

International Players Expanding Into Small College Basketball

Numbers growing faster in Division II than Division III, but coaches still unsure of how prevalent foreign-born players will become.

by Brian Lester, Contributing Writer

Bobby Champagne has two international players on his men's basketball roster at North Alabama in Phil Collins (Australia) and Elvado Lima (Brazil), but he is hardly pioneer when it comes to going abroad to find recruits.

In fact, Champagne is quick to point out that nearly every team in UNA's league, the Gulf South Conference, has at least one foreign-born athlete on its roster.

He attributes that to the global popularity of the game.

"Basketball has become a global game with just about every country in the world having a professional team and many international players having a major impact on the NBA," Champagne said in a recent interview. "Because of this, international players are coming to the United States to play in college."

Foreign women players are making a name for themselves in small college hoops as well.

Take Johannah Leedham of Division II Franklin Pierce for example.

The junior All American and *Women's Division II Bulletin* Preseason Player of the Year has adjusted nicely to the game in America, her phenomenal average of 23 points per game and 7 rebounds per outing as a sophomore serving as evidence.

Of course, the fact that Leedham spent time in the U.S. before coming to Franklin Pierce didn't hurt her cause either, according to head coach Mark Swasey.

"She spent a couple of years in the

states in prep school and played AAU ball, so she was already exposed to US Basketball before coming here," Swasey said. "She had absolutely no trouble adjusting to the style of play here and has been smart enough to adjust to the differences."

Indeed, there are differences in the game played here compared to the one that is played overseas. They tend to be minor, though, at least according to Swasey.

"I haven't noticed any difficulty in the way international players adjust to the game here. There are some small differences in offensive footwork and defensive positioning, but this is just as true for many American players," Swasey said. "We often see more maturity in our international players because they often enter school at 19 or 20 and that makes a difference in them being able to adapt to college life in general."

Champagne believes foreign-born players tend to have an advantage over American athletes when it comes to the basics.



Brazil native Lucas Alves led BYU-Hawaii to the Sweet 16 last year and was PacWest Player of the Year.

"The international player is often more fundamentally sound and has worked more on fundamentals," Champagne said. "At times, though, we need to be sensitive to the fact that (international) players do not have the luxury of seeing their families for an extended period of time."

Veteran Washington University head coach Mark Edwards, whose team is



Franklin Pierce University junior Johannah Leedham, who hails from England, was a first team All-American last season.

ranked No. 1 in the country in the men's Division III poll, said athletics provide an outlet for foreign students, particularly at the small college level.

"At the Division II and Division III levels, it is a great way to get noticed and to receive a degree from an American University, especially if there is the possibility of a scholarship," said Edward, who has been at Washington for nearly three decades.

"The players seem to be coming from those countries with highly developed junior national programs such as Spain, former Russian states, Australia and some South American countries."

NCAA statistics show great growth in international players in Division II since 1999-00. Yet, finding foreign-born college basketball players in Division III is rare.

While 4.6 percent of Division II men's basketball players are foreign-born and 3.4 percent of Division II women's players are from overseas, the percentage of international players at the Division III level, men and women, is much lower. Men come in at 1.2 percent and women

at a 0.4 percent mark.

Baldwin-Wallace women's head coach Cheri Harrer has an idea as to why that is the case.

"Players from other countries are looking for athletic scholarships to pay for their education, just as players in the states do," Harrer said. "If they can't get athletic scholarships, they have other options in their own countries. I think you will find that the schools with international athletes on their teams have very attractive scholarships for international students."

"I've had only one in my 28 years at Washington," Edwards said. "But I've coached a number of them when I was at the Division I level. The foreign players of today are more savvy about American basketball and they have a better understanding of what you have to do to play here."

Still, the impact international players will have on the game in the future is uncertain and ultimately could have an affect on how small college programs recruit overseas.

"I think the growth of international recruiting could potentially stall a bit as the NCAA tightens rules regarding eligibility and professional teams continue to expand overseas," Swasey said. "The amateurism question is one of the biggest challenges facing international recruiting today and finding a consistent, fair and expedient approach to validating the amateur status of a recruit is important as we move forward."

Swasey notes that the amateur rule isn't the only hurdle college coaches must overcome in their efforts to recruit players from other countries.

"Rules such as delaying enrollment have an adverse effect on recruiting secondary high school student-athletes from countries in the southern hemisphere who graduate in December," Swasey said. "Some of the new rules are making it more difficult to recruit international players, and that in turn could hurt many small college programs like ours." ●

Non-Resident Participation Percentages 2006-07

The percentage of international basketball student-athletes has doubled in Divisions I and II between 1999-00 and 2006-07, according to the NCAA. Little change has taken place in Division III.

Below are the percentages of international basketball players:

Division I Men 8.0
Division I Women 7.3

Division II Men 4.6
Division II Women 3.4

Division III Men 1.2
Division III Women 0.4

Source: NCAA