

Draft Dreams In The Making

International basketball players on a
mission to reach the NBA

David Hein

Impressum

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Reaching the National Basketball Association has long been a goal for millions of Americans growing up playing the game across the United States. But the influence of the NBA has spread throughout the globe, and youngsters from everywhere now dream of making it to “The League”.

Those kids from places across the world see more and more non-Americans playing in the NBA, and the NBA franchises are recognizing that those prospects also offer something that their American brethren might not. And the clubs have been taking chances on international players.

There are dozens of international players who have declared for the 2020 NBA Draft or are automatically eligible - those who were born in 1998. Most of those talents have been scouted for years by NBA personnel traveling the world for both club competitions and national team events - both at the youth and senior levels.

Each time an international scout, team scouting director or general manager sees a player they take notes - mental and/or written - on what they see in the prospect. The talent observers then stash those notes away until the next time they see the same player, looking to see how he has developed. Has he become more aggressive and confident dribbling to the basket with his weak hand; has he added a turn-around jumper from the post; has he moved from sitting between teammates on the bench to next to the coaches; does he run to help teammates up after they tried to take a charge.

The new notes are added to the previous picture that the scout had made of the player and there are now two different occasions to compare and contrast.

Another key to scouting a player is seeing him in different situations within a team. How does he not only play as the dominant leader of a youth team but also how does he handle being the best player and what is his relationship with the coaches like. Then, how does he handle himself being one of the younger - if not youngest player - on the club’s senior team. How does he interact with the older players and coaches of the pro team. What does he do when he gets playing time with the pro team, and does he feel comfortable or overwhelmed.

The same observations are then made when the player lines up for his national team. The national team summer calendar in Europe features U16, U18 and U20 European Championships and many countries “push” their top players - meaning they allow them to play with a generation that is older than them to see how they can handle the situation and also to prepare them to be the leader for the following summer when the player is together with his own age group at the same competition. How does the player perform and act as a player one or more years younger compared to

the next summer as the expected leader of his own generation. What about how he conducts himself in the same regard if he gets a chance to play with the country's senior national team.

Youth national team competitions elsewhere in the world are not as extensive. There are continental championships for U16 and U18 age groups in alternating summers in Africa, the Americas and Asia (which includes Australia and New Zealand), with the designated number of top finishers then qualifying for the FIBA U17 Basketball World Cup and FIBA U19 Basketball World Cup taking place in alternating summers as well. Those global competitions provide players with the opportunity to compete against talents then from across the world and see how they compare. Scouts also follow the players from one summer to the next and see how they develop over the long term with their youth national teams as well.

Over the course of a few years, scouts will have seen top prospects dozens of times - also together with their NBA club management leaders to get an idea of what kind of player the team is looking at in the draft.

The on-court observation, however, is just one part of the scouting. Another just as an important - or arguably even more important - is the background check and information gathering process. NBA franchises are investing millions of dollars in these young adults and often placing a major responsibility on these youngsters' shoulders. And all the information they can collect is crucial in determining what kind of person this player is. And the clubs' scouting personnel talk to as many people as possible to get the most detailed picture of this individual off the court. How is his family relationship? What kind of manners does he have? What kind of people does he have in his inner circle? What do previous coaches think of him? How would previous teammates describe him? Scouts and personnel people also look at players' social media channels as well as articles written about them.

That brings us to the objective of this book.

As previously mentioned, many of the non-American players have played in national team and club youth and senior level competitions over the years, and I have had the pleasure of interviewing them and writing articles about them for the websites of those competitions. This book is a collection of those articles, which in themselves can be considered at-the-moment glimpses of their personalities and mind frames. Some articles are more in-depth than others and some players have two articles written about them. All of these players have declared for the 2020 NBA Draft or are automatically eligible. Not all of the international players in the draft are included in this book as I have not written articles about all of them. And not all of the players in this book will be drafted. But this is a collection of works offering basketball fans and observers a chance to get to know a little bit about the players their teams might be drafting.

I have written all of the following articles, the links for which are included after each piece. All of the event organizers - FIBA, Basketball Champions League and Euroleague Basketball - have okayed the publication of these articles.

Hopefully this book provides the readers with some unknown and engaging information about these very talented young players, and hopefully it provides you with at least a little of the joy I had while writing the articles.

Good luck to all the players who are written about in this book as well as all other players shooting for the NBA. May you all have a long professional career in the game.

If you are interested in up-to-date links of articles I have written or more information, follow me on my media channels: Twitter @heinnews; Instagram @mr.heinnews; Facebook @heinnews or @DavidHein; website www.heinnews.com.

Thank you for taking some of your precious time and choosing to read this book.

David Hein

Thank yous

There are so many people I would like to thank in the publication of this book. Of course, my wife Mona who has accepted my life on the road in the world of basketball and supported me through it all. Thank you also to my families in Germany and in the United States for making me who I am. I owe a great debt to Roberto Carmenati, who has always been there to push me in projects I am working on and supporting me in my writing and information-gathering. There are dozens of friends and colleagues in the scouting and youth basketball world who I also would like to thank for keeping me humble. A great debt of gratitude also to the FIBA family as well as Euroleague Basketball and Basketball Champions League for asking me to tell these wonderful tales about these wonderful youngsters for their websites and also for granting permission of their publication in this book. Thank you also to the players who opened up to me and let me tell their stories as well as to the clubs and national federations who assisted me in doing the interviews. And last but not least, thank you to you, the reader. You mean the world to me, taking some of your hard-earned money to purchase this book and believing in me and my writing. Thank you and enjoy “Draft Dreams In The Making”.

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ALEKSANDAR ARANITOVIC

Born January 24, 1998, Serbia, ADA Blois, France

Aleksandar Aranitovic is a Belgrade native and grew up playing for Crvena Zvezda Belgrade. His potential was seen early on by Serbian basketball leaders as he represented the country a number of times at the youth level internationally, winning silver at the FIBA U16 European Championship 2013. He helped Zvezda to win the Euroleague Basketball Adidas Next Generation Tournament title in 2014 and also collected bronze at the FIBA U17 Basketball World Cup 2014. Aranitovic went through some serious knee injuries, and after spending two seasons with Partizan Belgrade played the 2019-20 campaign with French ProB second division side ADA Blois. This article was written for the website of the FIBA U20 European Championship 2018.

ACL injuries behind him, Aranitovic takes on a golden mission

BELGRADE (FIBA U20 European Championship 2018) - Don't be surprised if Aleksandar Aranitovic gets a bit more emotional than usual when he hears the Serbian national anthem at the FIBA U20 European Championship 2018 - especially as he reflects on what he's gone through in the past 18 months.

Let's rewind to January 2016. Aranitovic, with his bulldog physique and tough-as-nails game had already been playing in the Adriatic ABA league for four months with Mega Bemax Belgrade - despite not turning 18 until January 24.

Aranitovic's 2015 summer included playing for Serbia at the FIBA U19 Basketball World Cup and the FIBA U18 European Championship, which followed him helping his country to a third-placed showing at the FIBA U17 Basketball World Cup 2014.

He had advanced to being one of Serbia's next top prospects with a bright future.

Forgive Sani - as he's more commonly known - if he has a hard time remembering those good times.

On January 31, 2016 in an ABA game against Cedevita, Aranitovic landed wrongly and tore the ACL of his left knee. That meant about 10 months of rehab before he could get back onto the court.

"The first time with a major injury and everything was new for me," Aranitovic recalled. "During my recovery, I spoke a lot with Dragan Milosavljevic and Davis Bertans, players who had the same injuries as me, and their experiences helped me a lot."

All that guidance could not prepare him for November 2016. Just days before returning to game action, Aranitovic went down in practice with the same torn ACL to the same left knee.

"The second injury was more mentally tough for me," Aranitovic admitted. "Because I knew how tough the way back was after the first injury and recovery. When the second happened I knew I needed to be mentally strong to come back stronger than ever."

All the mental torment, physical stress and work finally paid off in October 2017 when he started the season with Partizan.

"Oh man, I will never forget that moment. That was one of the most unforgettable moments in my life," said Aranitovic, who only turned 20 in January.

The 6ft 5in (1.95m) guard lasted the whole season and put up solid numbers in the ABA (6.1 points, 2.9 rebounds, 1.4 assists and 1.4 steals) and the Serbian league (3.8 points, 3.5 rebounds and 2.1 assists).

"I owe a lot to Partizan because of their patience and huge support all this time - both my teammates and coaching staff," he said. "I'm very happy because I had a great season after the long break.

Now it's time to pull on that *Serbija* jersey again in Chemnitz, where Serbia have been drawn into Group D with Iceland, Italy and Sweden.

"I'm very excited because I didn't play the last two championships. So it will be more special for me for sure," he said.

"Every time I play for the national team I am so proud and happy to be part of this and to meet all my basketball friends all around the world."

The objective in Germany is clear - especially for a winner like Aranitovic: "The goal is the gold medal of course for me and my team."

Aranitovic and his strong 1998-born generation will have some extra help this summer as well. Some of the leaders from the 1999-born generation will also likely make the team - the group that last summer guided Serbia to the FIBA U18 European Championship 2017 title.

"For sure they can help a lot because they know how to win a championship," he said.

For Aranitovic, just hearing the Serbian national anthem will be like a mini-championship.

<http://www.fiba.basketball/europe/u20/2018/news/acl-injuries-behind-him-aranitovic-takes-on-a-golden-mission>

DENI AVDIJA

Born January 3, 2001, Israel, Maccabi Tel Aviv, Israel

Deni Avdija has already become a national icon in his Israel as he helped Israel win the FIBA U20 European Championship 2018 - the country's first gold medal in a FIBA event. He helped Israel defend the title in 2019 as well and also played for the Israeli senior national team. All the while he also made in-roads with Israeli legendary club Maccabi Tel Aviv's senior team. But Avdija also showed his dominance in the youth categories at the club level at the Euroleague Basketball Adidas Next Generation Tournament. This article was written for the website of the 2019 ANGT Munich.

Maccabi's Avdija is just #LivingTheDream

Deni Avdija already possesses an impressive list of career accomplishments including carrying U18 Maccabi Teddy Tel Aviv to the Euroleague Basketball Adidas Next Generation Tournament Munich first-place game. But the guard talent is more concentrated on just living the dream of being a basketball player.

Avdija was an MVP candidate in his performance in Munich and ended up being named to the All-Tournament Team as the event's leader in scoring (24.3 ppg.), assists (6.0 apg.). Steals (3.8 spg.) and performance index rating (31.5). He also ranked second in rebounds (11.0 rpg.).

"It's an honor to play here. It's good for me to play these minutes here and play and get this experience," said Avdija, who turned 18 on January 3.

"It's an amazing competition and I'm proud that I am here and I am very proud that we are winning games and competing. I asked my senior team if I could come here and play and I respect their choice."

Avdija said being on the court with the guys he knows so well and playing against the best in Europe is special.

"I had so much fun coming here to this beautiful arena and playing with my best friends on the court and winning games. That's huge for me. That's what I play: to have fun and compete with my friends and fight with my friends. That's the best that I can ask for."

Avdija was the clear leader of the Maccabi team, which did not compete in the ANGT last season and last played in the ANGT Finals in 2006-07. He was hoping for some more magical moments in Germany after his last trip to the country ended with Israel winning its first national team continental crown when it captured the title at the FIBA U20 European Championship 2018 in Chemnitz.

"Goosebumps really. I can hardly express what it meant for me and what that team was like for me. A big, big, big experience and really an honor to represent my country and bring them the first gold medal and I will try my

hardest to win all the trophies I can in the world," said Avdija, who averaged 12.7 points, 6.4 rebounds, 1.1 assists and 1.3 steals in that event. That performance earned him a spot on the tournament's All-Star Five – at the tender age of 17 years old.

"I think age really doesn't matter. I am not thinking about my age," Avdija explained. "When I play at the senior level I am not thinking about how young I am or how weak I am. I am not thinking about this. I am playing my game and really everybody has their own development pace. Everybody develops at different speeds and I am not worried."

The 2.05-meter guard has basketball greatness in his blood; he is the son of former Crvena Zvezda Belgrade team captain and Yugoslavian international Zufer Avdija. The younger Avdija has already made history with Maccabi when he became the youngest player to debut with the club. He was 16 years and 320 days. when he appeared in an Israeli League game against Ironi Nes-Ziona on November 19, 2017.

"I was nervous, but my teammates shared the ball with me. They wanted me to score and I am thankful for this," said Avdija, who missed his two three-point shot attempts in 3 minutes of action that night. Nearly a year later - on November 22, 2018 - Avdija made his Turkish Airlines EuroLeague debut when Maccabi hosted Fenerbahce Beko Istanbul at Menora Mivtachim Arena.

"There I wasn't nervous. I was confident. I came into the game super ready and super motivated. I didn't get a lot of minutes but I tried my best and I am thankful that I scored that basket. It was very emotional for me. It's a moment that will stay with me all my life," said Avdija, who scored 2 points on one shot attempt in 2:28 minutes of action and has totaled 1:57 minutes in two other EuroLeague games this season.

Avdija said he is working hard to convince head coach Ioannis Sfairopoulos to give him more playing time.

"I am doing everything I can. I am working hard and I see myself in practices really getting better. Day by day I am progressing and making coach trust me more. I am trying to play good defense. I am not worried about playing, but am working and being thankful for the minutes I get. They are important. But I shouldn't worry. They will come," said Avdija, who is averaging 3.2 points, 1.6 rebounds and 0.8 assists in 10.7 minutes over 12 games in the Israeli League.

Avdija practices solely with Maccabi's senior team so Munich was a chance to play with his boyhood friends - something he valued very much. But it was also just a chance to do something he truly loves and cherishes: playing the game. And that is something he expresses with every social media post with the hashtag #LivingTheDream.

"It's so much fun. Every day I just say thanks for another day that I can touch the ball and score and be in gyms and just be with a lot of good guys and my teammates. It's really #LivingTheDream and I won't change it. That will always stay my motto."

Just living the dream while accomplishing great things.

<https://www.adidasngt.com/u18/news/latest/i/9felb3mwhqicmyh/maccabis-avdija-is-just-livingthedream>

JUSTIN BASSEY

Born January 26, 1998, USA, Harvard University, USA

Justin Bassey grew up in Denver, Colorado as the son of a Nigerian father and Thai mother. He went to Harvard University and made his sole appearance on the international stage at the FIBA U18 Asian Championship 2016, playing for Thailand. This article was published on the FIBA U18 Asian Championship 2016.

Billups fan Bassey thrilled to be playing for Thailand

TEHRAN (FIBA Asia U18 Championship 2016) - Growing up in Denver and around the Nuggets of the NBA, Justin Bassey was exposed to a high level of basketball culture. Now the guard is hoping to bring some of that knowledge to the Thailand team at the FIBA Asia U18 Championship 2016.

Bassey is the son of a Thai mother and Nigerian father and has only been with Thailand team for a month ahead of the tournament in Tehran. But the Denver area native feels he has been very well received into his new family.

"I've enjoyed being on the team. They've all been super welcoming. We've pretty much become a family," Bassey said. "We're all really close. We love going out, talking and catching up with one another so it's definitely a group of guys I'm very fond of. I'm looking forward to staying in touch with and building up on our relationship in the future."

The future is the present as well as Bassey is with a Thai team which is back at the FIBA Asia U18 Championship for the first time since 2006.

"The team's expectations are to go out and play hard," he said. "We don't know too much about the other teams and the talents that they are bringing forward but we expect ourselves to play the best of our abilities and to really show that Thailand can be a contender."

Thailand dropped their first game at the FIBA Asia U18 tournament, losing 100-93 to India as Bassey scored a team-high 20 points to go with 6 assists. And the Harvard University-bound guard feels ready to take a leadership role.

"I'm expecting to lead my team, not only vocally but by example. Just playing hard, holding everyone accountable," Bassey said. "So when I tell someone to show up somewhere, be there. If there's a loose ball, I expect everyone to dive on the floor. I think that one of the better ways to lead, especially on the court, is by showing that I'm willing to do it myself."

Bassey grew up around the game, starting playing at around 3 years old in a YMCA basketball league. Bassey grew up looking up to Kobe Bryant and LeBron James and Shaquille O'Neal. Bassey remembers watching Allen Iverson and Carmelo Anthony also playing for the Nuggets.