

# Canadian high school basketball showcase still growing

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*Highly-touted*

*Canadian point guard Kevin Pangos, left, seen playing with the World Select Team on April 9, 2011, was one of the athletes participating in the All-Canada Classic, Canada's only high school all-star basketball showcase.*

*(Sam Forencich/NBAE via Getty Images)*

Over the past two years, the future of basketball in Canada has garnered more attention than ever before, as a handful of Canadians have been showcased in premier high school all-star events in the United States.

While the success of these expatriate athletes has defined much of the current reinvention of the youth levels in Canadian basketball, there is still a superb selection of home-grown talent.

Those athletes, and a few who went abroad, came together to showcase their talents at the Air Canada Centre as a collection of the nation's brightest high school players participated in the country's only national all-star game on June 21 — the All-Canada Classic.

The event, now in its eleventh year, has come a long way from the early days when it was played in small high school gyms before sparsely filled bleachers with little to no media coverage. It began as an exhibition between a group of the best players in the Greater Toronto Area pitted against the finest the rest of the country had to offer. Some of the early alumni include Canadian national team members Denham Brown, Jermaine Andersen, Olu Fatimi and Jevohn Shepherd.

Now, it's held in the country's most recognizable basketball venue with thousands of fans in the stands and more than 50 media representatives covering the action. It has evolved into a right of passage for Canadian NCAA Division I hopefuls.

Former Texas Longhorns standouts Tristan Thompson and Cory Joseph made their mark in this high school showcase before making headlines as the first Canadians selected to the McDonald's All-American Game — an exhibition featuring the best high school prospects from across the U.S.

"It's huge, just to get the atmosphere and the culture in Canada supporting basketball," said Kevin Pangos, a top-ranked point guard from Holland Landing, Ont., who committed to attend Gonzaga University next season. "I watched the world juniors in hockey and people are going to Buffalo and packing the place and it's not even our country, supporting Canada and Canadian pride. It would be great to see basketball become like that eventually, obviously it's a process but this is a huge step."

It's a growth few envisioned in the early days.

"Every year was a grind, [and] you were just caught in survival mode all the time. The mindset was, 'how can we get to next year?' Then when that year happens it's 'well how can we get to the next year?' Then it's finding how we can plant some firm roots into this event so it can grow," said Wayne Dawkins, founder and director of PHASE 1 Basketball, an organization designed to develop and showcase top level talent in Canada for the past 16 years.

"There was a void. We had a passion to share with the world the talent of our kids ... we just felt like people needed to know." Despite establishing itself as Canada's only national high school all-star event, the All-Canada Classic isn't the first of its kind and still has its share of obstacles.

Events such as the Metro All Star Game and the Adidas All Canadian Game tried to promote Canadian athletes in a similar manner, but failed to stay relevant and vanished overnight.

As the Canadian presence in prestigious American high school all-star games — like the McDonald's All-American Game and the Jordan Brand Classic — has emerged in recent years, so has the interest of the media on their accomplishments.

Yet the number of players mentioned on a national level is minuscule to the number of athletes participating in basketball across the country. For those who aren't featured in the American exhibitions, the All-Canada Classic is a chance to show off their talents.

"I don't know if it will ever be as big as the McDonalds or the Jordan Brand, but it's going to be something big right here at home," said Nik Stauskas, a highly-touted NCAA Division I recruit from Mississauga, Ont. "Games like this have helped Canadian basketball."

Regardless, the lack of exposure is a concern Dawkins sees as a growing issue within the basketball community.

"All we're hearing about [is] which of our handful of Canadian athletes are going to get selected to the top events in the U.S. ... It's a great honour for Canadian athletes to be a part of that, but what is Canada doing to take care of the rest of our athletes? What are we doing to draw attention into our backyard for the outside world?"

"It's a step in the right direction for media outlets to go cover our athletes participating in the high school circuit in the [United] States, but my hope is they can give more coverage to high school athletes that are participating in Canadian events.

"I understand it's about dollars and cents and ratings and different things like that, but the same athletes that they're going to cover are the same athletes that can be showcased here."

Myck Kabongo and Kyle Wiltjer, who were 2011 McDonald's All-Americans, participated in the 10th edition of the annual All-Canada Classic last year, yet it wasn't until their success south of the border that anyone outside of the Canadian basketball community took notice of their talent.

That's a trend the All-Canada Classic is trying to change.

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