

# NEXT LEVEL

Everyone wants to coach a star.  
But with talent comes  
responsibility and  
the challenge of making  
sure the team comes first.

BY MIKE PHELPS

IN SIX YEARS AS HEAD MEN'S COACH AT OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY, Thad Matta has seen his share of star players pass through the program. Greg Oden, Mike Conley, Dacquan Cook, B.J. Mullens, and Kosta Koufos were each picked in the first round of the NBA draft under Matta's watch, and current star Evan Turner will likely travel a similar path. Matta's teams have been equally successful over the same stretch, with two Big Ten regular season titles and a national championship game appearance in 2007.

Matta knows that coaching a high-profile player at the college or high school level has clear benefits, but it also can present significant challenges. For example, how do you help the star cope with attention from the media, college recruiters, and pro scouts without becoming distracted? How do you keep the focus on the team rather than the individual? And how do you prevent jealousies and perceived favoritism from poisoning your team chemistry? Properly answering those

questions can be the difference between raising a championship banner and looking back with regret on a season of missed opportunities.

## Lead the Way

The key for the Buckeyes has been developing blue collar stars. "If your best player is also one of the best people, you're going to have a heck of a basketball team," Matta says. "If he's the hardest worker, you can always say the reason he's getting 20 points a game is because he spends the most time in the gym."

To have selfless stars, you need to build great personal relationships. A poor relationship can lead to a selfish star who is more concerned with his statistics than the team's win-loss record.

"He has to know you have his best interests in mind—and that you will help him become the

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best player he can possibly be," Matta says. "Be up front and forthright, and if you have a great player, let him know he's great. Tell him playing team ball is the way he's going to help this program win games, and the more the team wins, the more everybody shines individually."

"Integrating a star into the team framework is one of the more difficult things coaches face," says Bosko Djurickovic, Head Men's Coach at Carthage College, who is confronting an additional challenge this year as his top player is his son, Steve. "Coaches have to be harder on their stars than on the others in order to set the tone. Often, there is a perception that a star can do whatever he pleases and shoot whenever he wants because the team needs him. It doesn't work that way. In fact, it has to be the opposite."

To make sure his message is crystal clear, Djurickovic has one-on-one conversations with his stars. "I'll let them know I'm expecting a lot from them," he says. "They need to know I'm holding them to a different level of accountability."

That accountability includes taking a leadership role. "That's part of being the star," Djurickovic says. "Because of the uniqueness of basketball, one player makes the biggest difference, but the other four people need to be involved. The star needs to integrate his teammates and make them better."

Most coaches agree the best strategy

starts with not playing favorites with your stars and giving each athlete their fair share of attention, even if others won't.

At Kinston (N.C.) High School, Head Boys' Coach Wells Gullledge's team features a future University of North Carolina Tar Heel in Reggie Bullock, who committed to Head Coach Roy Williams's team as a sophomore.

"During this whole process, I've tried to not make any of our other kids feel less important," Gullledge says. "One guy is getting most of the outside attention, but the other 14 or 15 players are just as important to our success. I make sure to spend time with everyone on and off the court and show interest in their future as well."

"The team takes on the makeup of the coaching staff," he continues. "So if I show each and every kid the same amount of respect, the players will follow suit."

Despite making sure players are treated equally, Gullledge recognizes that more talented players sometimes need a bigger push. "Our expectation is that Reggie is an Atlantic Coast Conference caliber

player, so his play, even now, has to be ACC level," Gullledge says. "Whether it's pickup, practice, or anything else he does,

***"Tell each player what you think his role is and what you expect from him ... Not everybody gets to shoot the ball, and not every player plays 30 minutes, but everyone can contribute in their own way."***

he has to maintain that level. We expect and demand him to be the best player on the floor."

It's possible, though, that a star won't be willing to accept additional leadership roles and will try to fill his or her stat sheet without worrying about teammates. In these situations, Gullledge recommends turning to the tape.

"If you have a player taking 40 shots a game and your locker room is unhappy or you're losing, the biggest thing is to sit that player down and make them a

## During his ballyhooed freshman season at

Ohio State University in 2006, Greg Oden—the eventual No. 1 pick in the NBA Draft and the Buckeyes' leading scorer—missed seven games with a wrist injury. In 2008, guard David Lighty was expected to be a major contributor, until a broken bone in his foot ended his season after just seven games. And this year, Ohio State's top scorer Evan Turner sat down for an extended period of time with an injured back.

When your best players are injured, having previously placed an emphasis on team play can be extremely beneficial—and, conversely, relying too

much on your star can come back to haunt you. During each situation, Ohio State Head Men's Coach Thad Matta viewed it as an opportunity for other players to make a name for themselves, rather than toss away the season.

"The one thing we talked about each time is that we've got to move forward," Matta says. "We have to continue to play. Each remaining player has to pull his own weight and maybe a little bit more. With Evan, our guys anxiously awaited his return, but at the same time, they knew they needed to keep the season rolling."

## FALLEN STARS

better student of the game," he says. "For example, show the player instances where their teammates were open on the wing. Show them where they went wrong in their decision making, and if they're not adhering to what you want, switch the script and put them in their teammates' shoes. Ask, 'Would you be happy in that situation?'"

"That will solve a lot of problems," Gullledge continues. "Nobody wants to play with someone who's only in it for themselves."

### Supporting Roles

When one player is averaging 25 points per game, is constantly featured in the media, and has his or her photograph plastered all over the school's Web site, it can be easy for teammates to become jealous. Those jealousies can pull a team apart and turn a promising season into one filled with stress. That's why it's important to eliminate any potential ill will from the get-go.

At Carthage, Djurickovic attacks any perceptions of unfairness by establishing clearly defined roles for each player, and also working hard to identify team goals and emphasize team concepts. "Tell each player what you think his role is and what you expect from him," Djurickovic says. "Then integrate him into the team setting by using his talents in the best way possible."

"At this level, everyone comes in with a preconceived notion that they're a really good player because they had success in high school and they think it's going to be the same in college—and that's not always true," he continues. "Only the best middle school players become good high school players, and only the best high school players become really good college players. Coaches at every level need to define roles right from the start. Not everybody gets to shoot the ball, and not every player plays 30 minutes, but everyone can contribute in their own way."

While individual accomplishments are important, the ultimate goal is to win championships. If coaches can keep the focus on winning, then players shouldn't be jealous of a star player commanding a majority of the attention.

Bill Mitaritonna, Head Boys' Coach at Half Hollow Hills High School West in Dix Hills, N.Y., coached Tobias Harris, rated fifth in the Class of 2010 by Rivals.

com. Harris was so highly regarded that his decision to attend the University of Tennessee was broadcast to a national audience on ESPNU.

Mitaritonna, who has coached Hills West for 10 years, says he was fortunate that despite the attention, Harris remains as grounded as he was when he arrived on the varsity team. However, despite Harris's immense talent and ability to make the team better, Mitaritonna believes there was some jealousy from older teammates during Harris's freshman year, when he was averaging 25 points per game and taking shots away from veteran players.

"Some of the older kids had been here for three years doing all the hard work, then Tobias came in and instantly became the star," Mitaritonna says. "I had to speak with some of the guys and explain to them that this was the way it was going to be, and they needed to buy into it because Tobias was a special player who was going to help us win. By the time he was a sophomore, his teammates saw the light and rallied around him."

Mitaritonna had his athletic director speak with the team to confirm that message. The athletic director also spoke about the increased media and recruiting attention that surrounded the team and how the extra coverage could benefit everybody.

"He told them that if a Division I coach sees you playing, and you're hustling, he might make a phone call to a friend at a Division III school who would love to have you," Mitaritonna says. "It's a win-win situation for everybody. The guys on our team know that Tobias brings attention, college coaches, and media to the games."

At Ohio State, Matta is constantly reminding his players that team goals take precedence over individual accolades. The perfect example of team play presiding over individualism lies in his squad's appearance in the 2007 championship game against the University of Florida.

"Between the two teams in that game, there were nine players who would eventually get drafted into the NBA—including eight from the 2007 class alone," he says. "Both teams had a lot of high-profile players, but they were true teams with really good players choosing team priorities over stats. Nobody on the floor averaged more than Oden's 15.7 points

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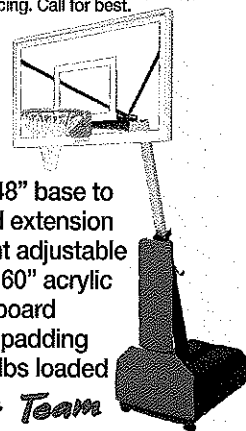
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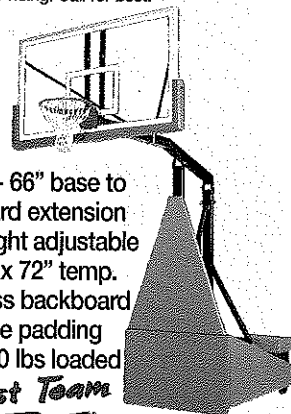
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### Big Fish

Few college players have received more attention in the past five years than Stephen Curry. The fact that Curry attended Davidson College, with an enrollment under 2,000, made his national stardom even more remarkable—and even more resounding on the Davidson campus.

During the 2008-09 season, the Wildcats were frequently featured on national television, played many high-profile games, and almost always competed in front of a full house. The attention was something the players were unaccustomed to, and it eventually began to wear on Head Coach Bob McKillop's squad.

“Every game—home and away—was a sell out, and every arena featured lines of fans waiting for autographs,” McKillop says. “It elevated expectations, and even though there was a lot of enjoyment with it early on, it eventually took a toll on our team. If you go through that experience on a yearly basis, you know how to handle it. But this was our first time in the limelight, and as a team, we had to learn how

to deal with it.”

McKillop's approach was to discuss the situation and explain the positives. “You can't ignore it, hope it goes away, or soft sell it,” he says. “I made sure they understood the precise situation they were in and realized this was a very special time in their lives. They needed to enjoy the ride, rather than let the stresses of the situation take control.”

Head Coach Vance Downs's boys' team at Ames (Iowa) High School went through a similar situation, albeit on a smaller scale. Last season, the team was led by Harrison Barnes, a University of North Carolina signee who was the second-ranked player in the Class of 2010 by Rivals.com. Early in Barnes's recruitment, the onslaught of recruiting and media inquiries was so great that it began to take away from the head coach's time on the court with his team.

“That's when I learned my first lesson

in handling a star,” Downs says. “I had to be careful not to let my teaching responsibilities get overtaken by the recruiting and media demands. I just took a deep breath, started making to-do lists, and did the best I could with the time I had.”

*“Anyone can draw up X's and O's. Anyone can develop a game plan. But coaching young men to become model citizens on and off the court is the most extraordinary challenge a coach has.”*

To manage the situation, Downs and his athletic director instituted a policy that limited the number of times media members could visit practice and talk to players. “That way we could at least limit the distractions and protect the best interests of Harrison and the other

## Managing star-level attention also means managing social networking.

University of Tennessee recruit Tobias Harris was a frequent presence on the micro-blogging site Twitter.com throughout his recruitment, tweeting about the schools he visited and exchanging messages with current players on the team—all of which were visible to anyone who wanted to read them.

While Bill Mitaritonna, Head Boys' Coach at Half Hollow Hills High School West in Dix Hills, N.Y., didn't specifically advise Harris on what to write, he did warn him of potential pitfalls. “Random people constantly tried to talk to Tobias on Facebook and give him advice,” Mitaritonna says. “I've tried to develop a relationship that makes Tobias feel comfortable talking to me about things like that so he doesn't have to turn to people on the Internet for advice.”

Furthermore, Mitaritonna advises all his players to limit their involvement with Internet chatter. “There are enough people out there who live on the computer and want to give their two cents,” he says. “I could imagine a situation where a player says something to someone through e-mail, someone else sees it, and suddenly the player has their foot in their mouth.”

Wells Gullledge, Head Boys' Coach at Kinston (N.C.) High School, advises athletes to think carefully about the possible ramifications that come with each keystroke. “With technology today, the general public can have access to a lot of kids' personal thoughts,” he says. “I tell my players to make sure everything they display to the public is cleaned up and ready to take to church.”

## A TANGLED WEB

players," Downs says. "The vast majority of media people handled it well because it was put in place early in the season and was accepted as the standard operating procedure. Our kids responded well because it became a routine, and they knew what to expect day in and day out."

Downs also had a plan for deflecting some of the attention to other players on his team. Rather than always letting Barnes play the role of team spokesman, Downs often put other players in that position, which was beneficial to keeping the focus on the program, rather than its star.

"For example, the past few years we've played in the Wells Fargo tournament, and they have a press conference where they invite representatives from the teams to speak," Downs says. "When we went last year, we sent another player on the team's behalf, and he did a great job. It was certainly a situation where Harrison could have taken the lead—and some of the media expected him to be there—but I wanted his teammate to carry the torch."

Djurickovic has similar policies at Carthage, frequently placing photos of different players on the team's media guide or the athletic department's Web site, and appointing other players to leadership roles. And as he found, it helps when your star player does his part to further the cause.

"Steve is so low key and easy to get along with that it's very easy for him to keep moving forward with all the publicity he gets," Djurickovic says. "He's very close to his teammates, he's very unselfish, and he's more than willing to deflect some of the attention."

### Once In A Lifetime

A common theme among coaches of high-profile players is that they wouldn't trade the experience for anything. That's an important factor for any coach who may just be beginning this process to remember—the workload might be greater, but so is the payoff.

"I'd love to have a player like Harrison every year, believe me," Downs says. "I don't look at it as a hardship,

but as a growth opportunity. You have to learn to manage your time. You get up a little earlier, go to bed a little later, and prioritize your tasks."

For a high school coach, it can also be an opportunity to learn from the best. "Speak to college coaches like they're just another coach, another person," Mitritonna says. "Pick their brains."

"Most coaches love to talk about defense and how to run drills," he adds. "John Calipari sat down with me and ran through some of the drills he uses. Bruce Pearl sat down to talk with me. Paul Hewitt went through some coaching philosophy with me. Enjoy it, because these guys are just like you. They're there to help."

McKillop, meanwhile, believes working with stars can be one of the most rewarding experiences in the profession. "Anyone can draw up X's and O's," he says. "Anyone can develop a game plan. But coaching young men to become model citizens on and off the court is the most extraordinary challenge a coach has." ■






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