



A Rise in Girl's Hoops

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A few, scintillating minutes during the adidas Top Ten All-American Camp all-star game between rising seniors and underclassmen in Suwanee, Ga., spoke volumes about where girl's basketball is and where it's headed.

SUWANEE, Ga. - They streamed off the bleachers, leapt and spun, danced and high-fived, and hooted and hollered in unadulterated celebration. Dozens of them. It was very much like a scene from the Ruckers League in New York, or some And1 mix tape, where a player captures the imagination and the crowd honors the act with abandon.

The difference here was that both the artists and celebrants were girls.

And on a balmy night in Georgia, during the adidas Top Ten All-American Camp all-star game, with the clock about to strike midnight on Cinderella's ball, as well as the first part of the July evaluation period, they - the girls - served notice that their game had changed forever.



This isn't what you think it is. There have been scattered messages, served on a platter, in recent months and years, starting with [Candace Parker](#) taking the slam-dunk title at the McDonald's All-American Game. Then there was Leslie Leslie dunking in a WNBA game, Parker dunking (twice) in a women's college game, then a parade of high-school girls starting with [Tina Charles](#).

But what happened here was little (which is what 5-foot-6 qualifies as these days) [Samantha Prahalis](#) of Long Island executing an impossible procession of rapid, ultra-creative dribble moves, her lithe body shifting to and fro, then getting bumped and, gathering her body at a 45-degree angle in the air, tossing in a teardrop from the elbow, as an official signalled for an and-one. That moment ignited the

first, and most rousing, reaction, one that was the very definition of "bringing down the house."

Inspired by her Exodus select teammate, [Anjale Barrett](#) of the Bronx, in essence, called out defender [Nikki Speed](#) of Pasadena, Calif., to start what amounted to a b-girl, hip-hop



"battle," with an East-West flavor. While Barrett jittered, juked and changed speeds and directions for dishes, Speed responded from increasing distances with rainbow three-pointers, splashing one, two, three in a row, missing a fourth, then landing the fifth in a matter of minutes.

Another Exodus guard, [Erica Morrow](#) of Brooklyn, followed suit. [Jasmine Dixon](#) of Long Beach, all 6-feet-1 of her, attempted a dunk, but doesn't have large enough hands to cup the ball, so she caught the rim. Most everyone in the crowd already knew that [Brooklyn Pope](#) of Fort Worth, Texas, is the filthiest high-school girl's dunker in the country, but she didn't get an opening and instead showed her patented, long, 360-degree spin, leading into Jordanesque hangtime for in-the-lane drops.

Just as you often see on the boy's side, the game deteriorated from there. Which is quite a milestone for the girls, because their "cute," "fundamentally sound" and "grounded" game turned a corner. It wasn't compelling stuff in its own right - the college coaches quickly lost interest, readying their Treos and Blackberries for the barrage of text messages when the clock struck 12 - but, in the context of what this game has been, it was downright historic.



Again, the point here is not the budding aerial show, for we've already seen that coming. As more and more former elite-amateur and professional athletes push their daughters, in addition to their sons, down their own beaten paths, genetics have produced bigger and faster girls. As interest in excelling in sports has increased, so has the number of girls who are eschewing the Vogue-inspired, salad-for-lunch, pick-at-your-dinner starvation bodies in favor of bulk, guns and cut calves rivaling any male.

No, the milestone here is the burgeoning skill level we are seeing with each passing year. That an all-star team of underclassmen beat an all-star team of rising seniors 64-48 here late on Saturday night is not a surprise. We are seeing the evolution of the game in each successive class. The Class of 2006 is marked by the work ethic and athleticism of its No. 1 player, Tina Charles of Queens, as is the Class of 2007 and [Maya Moore](#) of Suwanee, Ga. But in 2007 we add [Angie Bjorklund](#) of Spokane, Wash., and her mastery of jab-step moves, other footwork and shooting form, as well as the advent of 6-4 wings [Vicki Baugh](#) of Sacramento and [Kayla Pedersen](#) of Fountain Hills, Ariz.



Oh, but check out the 2008s. There's [Elena DelleDonne](#) of Wilmington, Del., a 6-5 pure shooter who may play shooting guard at the next level; [April Sykes](#) of Crawford, Miss., who has a WNBA body and NBA game, as well as Pope, who dunked in warmups then nearly beat the ballyhooed Boo Williams Summer League team in Birmingham, Ala., with her three-point shooting. Not to re-mention the aforementioned Prahalis and Speed.

Even at the highest levels, we are seeing the younger players better suited for immediate impact. Just as [Diana Taurasi](#) before them, WNBA rookies [Cappie Pondexter](#), [Seimone Augustus](#) and [Sophia Young](#) have played more like MVP candidates than Rookie of the Year hopefuls.

On the high-school level, the younger classes are providing clear evidence that girls are shattering the conventional wisdom that has gripped girl's basketball the past decade - that girls, with their varied interests and more-social leanings, are unwilling to put in sufficient gym time to develop advanced skills. Boys, of course, have been doing this for decades, though the falloff in shooting suggests they are spending more time on And One moves than shooting 250 jumpers from the same spot on the floor every day.

For years, boys clearly have played, any time, anywhere, while girls have played games, in structured environments with pretty uniforms, hair knotted in neat ponytails or buns, and their faces even painted in makeup. Evidenced by the impressive court sense and vision of Prahalis and the advanced, young point guard, [Shay Selby](#) of Geneva, Ohio, the girls obviously are starting to roam the streets and gyms in

search of an unstructured run, where they can experiment and register cause and effect. As the numbers of girl's basketball players grow exponentially on a nation-wide basis (even overtaking boy's hoops as the No. 2 sport, in terms of participation, in some regions), it is becoming easier and easier to find a pickup game.

Habits are changing as well. More and more, we see girls lugging around basketballs, wherever they go, and consequently developing better feel. We see them more willing and able to pound the basketball on the dribble, a precursor to better control. We see them more willing to touch each other - a no-no for years - and, as a result, their game has become more physical.

We hear a lot of people say the girls are starting to "play more like the boys," but we are seeing a different pattern develop. As the boy's and men's game has suffered from slippage in advanced skills, we see the opposite start to emerge on the girl's and women's side - for example, better perimeter footwork, or defenders knowing how to show and recover on pick-and-roll plays. Whether it's wishful thinking or reality, only time will tell, but we think we're seeing a game that is living up to positive female stereotypes - multitasking and attention to detail leading to more-refined basketball skills, for example, or more embracing and nurturing natures leading to a more team-oriented approach.

If that midnight-defeating sequence at the Suwanee Sports Academy was a harbinger of what we think or hope is to come, then it truly was a time to get up on the floor and shake your groove thing in celebration.