

# A hoops program for W. Siders looks to Europe as a guide

## IMPACT basketball focuses on complete players

By **MICHAEL ROMAIN**  
Editor

"I grew up in North Lawndale. I was a statistic," said James Foster, 59, and a head coach with IMPACT (short for Individuals Making Positive Alternative Choices Together) basketball. The organization comprises a series of AAU (short for Amateur Athletic Union) and developmental basketball teams for kids ranging from second-graders to high-schoolers.

"But through the grace of God, my mom, my dad and I my coach, I was able to make it. Back then we had more community involvement with kids. I wouldn't be here today if I didn't have several mentors. One of my best mentors was an ex-army sergeant in my elementary school. The next one came when I was at Farragut, during its heyday. And the best one of all of them was my father."

Now Foster is a mentor himself. Since the organization was started in 2000, the longtime coach has shepherded, by his rough estimation, upwards of 1,500 kids through IMPACT and into playing careers, and scholarships, at NCAA Division I schools around the country.

According to parent LaDonna Stokes, whose 14- and 11-year-old sons play under Foster, around 60 percent of IMPACT's participants come from Oak Park and Austin. The organization is currently holding workouts each Saturday at Oak Park and River Forest High School before spring tryouts start in a few weeks.

She and Foster described IMPACT in terms that seem to go against everything retiring NBA superstar Kobe Bryant says he hates about AAU basketball in America.

"I hate it because it doesn't teach our players how to play the right way, how to think the game, how to play in combinations of threes," Bryant said in an interview with ESPN last month.

"I think everything is a reward system. I think the coaches who are teaching the game are getting rewarded in one fashion or another. It's just a showcase. I think it's absolutely horrible for the game," said Bryant, before noting how lucky he was to have developed his game in Europe, where "everything was still fundamental, so I learned the game."

And the headlines seem to have reinforced Bryant's opinion of the nonprofit amateur athletic organization, which was founded in 1888 and fields programs all across the United States and Canada in a multitude of sports — not just basketball. It has a reported 700,000 members and sanctions hundreds of sports tournaments that rake in more than \$20 million, according to an ESPN report.

The news stories often feature figures like Curtis Malone, an alleged cocaine kingpin from Maryland who would build an AAU basketball empire so vast, "almost every NCAA coach in the country — from Mike Krzyzewski to Billy Donovan to Bob Hug-



RICK MAJEWSKI/Contributor

*Coach James Foster, 59, facilitates a skills practice at Oak Park and River Forest High School on Feb. 13. Foster says his program, IMPACT basketball, focuses on developing the whole player.*

gins — would take his calls," ESPN notes.

Or AAU's former president, Robert Dodd, who "stepped down in late 2011 amid allegations that he had molested young basketball players as a coach," but not before he was paid \$1.2 million.

Or David Salinas, late manager of the Houston Select AACU and investment manager who "found himself at the center of an SEC (Securities Exchange... not Mike Slive's league) investigation into an alleged Ponzi scheme that cost his investors millions," according to a report by SB Nation. "The twist? Many of those investors were major college basketball coaches, all of whom lost millions of dollars investing with Salinas."

Both Stokes and Foster are well aware of AAU's reputation. It's one they simultaneously try to hold up as an object lesson and keep at bay.

"Many [AAU] programs will take children and use them for what they will do," said Stokes, reinforcing the long-held characterization of AAU as an organization known more for treating young amateurs as potential investments that might pay off on draft day than developmental leagues. "The truth is whatever you do well is what you'll do well. They won't take the time to help you grow."

"IMPACT is a place where someone cares about your child and not just what your child can do," she said. "Coach Foster cares

about the total child and that's way more important to me."

"Impact is based on two principles — the band principle and European style," Foster said. "If you buy your kid an instrument, you expect him to play it, right? If you invest in IMPACT, we expect for the kids to practice ... The games are like going to concerts, as if we're on tour. Everything else is training with our instruments. We call it drill for skills. But the biggest thing is we've got God on our side."

"This is atypical of AAU," Stokes said. "AAU gets a bad rap, because people have taken it and made it overly competitive and they've forgotten to develop kids. If you come in and you can dribble well, but you don't defend; when you finish with most AAU teams, you're going to be the same way — you won't defend and you'll dribble well. IMPACT is atypical. You will finish better than you started, no matter what."

"My son is a great example," Stokes said, pointing to her 14-year-old. "He's always been big. From the time Foster trained him, most people would take him and make him a center. No. He can actually handle the ball. One time, he was in the open court and he stopped, turned around and gave the ball to the point guard. Coach blew the whistle and said, 'Sir, when you have the ball in the open lane, you're a guard.'"

Foster said the European model of train-

ing isn't position specific; rather, "they train a complete basketball player."

"If a kid is tall, he's going to be able to play all positions. He might be able to play the post, but it's not my job to make him a post player. It's my job to make him a complete player. I might put him in post, but I'm not going to restrict him from playing basketball."

"The reason why we're successful is because we build confidence," he said. "We're like family; wins are secondary. If you can teach them how to play hard and not give up, the wins will come. We have two tiers of teams, elite team and developmental teams. So, we have something for everybody."

Cornelius Montgomery, 15, is a relative newcomer to the game of basketball who said Foster is one of his first mentors.

"Coach foster is more than just a coach to me," he said. "My momma always raised me in the church, but Coach Foster teaches us on religion and that's important to me. He's very well spoken and he knows what he's talking about. One of my favorite lessons is the one about the farmer. A farmer is someone who plants things. Coach Foster says, 'Everybody wants to eat, but not everybody wants to grow what they eat. At IMPACT, we've got farmers over here.'"

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