

It's all basketball as Josh Pastner hits Las Vegas for prospect-filled AAU showcase

Michael Cohen

1:00 PM, Aug 2, 2014

LAS VEGAS — As the last few minutes of the 4 o'clock hour broil beneath the Nevada sun, parking spaces are at a premium on the back side of Bishop Gorman High School. The third and final live evaluation period begins at 5 p.m. sharp on this Wednesday, July 23, and coaches from across the country have swarmed Las Vegas to stake out the Amateur Athletic Union showcases featuring some of the best high school players in the country.

Every second of the five-day recruiting period is valued like currency, which is why rental cars have poured into the parking lot well in advance. Up and out of Chevy Malibus, Dodge Avengers and Nissan Altimas rise the likes of Tom Crean from Indiana, Sean Miller from Arizona and Steve Alford from UCLA, while dozens of others are already waiting at the private, coaches-only entrance at the back of the gym.

Among those attending the Las Vegas Fab 48 is Memphis head coach Josh Pastner, whose boyish appearance is striking alongside his aged coaching colleagues. A pair of blue and white Nike sneakers gives way to black basketball shorts and a black #TigerNation T-shirt. (Can you imagine Mike Krzyzewski donning a hashtag?) The first few wisps of gray in his dark, curly hair fail to close the generational gap. Which is why Pastner's cellphone, an ancient Samsung flip phone, is a gift-wrapped joke for many of his iPhone-toting counterparts.

For 13 hours over the next two days, Pastner, who will spend the entire evaluation period in Las Vegas, granted The Commercial Appeal full access as he flitted between three AAU tournaments and countless gymnasiums to monitor players from all across the United States — and beyond. Without so much as a glance at a casino, Pastner offers a window into the non-stop lifestyle of coaches on the recruiting circuit. He makes sure to text more, sleep less and, for this particular summer, follow the creed that has dictated his travel schedule for the month of July: Never, ever miss one of Skal Labissiere's games.

See and be seen

Inside Bishop Gorman, a line forms leading to a pair of folding tables with registration information. Coaches gain access to the gym by paying a daily admission fee of \$25, which allows them to come and go as they please with a wristband of the proper color. Packets containing roster and contact information are an extra \$350 for Division I coaches, though purchasing one will knock a few dollars off your admission fee.

"I'm all for it," Pastner says of the high prices. "They're trying to run a business."

Clutching the three items that seldom leave his grasp all week — cellphone, wallet and schedule spreadsheet — Pastner enters the gym to meet up with assistant Robert Kirby, who is in town for a few hours before taking a red-eye flight to a tournament in Panama City, Florida. Seats are reserved for coaches along two walls of the gymnasium, which features side-by-side games late into the night. The first order of business for Pastner and Kirby is a simple yet important one: choosing the proper vantage point.

With its three evaluation periods, July has become the most important month on the college basketball recruiting calendar. Pastner and his staff use the first two sessions primarily as opportunities to observe and evaluate prospects. Notes are compiled and scouting reports formed, which eventually dictate travel schedules for the third and final period, a time in which making eye contact becomes the most important goal.

“I’m trying to be seen,” Pastner said. “By now I’ve got a good evaluation on them.”

Memphis is not alone in that philosophy, which is why the bleachers are filled with coaches wearing the brightest, boldest gear they can find. Only a select few decline to wear logos, but more on that later.

For now, Kirby and Pastner have opted to stand rather than sit. They can see both courts from their perch atop a bleacher aisle, and more importantly players on either court can see them, too.

The Skal Show

The drive from Bishop Gorman to Spring Valley High School, a trip Pastner makes three times on Wednesday night alone, features a lengthy, stoplight-laden straightaway on West Tropicana Avenue. It’s here that a series of stop-and-go intervals frustrate coaches trying to zip from one gym to another, where the estimated time of arrival on their GPS units never coming quickly enough.

But after a dozen years in coaching, Pastner has found the silver lining of stoplights: a safe alternative to texting and driving.

“I use red lights to do a lot of my texting,” Pastner says from behind the wheel of a silver Hyundai Sonata. “I get honked at a lot because I’m looking down and it’s a green light.”

He makes it to Spring Valley and enters the back gym for a game involving M33M, a team based in Memphis that is funded by NBA veteran Mike Miller. It’s a squad featuring one of the best players in the country in Skal Labissiere, a supremely talented 6-foot-11 forward who drew comparisons to both Dirk Nowitzki and Anthony Davis from college coaches. Labissiere, who lives in Olive Branch and will play his senior year at Evangelical Christian School, is almost certainly the top priority for the Tigers. Pastner himself has been to every one of his games on the summer circuit.

Saving Pastner a seat is John Calipari, the head coach at Kentucky, who hired Pastner as an assistant during his time at Memphis. Unlike almost every coach present, Calipari wears no logo because everyone already knows who he is. Instead, he sports a navy blue pullover, khaki shorts and black Nike sneakers. He holds a pair of sunglasses and an iPhone.

Mentor and protégé sit along the baseline, and Pastner's phone begins to hum with text messages from people who have been made aware of his seat location via Twitter. The game evolves into a showcase of Labissiere's skill set, with range extending beyond the 3-point line and fadeaway jumpers from nearly everywhere inside it. His offensive repertoire seems endless; so, too, does his wingspan. At times, he looks unguardable.

"His skill set is ridiculous," said one assistant coach at a school in the Atlantic Coast Conference. "He's No. 1 (in the country) in my book. And I've seen everybody."

Kentucky and Memphis appear to be the favorites to land Labissiere, who is ranked No. 11 overall in the class of 2015 by ESPN, though he is being heavily recruited by Ole Miss, Georgetown and North Carolina — all of which watched him in Las Vegas. Labissiere added another wrinkle to his recruitment last week by telling CBSSports.com that playing overseas is an option.

"I don't know yet for sure. We'll see," Labissiere said to CBSSports.com. "But that is a lot of money."

Labissiere played brilliantly in Las Vegas as a traveling caravan of coaches followed him from game to game. He showed glimpses of his defensive ability with a flurry of three straight blocks Wednesday night, and in a head-to-head matchup with Stephen Zimmerman, a 7-foot center ranked above Labissiere by ESPN, he flashed a competitive mean streak yet unseen.

No one questions his scoring. And Labissiere's display Wednesday night against a team from New Jersey — a dazzling array of fadeaways, 3-pointers and blocked shots — was described by a Division I coach as "one of the best AAU performances I've seen."

Father and son

As Pastner exits Spring Valley on Wednesday evening, preparing to drive back to Bishop Gorman where he will watch small forward Dwayne Bacon, he walks out of the lobby and into his past.

More than 25 years ago, as a basketball-crazed preteen, Pastner convinced his father to form their own AAU team in order to play the sport he loved year-round. It was the birth of the Houston Hoops, a team and a brand that would soon build a national reputation thanks in large part to the unrelenting passion of its young point guard.

By age 14, Josh was making recruiting pitches to add players to the Hoops. By 16, he had supplanted his father on the sideline and ran the show as a player-coach.

At tournaments, Josh lived in the gym. He watched games from sunrise to sundown, analyzing players and rubbing elbows with college coaches until his father dragged him back to the hotel. His notes were later compiled in the form of a 50-page booklet known as the Josh Pastner Scouting Report and mailed to coaches around the country. Many called back wanting to subscribe, and Hal Pastner informed them it was a free service compiled by his teenage son.

“He had the most intricate scouting report on every team,” Hal Pastner said back in January.

As Josh leaves Spring Valley, his father is waiting for him. The school is the primary venue for the Las Vegas Classic put on by Bigfoot Hoops, a company founded and run by Hal.

He greets his son in the lobby, putting an affectionate hand on his neck in much the same way he would have two decades earlier. They exit into a steamy Las Vegas night discussing the tournament, as past and present fuse into one heartfelt flashback.

“Be safe,” Hal said.

“We will,” Josh replies.

“Text Mom and tell her what you think,” Hal said.

The Lawson decision

Pastner is back at Bishop Gorman by 8:30 a.m. the following morning to begin what will be more than 14 hours of non-stop recruiting. His work day concluded at 10:39 p.m. the night prior, giving way to a late dinner with his father before retreating to his room at the Fairfield Inn & Suites. He has “no interest at all” in staying on The Strip.

By now, Pastner is the only member of the Tigers’ coaching staff in Las Vegas. Kirby has taken the red-eye to Florida, and the other two assistants, Aki Collins and the newly hired Keelon Lawson, are recruiting together in Louisville.

Lawson is a popular topic of conversation in Las Vegas, and Pastner is asked about him multiple times by fellow coaches. Each inquiry is fielded with the same genuine affability Pastner displays in routine conversation, where he refers to everyone as “Coach” out of respect. High-major coaches and low-level assistants all receive a hello, and many of them are curious about Lawson.

Formerly a high school coach in Memphis, Lawson is the father of three and potentially four elite recruits. He made it public knowledge that his kids would follow him to

whichever college gave him a job, and on July 16 it was announced that Memphis is his new employer. Two of his four sons are already committed to the Tigers; both are ranked in the top 40 in their respective classes by ESPN.

The timing of the hire coincided with a deep run in the Nike Peach Jam by Team Penny, a squad led by the eldest Lawson brothers, K.J. and Dedric. The ESPN broadcasts of the semifinals and finals became a “two-hour infomercial” for the University of Memphis, according to Pastner, as the brothers guided Team Penny to the championship game.

“It was amazing the amount of national publicity Memphis got,” Pastner said. “Positive publicity.”

In Las Vegas, Pastner was asked about Lawson and his children by at least a handful of coaching colleagues. He opened up about the situation while driving through the city Thursday morning.

The idea to hire Lawson was floated as early as April, Pastner said, a few weeks before the news broke on CBSsports.com saying Lawson was a potential candidate. But Pastner said he needed time to sort through what amounted to fairly unusual circumstances, and he enlisted the help of athletic director Tom Bowen and deputy athletic director Wren Baker.

The trio played out “every possible scenario” that could arise if Lawson was added, which led them to the conclusion that he was “100 percent the best hire.” The decision was made in late June or early July, Pastner said, and then took a few weeks to finalize.

When asked if outside pressure contributed to the decision to hire Lawson, namely for the purpose of keeping elite recruits close to home, Pastner quickly dispelled the notion.

“If I didn’t want to do it, I wouldn’t have done it,” Pastner said. “I felt it was the best hire for the program.”

Back in Memphis

Thursday is hectic.

With one hand on the steering wheel and another pressing his cellphone to his ear, Pastner casts nervous glances at the GPS unit on his center console as precious minutes tick away. He looks up in time to successfully avoid an SUV barreling the wrong way down West Tropicana Avenue.

As Kirby begins his day in Florida, Pastner must crisscross the city in hopes of seeing as many recruiting targets as possible. By lunch he will have watched Horace Spencer, Alterique Gilbert, P.J. Washington, Skal Labissiere, Jermaine Haley, Elijah Thomas and Ted Kapita at four different gymnasiums — not that Pastner stops for lunch.

Instead, he deals with an issue that has arisen back in Memphis with one of his current players who skipped a mandatory treatment session. Pastner, who asked that the player not be named, is less than pleased. With his foot tapping anxiously on the wooden bleachers he calls his strength coach, Evarist Akujobi, to discuss a conditioning workout that will serve as discipline for every player.

“The whole team has to be held accountable,” Pastner says into the phone.

It is the first of a flurry of phone calls that drown out the XM Radio tuned to a pop station. He jumps between conversations like hopscotch, and over the course of a 25-minute drive he speaks with the athletic trainer, the academic advisor, Akujobi (twice) and director of player development Julian Swartz.

“Based off this past month,” Swartz wrote in an email to The Commercial Appeal, “I need Coach Pastner personally to pay for my extra-charged phone bill — only half joking!”

The one person Pastner does not immediately reach is the player who skipped treatment; his cellphone is off. But Pastner, adept at circumlocution, tracks the player down through the academic advisor and launches into a stern, intense conversation that is equal parts parenting and coaching.

The dialogue continues long after Pastner reaches his vantage point along the baseline for a game where P.J. Washington, an elite 2017 recruit, is scoring with ease. Eventually, the Memphis player relents and owns up to his mistakes. Pastner hangs up the phone fairly pleased.

“I always say the most important players are your current players,” Pastner says.

And with that, he hops back into the car to go watch Labissiere. The dashboard thermometer reads 125 degrees.

Coach Cal

The search for Calipari is on.

The first two days in Las Vegas have featured an ongoing competition between Pastner and Calipari to see who can arrive at Labissiere’s games first. Both coaches, who are excellent friends, plan on watching Labissiere every time he takes the floor. Calipari drew first blood Wednesday night.

But Pastner cranes his neck Thursday afternoon inside Spring Valley, momentarily giddy because he cannot find the most famous college coach in the country. Minutes later, Calipari strolls in. He’s playfully miffed over finishing second.

“He beat me in?” Calipari asks with a smile. “Damn. Traffic got me.”

For the second time in as many days the former colleagues watch Labissiere side by side, enjoying the company despite their ongoing battle to land one of the best high school players in the country. This particular game, between M33M and Oakland Soldiers, is a challenge for Labissiere, who will go head to head with Stephen Zimmerman, the 7-foot center rated in the top 10 in the country.

Tempers flare between the two elite big men. Zimmerman lowers a shoulder into Labissiere on the left block, and Labissiere responds by throwing one of his own as they jog down court. He gets slapped with a technical, but for the first time since arriving in Las Vegas he is playing with an edge.

“I’m better than him!” Labissiere yells, pounding his chest after muscling a jump hook up and over Zimmerman’s outstretched arms.

Up in the bleachers, an Italian ice vendor meanders through the flock of coaches. The sugary treats are \$2 each, and the vendor thinks he recognizes the man to Pastner’s left wearing a Kentucky logo.

“Come on, Coach K,” the vendor says. “You can buy this for the whole group.”

“Did you just call me Coach K,” Calipari asks, mystified.

“You know what I meant.”

“I’ve been called a lot of stupid things before but ...”

Calipari’s voice trails off. The vendor, deeply embarrassed, has quickly moved on. A potential sale melts away amid the laughter.

Parting wisdom

After another game in yet another gym, Pastner stops at a concession stand on his way to the parking lot.

He purchases a pair of chocolate chip granola bars and a bag of fruit snacks that will serve as both his lunch and dinner. The next meal he eats will be the equivalent of a midnight snack after the final game has ended, some 19 hours after he began his day at 4 a.m. And even then it’s only a Subway sandwich.

Pastner squeezes in one more game at Spring Valley before guiding his rental car back to Bishop Gorman for the first time since the morning. It’s now the middle of the afternoon on Thursday, and he drops off a reporter with seven hours of recruiting already in the books. There are still seven more to go.

“I think you got a taste of what it’s like,” Pastner said. “Stay hydrated.”