

Sports / Amateur Sports**Young hoopsters take page from hockey's playbook**

Omar Nicholls and his under-10 Durham City Bulldogs are part of a new Ontario basketball culture in which kids start younger, train year-round and dream of being professional superstars.



LUCAS OLENIUK / TORONTO STAR

Omar Nicholls, second from right, coaches his under-10 Durham City Bulldogs basketball team during a game against a squad from Mississauga last month at Lorne Park Secondary School.

By: Kerry Gillespie Sports reporter, Published on Sat Apr 26 2014

Walking into a Mississauga school gym decked out in matching blue team tracksuits, the Durham City Bulldogs look impressive.

When the buzzer signals the start of their basketball game, these 9- and 10-year-olds look even better.

They're aggressive and dribble full-speed down the court; they can pass and find the open man; they don't miss many layups and can make jump shots.

"This blue team is really good," says Tarry Upshaw, an assistant coach for the University of Waterloo men's basketball team, who is waiting in the stands for his son's game to start. "Look at that pass — that's high-school level. They're really well coached."

That coach would be Omar Nicholls of the [Durham City Basketball Association](#)'s AAA under-10 boys.

The Bulldogs went undefeated in the [Ontario Basketball Association](#) league — 29-0 — and even managed to win the Ontario Cup championship game without their two top scorers.

Since their season ended they've continued to play in tournaments (where they finally lost one game) and

are hoping for the chance to play in the United States this summer.

Basketball never ends for these kids and the harder the competition, the better. In that regard, Nicholls and his team are poster kids for Canada's emerging hardcourt culture.

It takes a page from hockey's long-time playbook where [kids start young, train intensively year-round](#) and dream of being professional superstars.

That's not at all how things were when Nicholls grew up. He didn't even play basketball until he was 14 years old.

"I used to live in the Jane and Finch area and you couldn't go on the basketball courts, it was drugs and gangs, so I played soccer and baseball," said the 37-year-old.

When the family moved to Ajax in the middle of his Grade 8 year he discovered basketball.

"I had to learn quickly and once I learned, I guess I became obsessed with it. I watched hours of videotape of Magic Johnson and Michael Jordan. I studied everything, I played against guys five years older than me. I just loved playing."

But he never even dreamed of playing basketball in the NBA.

"At the time, coming from Canada, it was unheard of. The only guy that went somewhere then was [Jamaal Magloire](#). We played against him in high school, he was huge."

Magloire, a 6-foot-11 centre, finished his 13-year NBA career with the Toronto Raptors in 2012 and now works with the team.

Steve Nash, drafted 15th in 1996, was Canada's highest draft pick until Tristan Thompson went fourth in 2011 and Anthony Bennett crushed that by going first in 2013.

There's a possibility that Thornhill's Andrew Wiggins will repeat that Canadian feat this year.

"Kids see now that there's actually a chance to go somewhere from Canada. Their focus has definitely changed," Nicholls said.

It's not just the players who have changed; it's the entire structure of basketball in Ontario, the coaches and the parents.

"Our sport is graduating to the hockey model for the most part," said Jason Jansson, Ontario Basketball's executive director.

Ontario Basketball has gained thousands of new players in the last decade and now has 16,000 athletes on 1,200 rep teams, he said.

During Durham City's last game in April against the Mississauga Monarchs, two parents videotaped the game.

Others made themselves hoarse shouting, "Defence, defence" even though they had a commanding 30-point lead at the half.

"We've had a couple times that the refs want to give us a technical for the crowd," Nicholls said, grinning.

He knows some parents are already hoping that basketball will be the ticket to get their child an NCAA scholarship.

"It's a free education," he said.

Nicholls isn't without those dreams himself, including for his youngest son Kailon, 10, a point and shooting guard on the (nearly) undefeated team.

If he can keep the team's core players together for the next five years, he thinks they can remain unbeatable as they get older and face stiffer competition.

"I think we can get at least a couple of them scholarships," he said.

It's easy to imagine a team that lucks into a few star players who can wipe the floor with everyone else. Plenty of NBA teams are designed on that very premise.

But that doesn't work for the under-10s. Ontario Basketball's equal-play rules prevent a few players from dominating a team.

The best players can only play one shift more than the worst; zoned defences aren't allowed; and a full-court press is allowed only in the eighth and final four-minute period. And, they can't even do that if they are leading by 15 or more points.

Nicholls has managed to create a team that finds success within a system almost designed to prevent it. How does he do it?

"What every coach does at this level is just tell them to go for the basket, go for layups," he said. "I told them you're not going to get layups all the time, so the first thing I made sure is that they could shoot."

Sounds simple. But it just takes watching a U-10 game to see that it's not.

"Our guys are taught if there are two guys in front of you and they're backing up, take that shot. Once you can shoot, they have to come play you and that works for our guards really well."

The team has plays, but he doesn't run a lot of them.

"If we're blowing out a team I'll tell them to practise their plays," Nicholls said. "We try not to embarrass anybody."

When asked why they are so good, the boys, just like the pro athletes they aspire to be, offered up sound bites.

“We play hard,” Jahari Williamson said.

“We train hard, every chance we have,” Darrius Sylvester added.

“(Nicholls) is hard on us, but in a good way,” Javian Downey said.

It sounds like the go-to answers they hear from their favourite players on TV but there's truth here, too.

This team has a strength and conditioning coach — Jada Curry, who is also shooting guard Tye Curry's mom — so in the last few periods when other teams are starting to drag, the Bulldogs are just getting started.

In their last game, they were leading 69-31 in the penultimate period and still they didn't slow down. They kept racing for the ball, passing and working to get in as many shots as possible, including the wild throw from halfcourt as the buzzer sounded.

That's why it ended 78-33, a high-scoring game for this age group.

“They're taught we don't stop until the whistle blows,” Nicholls said. “We keep playing whether it is a low-ranked team or the highest-ranked team.”