



## Reality Check

It was disappointing and disheartening to have the Olympic dream shattered by the loss to Croatia in the Olympic Qualifying tournament in Greece. How could this happen? After all, Croatia has a population of 4,500,000, which is equivalent to the population on the GTA here in Southern Ontario. Some commentators said we were outclassed. Others said we played poorly. Some questioned the coaching and preparation. I felt exasperation on behalf of our coaches and players. They were wearing the weight of the basketball nation on their chests. Was it entirely their fault? Well, they were the ones on the court and actually playing the games. But in the end, I believe that we, the basketball community in Canada, must accept responsibility for the defeat in Athens.

I have always believed that in analyzing a season you need to start with a reality check. Look at the situation from a long term perspective not just from the outcome of the final game. The simple way to evaluate a season is to look for someone blame. Once the culprit is found everyone else can continue to do what they have always done. This is akin to Albert Einstein's definition of insanity; Doing the same thing and expecting different results.

A national team is not built in a 10-day training camp. It is a result of years of development. The final team is the accumulation of the hard work of a number of coaches and players over a number of years. The quality of the training and competition that these athletes and coaches amass is crucial for their development. I was intrigued by a comment made by Maurizio Gherardini, Toronto Raptor Vice president and assistant GM, during the broadcast of the game. He was asked what he was doing at the tournament. He replied that he always enjoyed watching talented players play especially when there was **pressure on the outcome**. What bigger pressure can there be than playing for your country and if you lose you go home? Many teams have talented players, but how many have talented players who can perform night in and night out under pressure? This is not something you are born with. You need to play in those pressure situations against quality competition to build this feature.

Why was it that the European teams finished in the top four places; with Greece, Croatia, and Germany (Slovenia finished fourth, but did not qualify) making it to the Beijing Olympics?

### □ Euroleague

This professional league comprises the top 24 teams in Europe. Next to the NBA, it is considered the best basketball in the world. The Raptors had the distinction of being the first NBA team to lose to a Euroleague team. Croatia had nine of their 12 players play in Euroleague. One of the three who did not, Roko-Leni Ukic, was just signed by the Raptors. Canada had two NBA players and no players on a Euroleague team. Next season we will have one Canadian (Levon Kendall) of the roughly 300 players in the 2008-09 Euroleague. By the way, there will be 21 Croatians and 19 Slovenians in the 2008-09 Euroleague. If you go to the website <http://www.eurobasket.com> you will find the top 100 teams in Europe ranked. Croatia had four players who played on the top 10 teams. Carl English was the highest Canadian who played on the 36<sup>th</sup> ranked team. Only four others were on these top 100 teams.

Let me explain this in a way that Canadians may understand. What are the chances of a team winning a major hockey tournament with only one NHL player and the rest playing in the AHL and you play a team that has nine NHL players and another 12 left at home to give three bright young talented players a chance to develop?

How does an AHL team beat an NHL team?

1. The NHL players must come out flat and not show any interest. Does this happen when you're playing for an Olympic berth?
2. No mistakes – you have to play almost flawless.
3. Need to catch a break.

I thought we had a great first quarter of play. It was our best quarter of the tournament. As the game wore on our lack of experienced depth became a factor. The mistakes began to mount.

□ **Development system**

If you look on the eurobasket.com website you can find out that Croatia has 279 players who play internationally, the majority at the professional level. They also have 47 coaches who coach internationally. This is not counting the number of coaches and players who compete in their domestic professional leagues. My best estimate is that there are 75 teams in the three divisions. If we conservatively estimate only 10 players per team this is another 750 players playing professional basketball. The same website claims we have 132 Canadians playing abroad. As we have already shown very few of these are playing in the highest level the Euroleague. It also says we have 256 playing in the USA, four of which are NBA players. Again many of these are often smaller division 1 and division 2 schools. Very often they are not getting to be key contributors to the team's success. They do not get to play in those pressure situations. When it comes to domestic play we have no professional leagues similar to what they have in Europe. CIS basketball is considered the highest level of domestic play.

How can Croatia, a country of only 4.5 million, have that many quality basketball players? I would contend that it is two fold;

- Quality development system
- Cultural passion for the game

Players in Europe train. The typical European player has three sessions a day:

- Individual work out in the morning,
- A small group or fitness work out in the afternoon
- A team practice in the evening.

There is usually one game on the weekend with one day of rest. We have very few players doing this in Canada. Our 252 players in the NCAA are only allowed 20 hours of basketball a week. The NBA collective bargaining agreement is also working towards getting rid of two a days. As I have said before we play too many poor quality games against poor quality opponents.

We do not have enough players who play in pressure situations against other great player's.

We do have some players and coaches who are passionate about the game. Having travelled to Serbia last summer I can tell you from first hand experience it is not the same. For many players in these countries that made up the former Yugoslavia, basketball is a career and a chance to earn a living. Very few youth in Canada have the same passion because of our wealth. Also you have to leave our country to play professionally.

❑ **Skills**

As I have stated before the European trained player has been trained to be a multi-skilled player until about the age of 15 or 16. It is not until this age that they begin to specialize by position. For this reason the European players in general are better skilled. This is especially true of the big players. In North America this player is very often stuck in the post and restricted in his/her movements and skills. It especially shows at the defensive end of the floor where we have trouble defending this mobile big player who can shoot, dribble, screen and pass. Also these players have realistic practice to competition ratios where training dominates.

Here are a few stats from the Olympic qualifier to help illustrate these points. There were 12 teams involved.

- ❑ Points per game - Canada finished 9<sup>th</sup> with 70.3 ppg. Greece who finished first averaged 92.8 ppg.
- ❑ Turnovers – Canada was third with 15.7 per game Greece only had 9.3 per game
- ❑ Assist – Canada was last with 6.3 per game, Greece averaged 17.8 per game (This is a very telling stat, as it points out the lack passing or ball movement to score).
- ❑ FG% - Canada 11<sup>th</sup> with 37.3 %, Greece 55.3 % (This is a huge discrepancy. Combine this with the lack of assist and you can assume that many of the shots taken were contested for Canada and uncontested for Greece). Canada averaged 61.7 shots per game and Greece averaged 63.8 per game. We were getting shots, but we could convert at the same percentage.
- ❑ Rebounding – Canada was 2<sup>nd</sup> with 36.5 per game. When you only shoot 37% there are a lot more rebound out there to get. This is also hard work and hustle something we do well internationally.

❑ **Strategies and tactics**

At the highest level all teams run plays. The difference is in the decision making and skills sets that players have when running these plays. Too often in North American basketball players have been running plays from the first time they step on the basketball court. Each time they play for a new coach they must learn a new play. When the play breaks down we often resort to one on one play as the solution. The other players tend to stand and watch. This allows the help defence to load up. As long as you have better talent you can still win. In Europe players have been taught concepts first. They become very adept and reading the defence and reacting to what the defence gives them. The player and ball movement is superior and therefore it makes it difficult for the help defence to be in position. If you watch a North American team, players tend to freeze the ball by holding it for long periods of time. This often leads to a contested shot late in the shot clock. In Europe the ball and players are constantly moving, this tends to lead to more uncontested shots. This does not happen in a ten day training camp. It is the whole long term development system supporting these concepts.

**Where do we go from here?**

These ideas are not new. We have recognized them for a number of years and have started to take steps in the right direction. Here are some thoughts on steps we need to take:

- ❑ Long term Athlete Development is probably the single most important step we can take. Educating coaches, players, parents and administrators to the proper training and

competition at each stage of development is crucial to developing the players who then can compete for our national teams.

- ❑ As a basketball community we must decide if we want to compete at the highest level. If so we need to develop the proper pathways for coaches and players so that they can achieve this worthy goal.
- ❑ Multi-skilled players trained with concepts not plays. These players should be able to fit into any basketball system when they reach the high performance stage. We need players who can play, not run plays.
- ❑ Greater number of players playing at the highest stages of the game. We need to help educate players and help them in making the right decisions along their developmental pathways. This will also occur as we properly train our athletes and prevent early burn out. Our senior teams are starting to see more and more players reaching the higher levels of professional play. It takes time.
- ❑ Domestic competition. This is not a new idea; I can remember Ken Shields lobbying for this back in the early 1990's. If we want to compete at the highest levels we need to address the issue of no domestic professional league for our players and coaches compete in. CIS basketball should not be the end point for our players as far as domestic competition stands.
- ❑ Coaching education, the game has changed. We as coaches have to change with it. We cannot continue to teach offensive strategies that were prevalent when there was no shot clock. At the development stages it is about developing the players. Coaches need to be able to individually develop the players and then get the players to work together.