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From grassroots to the court

The Chauncey Billups Elite Basketball Academy hopes to groom the next generation of Colorado players

By Chris Dempsey
The Denver Post

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Hundreds of boys participated in tryouts at South High School for the Billups academy's inaugural teams at the fifth-, sixth- and eighth-grade levels Saturday. (Kathryn Scott Osler, The Denver Post)

This is about building a better basketball player, from the shoes to the headband, and giving the kid a chance to thrive.

It's about putting the state of Colorado on a higher plane in boys hoops and giving it some respect around the nation.

The newly formed Chauncey Billups Elite Basketball Academy aims to do all of that and then some. That journey took its first steps at Denver South High School on Saturday morning, with tryouts to fill the program's inaugural fifth-, sixth- and eighth- grade elite and developmental teams.

"It's a grassroots basketball organization," Billups said. "We all grew up playing basketball. Me being from Denver, being from Colorado, there was never one official big-time program that all

Basketball

[View slide show of Chauncey Billups Elite Basketball Academy tryouts at South High School .](#)

the best players played at. That's what we're creating. We're going to have the best program the state has ever seen. We're going to have the best players. And we're going to give them the opportunity to get some exposure on a national level."

Solving the state problem

Colorado has never been a consistent player on

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the national high school basketball scene. Billups is one of a few players in the state to be widely recruited, go on to play top-level college basketball and thrive. The state's inability to churn out top-notch talent on a yearly basis is an enigma no one has been able to solve. This is an ambitious attempt at doing just that.

Since 2002, Colorado has had only 11 players sign with a BCS conference school out of high school. Gonzaga guard Matt Bouldin, a former ThunderRidge standout, is an exception by virtue of the fact that he plays for a major team in a minor conference.

Billups believes that can change.

"From my perspective it can absolutely happen here," he said. "But the big thing is it has to start at a young age. These kids have to be groomed. They can't just wake up and become a great high school player."

The state has taken recent positive steps with younger kids because of an improvement in the level of coaching at earlier stages.

"Before, at the middle school and elementary school (levels), there was mis-education in terms of coaching," Denver East coach Rudy Carey said. "Coaches have gotten a lot better at the lower levels. Coaches are going to clinics. They are passionate about the game, they are students of the game and they are getting better."

Exposure to college coaches

Centralizing the talent is an important step, Billups said. His program will make that possible. Providing the proper chance to showcase skills is also a priority.

"We're going to put teams together that are going to be able to come out and compete on a national scene, not just be in the tournament but try to make some noise," Billups said. "And, in turn, they'll get a chance to play in front of all of these college coaches and get opportunities that most Colorado high school basketball kids don't get."

The program has Billups' name on it, but it is a joint venture with others, mainly two guys who know the Colorado landscape well — former Boulder High School/CU athlete Elton Davis and former CU basketball player Ronnie DeGray.

"We're just trying to help these kids as far as having a chance to be successful in high school, and if they're good enough, having the chance to play at the college level," DeGray said. "All three of us, we know what it takes, not just as far as athletics but also academically."

Billups' trade back to Denver last year breathed life into the program. He's hands-on with the projects bearing his name, and being in Detroit or anywhere else would not allow him the time to properly work with the kids.

That's all changed now.

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"For us, we would just feel so good if that one day, five, six years down the road, we look at March Madness and we have six, seven, eight guys playing from our program that we helped raise," Billups said. "And watch them become men and play at the college level and maybe even farther than that."

Chris Dempsey, The Denver Post

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Where they went

Since 2002, the state of Colorado has sent 11 players to BCS conference schools straight out of high school. The list, provided by [Scout.com](#) :

2004 — Marcus King-Stockton, Colorado Academy (CU); Daven Harmeling, Fruita Monument (Washington State)

2005 — Ryan Dermody, Loveland (CU, transferred to Wyoming); Caleb Forrest, Pagosa Springs (Washington State); Sam Warren, Cherry Creek (Virginia, transferred out of program); Dazzmond Thornton, Denver East (Texas Tech, transferred to James Madison)

2006 — Ray Hall, Mullen (Providence)

2007 — Levi Knutson, Arapahoe (CU)

2008 — Reggie Jackson, Palmer (Boston College); Dallas Elmore, Poudre (Boston College); Trey Eckloff, Cherry Creek (CU).

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