

## Talent in college basketball in need of a new definition



*"They came out fighting and we were passive. When you have one team that has real energy and the other team's playing passive, you're getting killed. Talent's out the window."*

That was how Kentucky coach John Calipari explained his team's first-half deficit to ESPN sideline reporter Shannon Spake during the Wildcats' game at LSU last Tuesday. Kentucky went on to lose, 87-82.

Calipari was partly right. LSU was indeed playing with more energy, but talent was not out the window. It was very much in the house. LSU just had more of it.

What do I mean? To paraphrase Calipari's good friend Bill Clinton, it all depends on what the definition of the word talent is. In basketball, people tend to define "talent" based on two physical traits: speed and jumping ability. I believe that definition is way too narrow. There are many other variations that can be far more important in determining who wins a basketball game.

Thus, it's time to broaden our understanding of this oft-used but poorly-defined word. Much like ESPN's Jay Bilas reshaped the meaning of the word toughness with his terrific column and book of the same name, I'd like to start a similar conversation that re-boots the meaning of talent. Here are nine categories that should be included the next time you are playing the role of talent scout:

**Energy.** At first blush, it appears that Kentucky sophomore center Willie Cauley-Stein has a lot of "talent." He's tall and graceful and he's quick off his feet, which is why he can be so effective as a shot blocker. But over the last few weeks, Cauley-Stein looks as if he has been sleepwalking. As a result, Calipari has benched Cauley-Stein in favor of freshman Dakari Johnson. Johnson lacks some of Cauley-Stein's physical gifts, but he plays with a lot more energy. In my dictionary, that makes him more talented.

Anyone can have energy while playing in front of a raucous home crowd against a ranked opponent. It takes a talented player to go all-out in a road game being played in a half-empty arena. Tell me before a game which team is going to play with more energy, and I don't have to ask which one has better runners and jumpers. Chances are, the team with more energy is going to win.

**Concentration.** Physical energy is one thing. Mental energy is quite another. They are linked to a point -- it's harder to concentrate when you're tired -- but they are two separate talents. Being an effective player requires the ability to read the game, see plays develop, recall the scouting report (assuming he has taken the time to study it) and make instantaneous decisions. Quickness is a wonderful asset, but if a player can think quickly, he will get to his desired spot before his opponent does.

In my lifetime, the most talented athlete I've seen in this area has been Tiger Woods. For all the majors that Tiger has won, his most impressive accomplishment was going 142 straight tournaments without missing a cut. Think about how hard he had to concentrate to make that happen, grinding out the last few holes on a Friday when he didn't have his A game. Likewise, think about the number of times you have seen a team lose an NCAA tournament game because of a careless mental error on a late possession. Such mistakes are less likely to occur early in the game when the mind is fresh. It takes a talented player to keep his mind sharp even when his legs are dead.

**Discipline.** You won't find too many more "talented" big men than Josh Smith. A 6-foot-10, 350-pound junior from Kent, Wash., Smith was a much-heralded recruit coming out of high school. Sure, his body was not in great shape, but he had a dancer's feet and had Velcro hands. It was considered a major coup for Ben Howland when Smith decided to go to UCLA.

Problem is, Smith does not have the discipline to match his innate gifts. His eating and social habits keep getting in the way. Smith transferred to Georgetown, but after a promising start this season, he has been declared academically ineligible. People say that Smith is wasting his talent. With all due respect to the young man, I say he doesn't have enough of it.

The same can be said for former Louisville forward Chane Behanan, a 6-6 junior who was finally booted out of Louisville's basketball program in late December following repeated violations of university policy. Behanan recently announced he was transferring to Colorado State.

It takes talent to restrict your diet, stay away from parties and fulfill your duties off the court. What good is running and jumping if you're constantly overweight, breaking the rules or failing to show up for class?

**Work ethic.** Not only is this part of talent, I would argue it's the most important part. A player who works hard can overcome physical limitations. If he doesn't, all the "talent" in the world will not get him anywhere.

By any definition, Sam Young was one of the most gifted athletes to play for Pittsburgh. A 6-6 forward from Washington, D.C., Young could have been an Olympic-level gymnast if he dedicated himself. Panthers coach Jamie Dixon will never forget the day Young took his official visit. When Dixon showed him a space with a big gymnastics mat, Young walked onto the mat and did a series of backward handsprings without any effort.

But those talents aren't what led Young to be an All-America by his senior year. He was so devoted to his workouts that he went to a Walmart and purchased an air mattress so he could sleep in the locker room. The way Young figured it, the 20 minutes it took for him to drive back and forth to his off-campus apartment was wasted time. He'd rather be working hard.

If I were Dixon, I would have left Young's mattress in the locker so all future Panthers could see it. Above it I would hang a sign that read: "Sam Young slept here. Dude was talented."

**Leadership.** What, exactly, makes a good leader? Yes, you've got to have some sis-boom-bah. You've got to be able to call a team meeting and set a good example. But a great leader must also be willing to say unpleasant things, even if the person hearing it is a better player.

It takes a special talent to be able to take charge of one's peers, thereby risking ridicule and hostility. One person who stands out in my mind is Travis Walton, a 6-2 guard from Lima, Ohio, who played for Michigan State from 2006-10. In all my years covering college basketball, I have never seen a player take charge of a practice like Walton did during his senior year. He would stand at center court and bark out orders during drills - just like an assistant coach, only louder. If Walton saw something that displeased him, he would let his teammates know. All this from a guy who averaged 4.2 points per game during his college career.

I saw a similar display during an informal workout at Duke in September, when senior guard Tyler Thornton ripped into Jabari Parker for making a sloppy play. "That's a b----- turnover!" Thornton yelled. Parker was irritated, but he knew Thornton was right -- and that Thornton had his best interests at heart. You might be thinking it takes a lot of guts for a role-playing senior to talk that way to a future NBA lottery pick. I think it takes a lot of talent.

**Conditioning.** Yes, this can be developed. If you work hard in the weight room and on the track, you are going to be in better shape. But some athletes have a physiological makeup that prevents them from getting tired the way others do. Much of this is due to biological and environmental factors. There's an expression in long-distance running that says the most important thing a runner can do is choose his or her parents wisely. How else to explain why so many elite marathon runners come from Kenya?

Lots of basketball players put in the time to get into better shape, yet when a game enters its final minutes, some guys are tired, and others are not. The difference isn't always how hard they work. Some players are simply more talented.

**Footwork.** The ability to react in a fraction of a second, move your feet, and apply your weight without losing balance is another overlooked talent. Look at Kansas center Joel Embiid. He stands 7-foot-1, and he has only been playing basketball for a few years. Yet, his footwork is exquisite. Much of that can be traced his boyhood years playing volleyball and soccer, but it is also innate.

A big man with great footwork can overcome a lot of shortcomings. Think about former Michigan forward Robert "Tractor" Traylor and former LSU forward Glen Davis. Neither had the type of build you would expect in an effective player, but their footwork was so good, they were able to become pros.

I recently asked former Pittsburgh Steelers coach Bill Cowher what made Jerome Bettis a great running back. I expected him to say something about Bettis' strength, but instead he remarked that Bettis had the quickest feet of any player he had ever seen. That, Cowher said, was why Bettis lasted in the league for so long without wearing down, because he rarely took direct hits. That's a rare talent.

**Shooting.** There are certain basic fundamentals that go into shooting a basketball, but just as no two golf swings are alike, so too does each player have unique nuances in his shooting motion. There is something mysterious about the collection of factors that goes into balance, weight transfer, lift, release and touch, all of which decide whether the ball will splash through the net or glance off the rim.

Yet, too often great shooters like Oklahoma State's Phil Forte, Michigan's Nik Stauskas, Missouri's Jabari Brown or Duke's Andre Dawkins get dismissed as being the result of long hours in the gym. Yes, those guys have put in their practice time, but that does not fully explain their ability to loft the ball into the basket in so many different ways.

On the flip side, consider Ohio State senior guard Aaron Craft. Is there any doubt that he has spent countless hours in empty gyms trying to become a decent outside shooter? Yet, no matter how he huffs, no matter how he puffs, Craft just can't blow that house down. He is gifted in many areas, especially between his ears, but this is one talent he clearly lacks.

**Feel.** A basketball player makes countless decisions during the course of a game. Most of them are barely noticeable: When to drive, when to hold the ball, when to shoot, when to pass, when to attack, when to slow down, when to set a screen, when to clear out. The game is based on read-and-react action, yet many players never quite establish the feel for the game that enables them to be great.

Exhibit A is Draymond Green, a 6-7, 230-pound forward formerly of Michigan State and currently with the Golden State Warriors. Looking at Green's size and body type, there's no logical explanation for why he should be such an effective NBA player. But his feel for the game leads him to figure out how to help his team win.

The same, incidentally, applies to coaches. Lots of coaches are smart, hard-working and skilled at motivation. But the very best of them can immerse themselves in a game, sense how things are going, and make a substitution or adjustment that alters the game in their team's favor, even if that decision goes against the percentages. If you ask these coaches afterward what was going through their minds at the time, they would be unable to answer. That's because they weren't thinking. They were feeling.

That's talent.