

Nash takes lead to develop kids' program

The program will be the first major step for Canadian children to gain entry into basketball



CREDIT: Kevin P. Casey/Associated Press

NBA's Phoenix Suns player Steve Nash holds up a jersey for the National Rollout for Steve Nash Youth Basketball on Wednesday, Feb. 14, 2007.

Ian Walker, Vancouver Sun

Thursday, February 15, 2007

SEATTLE -- If there's one thing Steve Nash loves more than basketball, it's kids.

His kids. Poor kids. Rich kids. They're all the same to Nash -- kids.

It's one of the main reasons Canada Basketball is putting the development of the country's youngest players into the hands of its biggest basketball star. Starting in September, any child playing community basketball from Nunavut to Nova Scotia will be doing so with Nash's name on their jersey.

The Steve Nash Youth Basketball League will provide the basis for all Canadian development programs -- much like American kids play Pop Warner football and Canadian skiers take their first trips down the hill in the Nancy Greene Ski League.

The program will be the first major step for Canadian children to gain entry into basketball.

"Fortunately enough, after becoming so stable and strong and such a huge part of youth basketball, and youth sports in British Columbia having so much support, it's ready to grow up and go national," said the Phoenix Suns point guard and two-time MVP, who lent his name and \$40,000 annually to save the province's basketball development program after the Vancouver Grizzlies bolted for Memphis.

"Hopefully in time we will have youth basketball across the country in every community."

For the past six years the Steve Nash Youth Basketball League has been operating in the province under the direction of Basketball B.C. with numbers almost doubling to more than 9,000 participants between the ages 5 and 13. Within three years, Canada Basketball officials expect that number to jump to 50,000 nationwide.

The league -- run through a partnership group that includes Vancouver residents David Sidoo, Kyle Washington and the Mackayfamily -- will allow players to develop under a common set of guidelines with qualified coaches, with the aim being having fun while learning skills. The program is targeted towards community-based recreational groups and facilities as well as schools and any other individuals who want to give children the opportunity to play basketball.

"It's a groundbreaking concept" said Fred Nykamp, Canada Basketball CEO and executive director. "As a sport we are approaching this differently than all other sports. We are building a unified, aligned system that is essentially not being done anywhere else.

"Long-term, as these children develop and get into higher levels of play, it could also very much impact our international play."

While Nash, nicknamed Captain Canada, was the face of the national basketball team for more than a decade, he could never guide the red and white to an Olympic or world championship medal.

He's counting on his league leaving an even bigger legacy.

"I think that at this stage in my career, the youth league would go a lot further for Canada than if I did play," said the 33-year-old from Victoria and founder of the Steve Nash Foundation, an organization formed to assist under-served children in their personal development, education and enjoyment of life.

Nash also has a charity basketball game in his honour, which will be played for the second straight year at GM Place on July 21.

"I think that this is an incredible opportunity that doesn't come along in who knows how many generations."

Sitting on a courtside table -- his feet dangling over the edge, evoking the image of a kid in an oversized chair -- Nash followed the play with a swivel of his head as the Suns practised for Wednesday's game with Seattle.

Watching -- that's something he's done a lot of late. An inflamed right shoulder has kept Nash from touching a basketball for more than a week. Not a jump shot. Not a bounce pass. Not a crossover dribble. A stretch that ranks as the longest of his 10-year NBA career.

Still, he has managed to heed his trainer's advice and rest his shoulder by keeping his hands in his pockets anytime he's around the court.

iwalker@png.canwest.com

© The Vancouver Sun 2007