

Maverick program has progressed

By Mike Nortrup
Special to the Times

Thomas (T.C.) Caviness has proudly watched his Maryland Mavericks AAU basketball program grow from a couple of struggling teams only four years ago to 16 teams now.

Those early teams had few joyous moments on the hardwoods against their rugged AAU opponents; they got murdered as often as not.

But Caviness and his fellow program officials were willing to pay their dues and take those beatings. They were busy grooming young basketball players to succeed at the high school level and to do well enough there to be recruited by colleges. And they have been pretty successful in that endeavor over the years.

But they were also grooming their teams for the time when they would be the ones doing the beating. And now that's what some of them are doing.

This weekend, his boys' Frederick County-based under-13 and Carroll based under-14 squads played for Maryland State AAU Division Two titles. The championships were held Saturday at Morgan State University. But it has been a long road getting there.

The Caviness family moved

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to Mount Airy four years ago from Germantown. Right away he looked for a local AAU basketball program but found none. After a year of hauling his three youngsters to a Frederick County AAU group, he decided to start one in Carroll County.

But Caviness explained that there were a lot of preconceptions that worked against him. Many families considered AAU basketball too expensive, perhaps too competitive, and only for the top talent going to the top schools. Caviness intended to disprove that conventional wisdom. He believes that there are a lot of collegiate basketball opportunities open to youngsters at the smaller schools and AAU experience can help them get there.

"My concept was not to cater strictly to the top players. A lot of Division II and III schools need players too, and some of the [local] kids might be able to get scholarship help," he said.

He felt that his Carroll and Frederick county kids would land some of those spots, and AAU could help them get there even if their teams-and egos-would take a pasting in the early going. And if they needed to find out for themselves if super competitive basketball was for them-well-AAU would help there, too.

"I wanted kids to see what it was like beyond Carroll and Frederick counties and move up to the next level. Then they could either see where they need to improve or maybe decide to get into something else," Caviness said.

The Maryland Mavericks program has grown rapidly and founder Caviness, who now serves as the organization's director of basketball operations, thinks he knows why. He noted that last year alone, nine Frederick and Carroll high school youngsters received scholarship offers and help from colleges. And, his teams' tournament schedule puts the youngsters under the eye of college coaches.

Caviness noted that this year, the Mavericks' under-16 and under-17 boys' teams have already performed in front of 300 college coaches and this weekend, they played at Akron, Ohio in front of 400 more.

The younger players benefit too. High school basketball coaches tell him that young-

sters who have played AAU basketball all summer are stronger, quicker and have a better shot at making their teams.

The growth in numbers is paralleled by improvement on court. Westminster resident Paul Kelley can tell you about that.

He started his own Mavericks team three years ago as a sixth grade squad, and he has also watched it learn its basketball the hard way. The year they were formed, the then under-14 team, most of whose players come from the Westminster area, won its first-ever AAU state tournament game in double-overtime.

"We were feeling pretty good about ourselves, but we lost each of the next two games by 50 or 60 points," he recalled with a laugh.

But like the other Mavericks teams, Kelley kept his core of players together, added one here and there and kept hanging in against AAU competition. Kelley explained that it is much tougher and more physical than Carroll's travel basketball. However, he wanted his players to have the challenge. He believed that they would improve most if they played the toughest competition.

Last year they also played tournaments sponsored by the American Youth Basketball Tour (AYBT) which Kelley

rates as stronger than local travel basketball and a cut below AAU. There, his team did well. It won three tournaments during the season, made it to the AYBT nationals and finished sixth of 16 in its age bracket.

This year, he is playing AAU again. And the Maryland championships are actually early in a spring/summer season that extends into September. But Kelley's Mavericks have shown so far that they are moving into the elite ranks themselves instead of being its victims. They have already qualified for July's AAU national basketball championships.

Last weekend, they swept five games in the AAU state tourney, most by lopsided scores, and put themselves in the finals. Only a Frederick-based squad held them close-a nail-biting 61-60 win.

Their coach thinks his Mavericks match up pretty well against the Charles County team that still stands in their way. It has been a long climb to get to the top level, and he wants his team to show that it belongs there.

"We want to prove we can play with these guys," he said. "If we can do that, we can compete with anybody."

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