get on the court it will be easier for me."

One of the things that the players appreciate most

of all is the direct attention coming from NBA players. As Parker mentioned, the advice means a great deal to each of the young players attending the camp.

But the interaction off the court means even more. Thirteen active NBA players served as instructors and coaches, as did five retired players.

That meant the world to Parker.

"Just yesterday, I'm playing using these guys on the video game NBA 2K," Parker said. "Today, they're in front of me giving me instructions like 'Get down a little lower.' It's great getting instruction from the NBA players because every one of the guys in camp wants to be in the NBA someday. For them to come and give back to us, it means a lot to us when the Steve Blakes, the Luke Waltons and Raja Bells are talking to you and having fun with you. I really feel that's good."

As these players approach their high school seasons, statistics and video clips will be the measuring cups for their progress.

For now, however, while one camp cannot be the overall gauge, the venue and setting did allow the players to measure how they stack up against the other players. Most felt it was a good way to really measure their strengths and those elements in which they need to improve, especially facing top-notch competition.

"It shows how you're doing and measures where you're at compared to the competition," McGary said. "It's the Top 100 so you can grade yourself on how you've played against these guys. There are a lot of really good big men this year, which is kind of different than other years. So it makes for a lot of competition for us."

Added Parker: "Playing against these guys makes you a lot better. You're playing against the top competition day in and day out for four days. It makes you better as an individual when you're going against the best. You're banging up against the best. And it's really fun."

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*– NBPA instructor
Brian Cook*



your team. When you come here, you have to learn to fit in and find a niche on that team. That's what I'm preaching to these guys.

"Throughout my career, there have been times I've played and times I haven't played, and that's the coach's decision. You always got to keep ready and be involved with your teammates and have that great attitude. It's not always about wanting the ball. You see some guys who won't play any defense but they want the ball down at the other end. If they're calling for the ball, then they're not doing anything else. I tell them about my first time with the USA team when I was in college. We had Tayshaun Prince, Carlos Boozer and Jason Williams. I was 'the man' at Illinois, and I wanted to play and take the shots. But I had to learn that it's about the team and winning. And if the big men aren't getting the ball, they have to find other ways to contribute. That's what we're trying to teach."

While finding their niche in an all-star competition or camp can be frustrating, it can also be a learning mo-