

After Olympic experience, Krzyzewski emphasizes ball-handling at Duke

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The play will likely never be repeated, its beginning unlikely and its ending even more improbable.

There was Brian Zoubek, Duke's 7-foot-1, 280-pound center, ripping a Duquesne ball-handler of possession near midcourt, collecting the ball and then dribbling the better part of 47 feet before kissing in a sweet, left-handed finger-roll with a defender right on him.

It was the type of play that had teammate Gerald Henderson cracking up after the game, but if not from Zoubek, it's something coach Mike Krzyzewski has stressed more than in the past as a result of his Olympic experience.

During the three years Krzyzewski dedicated to helping the United States win gold in Beijing this past August, Duke's coach observed hundreds of international games, intensely watched hundreds of teams spanning the globe and noticed aspects of their playing styles that intrigued him.

One thing that stood out about most foreign teams was the versatility of all five players on the court: Whether it was a 6-foot guard or a 7-foot center, almost everyone could play with the ball.

"Everyone in international basketball handles the ball well, and it's because they have really good five-man offensive systems," Krzyzewski said.

"And they've been together so long that they become instinctive in them and it's like watching a great dance group or something, like a Broadway musical the way some of those teams run their offenses."

Krzyzewski became impressed with the versatility of international competitors. Lacking were the typical American centers who would either shoot or pass the ball upon receiving it. Duke's coach saw something he could emphasize with his team back in Durham.

By no means would he be drastically changing Duke's style of play. But by putting a little more importance on everyone — from starting point guard Nolan Smith to Zoubek, even — being comfortable with the ball, Krzyzewski saw a way to make his Duke teams more complete with a little international basketball flavor.

"It's not like we just changed and added," he said. "Most people say you've added this system, like last year they said we ran Phoenix's offensive system, which we didn't. But certainly we used some of the things that they did in our system.

"But to get all of our guys more ball friendly, we've made a really big effort on that over the last three years. And that comes into play a lot in our individual work. Even our big guys every day do some type of ball-handling, so the ball's not a visitor when they catch it. The ball is part of their family, so to speak."

Last season, with a very small team, Duke included nuances from Mike D'Antoni's fast-breaking system that was so successful when he led the Phoenix Suns. D'Antoni, Portland Trail Blazers coach Nate McMillan and Syracuse coach Jim Boeheim were Krzyzewski's assistants during the three-year Olympic commitment.

And from working with them, observing international teams and coaches and having assistants Chris Collins and Steve Wojciechowski and former assistant Johnny Dawkins work hands-on with the NBA superstars, Krzyzewski said upon returning to campus in late August that Duke's program is in good hands.

"I didn't just learn and then come back and say, 'Hey, here are the eight things I learned,'" Krzyzewski said. "We were learning together. So it was so good for our basketball program.

"It was like going to get your PhDs together, you know?"

Duke's players are seeing the effects of their coaching staff's experience. Kyle Singler said Monday that No. 6 Duke has started practicing a motion offense heading into Wednesday's game against UNC-Asheville that often puts players such as the 6-8 duo of Singler and Lance Thomas on the perimeter.

Thomas has never attempted a 3-pointer, but has appeared much more comfortable with the ball in his hands this season. He scored a career-high 21 points against Duquesne and is one of Duke's most improved players from last season.

"Coach has definitely had a lot more confidence in our big guys (handling the ball)," Smith said. "Kyle, Lance, even Zoubek out there; he has the confidence to take two or three dribbles, set somebody up for a score."

"So the big guys — they're doing a lot of stuff with the ball, just dribbling, trying to get them confident with the ball to make plays."

And while, as Singler pointed out, you won't see Thomas breaking down defenders with cross-over dribbles anytime soon, Duke's frontcourt players — Thomas and Zoubek in particular — have been a big part of Duke's 8-1 start. Thomas is averaging 8.3 points and 4.1 rebounds and Zoubek is starting and scoring 6.2 points while grabbing 4.1 boards a game.

Neither junior came close to compiling such numbers during their first two years.

"I think knowing when you should handle the ball is the thing (Krzyzewski) emphasizes with us," Zoubek said. "And, I mean, for me obviously I'm not going to be dribbling out on the perimeter."

"So I get the two or three dribbles in the post and just take care of the ball."

Whether it's using aspects of Phoenix's run-and-gone offense (last season) or having everyone work diligently on their ball handling, Krzyzewski and his staff have put their three-year Olympic experience to work in the familiar confines of Cameron Indoor Stadium.

And the effects aren't just seen in the drills the Devils run. Zoubek went as far to say that his coaches seem a little more relaxed. Jon Scheyer wasn't so sure about that, but he has noticed a renewed hunger to succeed — something Krzyzewski backs up by implying that he has felt more energized since returning from abroad.

Duke's 29th-year coach also has the utmost confidence in his assistants after spending countless hours with them overseas, discussing basketball ideas and concepts. Collins and Wojciechowski were the coaches who worked hands-on with players such as LeBron James and Dwyane Wade during Team USA practices.

"They were taking them through drills, so what an incredible experience that is," Krzyzewski said. "And the fact that those guys listened to them and learned from them, too — that's a very good thing."

"And I don't know where you get that type of experience."

After decades spent solely around the college game and Duke, it certainly was a different basketball journey for the 61-year-old and his staff. Much was learned, games were won and ultimately the result was a gold medal.

So is another three-year commitment to international hoops in Krzyzewski's future?

"I'm not even going to think about that until after our season's over," he said. "The people at Duke and my team have been terrific in allowing me to be able to do this for three years."

"And when I came back, I said, 'Look, I'm not telling anything or going anywhere. I'm giving 100 percent attention to our Duke program.' And that's what I've tried to do."

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