



In pro ball, hot-shot college ace is up against players who are just as good as he is. One specialty isn't enough. All-around man, who can do several things well (pass, dribble, rebound), has best chance of sticking.

What Makes a Pro Basketball Player?

Here's why many highly touted college stars never make the grade in the professional ranks.

by Dave Warner

MAYBE you have wondered about this:

Every college basketball season produces what are ballyhooed as super stars. If you believe the publicity, they get bigger and better every year.

Some of them are as tall as California redwoods, and they're fussed over as if they were beauty-contest winners. Some magazines even make All-Americans out of them before the season starts.

While these players are in college, they are the darlings of their campus. They are described as terrific, colossal, and sensational.

The puzzle is: if they are such fabulous players, why do so few of them make good in professional basketball? This is assuming, of course, that they want to play pro ball.

The answer, simply put, is that pro basketball largely calls for an all-around performer, schooled in all basics of the game. The pro must be willing to keep learning and to work as a team man.

Surprisingly, many of the most-publicized collegians don't meet those simple requirements. Also, there are only a few top pro clubs with only a few vacancies each season, though expansion is likely.

Some college boys come into the game with all the necessary tools, some without all the tools but eager to improve, some with very little but publicity and no desire to learn. Sifted from among those groups, plus the veterans, are the 80 players who comprise the eight big pro teams—New York, Syracuse, Boston, Philadelphia, St. Louis, Cincinnati, Detroit, and Minneapolis—of the National Basketball Association.

With rare exception, the pro clubs don't necessarily seek the publicized college player. They are interested in the player who can best fit into a pattern of working together.

Whether the prospect comes from a big college or even a "basketball school" is not of prime importance. Examples of this thinking are Harry Gallatin, who came out of tiny Northeast Missouri State Teachers to become one of the all-time greats in pro basketball. He recently retired to take up college coaching. Joe Graboski, with no college affiliation, is a very dependable per-

former with the Philadelphia Warriors, while Woody Sauldsberry, who did his college basketballing at remote Texas Southern, was good enough to be named NBA Rookie of the Year last season.

And Al Cervi, easily one of the best of the all-time pros as both player and coach, came straight from the sand lots.

Cervi's 20 years in the pro circuits span the era of the famed Original Celtics to the present day. Just this season, in fact, he was lured out of retirement to coach the Philadelphia Warriors. Previously, he coached the Syracuse Nationals for eight seasons and had three division titles and one world championship.

Among pro basketballers, Cervi is regarded as the coach who can get mileage from even mediocre players. He takes time to teach. Yet he is frequently shocked at the inability and attitude of the All-American college players. Many of them seem to think all they have to do is show up to win jobs on the club. All of them know how to shoot; few know how to pass, dribble, block, and screen well.

"If a player is just willing to listen, he will show immediate improvement," Cervi says.

PRO BASKETBALL should be getting nothing but the cream of college players. Yet selection can be a problem. The pro coaches usually know what they want; most of them have played and coached among the best.

Still, there are good players who go unnoticed. They are the players on schools with weak schedules, the schools which get no publicity.

With the number of colleges playing basketball well up in the thousands, it's difficult to see them all. Pro coaches, when their own schedules permit, do much of the scouting themselves, catching college tournaments and the like. But they don't have the time to do a thorough job.

As it stands now, professional basketball scouting scratches only the surface. The pros rely mostly on what they see themselves and on what friends in different parts of the country might tell them. What is needed is a scouting system which will blanket every nook and cranny of this large basketball nation. Maybe that will come with the game's

long-range expansion plans.

Most pro coaches agree, too, that some solid minor leagues are most essential. Granted, all drafted college players can't make the NBA. But some of them, if placed in well-organized minor leagues, could be schooled in basic skills, making them valuable future talent.

The Eastern Basketball League, a cut below the NBA, comprising teams in New York, Maryland, and Pennsylvania, swallows up some of these castoffs. Others just go into business careers, confining their basketball to industrial leagues—if they play at all.

Life as a basketball big-leaguer is worth pursuing. Salaries range from \$5,000 to over \$20,000, with the average about \$8,000 for a season from October to April. All players are seen regularly on television. Chances for making good business contacts for the future are excellent. The players are now organized for more protection, and those getting into the title play-offs receive additional prize money.

Before he retired last season, rounding out a fine pro career with the Boston Celtics, Arnie Risen had played 13 seasons in the basketball big leagues. No other player in the game today has put in more service.

Big Arnie (6-9), now doing spot playing duty on an Eastern Basketball League team, can rightly be called an authority on why college boys fail their tryouts.

"Pro coaches," Risen says, "look for size, offense, defense, all-around capabilities on the court."

"Teams will draft to fill gaps. All

teams are looking for that good, big man. But teams normally will go after what they need most at the time. It may be a backcourt feeder and outside or side shooter.

"Coming out of college, many of the hot-shot players have had the entire offense built around them. They've had everything going for them. In the pros, they are thrown in the midst of a lot of players with equal ability. Result is many of them wilt under the pressure.

"In the pro game a player has to do things for the other player. He must be a two-way performer. Gone are those college days when the rest of the team would set him up for those easy shots.

"Some big players can't work outside in the pro game, meaning they have become so used to just standing under the basket, waiting for the ball to be passed to them that they never learned anything else. When they come into the pro league, they are severely handicapped."

THE WAY the game is played today one needs a scorecard to tell the big players from the "little" ones. Big players such as Tom Gola (6-6) of Philadelphia, Tom Heinsohn (6-7) of Boston, and Bob Pettit (6-9) of the world champion St. Louis Hawks all can move with the best of them.

This is the age of the mammoth basketball player, but most pro coaches concur there always will be a place for the "little" man such as Bob Cousy (6-1) and Bill Sharman (6-2) of Boston, Slater Martin (5-10) of St. Louis, and Dick McGuire (6-0) of Detroit. These players do a lot of legwork and add balance.

Cousy (see cover), called the Houdini of the hardwood, is in a class by himself, regardless of size. He is the gifted athlete, perfectly coordinated physically and temperamentally. He is solid box-office, blending color and skill.

He has dominated the pro game in a manner in which no player before him has. He makes the plays and points, and is a master at the lead and blind pass and the behind-the-back dribble.

Cousy came out of Holy Cross with a flashy All-American reputation. Yet he had to unlearn a lot of bad habits before passing his test as a pro. For example, in the opinion of



Even "Mr. Basketball," Celtics' sensational Bob Cousy, had to unlearn many college habits before making good in pro ranks.

many pro players Bob came into his own in the last two or three years when he developed an outside shot.

To get a better idea of how pro basketball operates, next time you see a game in person or on television, watch the passing, dribbling, and defense—not just the shooting.

Does the team do a smooth job of zinging the ball around, trying to get a good opening for a shot within the 24-second time limit? Do the players dribble smartly, or are they fumbling and throwing the ball away? After the shot is taken, does the team hustle to get the ball back for more points?

These are some of the telltale marks of a good pro—and a good pro team.



Little men, like Detroit's Dick McGuire, are handy legmen for their giant-sized (6'10") teammates.