

BASKETBALL NAMES

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At first glance, the game of basketball does not seem a promising source of wordplay. Unfortunately for one in hoop-happy Hoo-sierdom, it isn't so hot on second glance, either.

True, players like to give each other flashy nicknames: Dr. J, Dr. Dunk, Dr. Thunder, Clyde the Glide, Skywalker, Magic. NBA star Lloyd Free made his nickname official, legally becoming World B. Free (nice thought). Such nicknames appear to be a regional phenomenon, mainly on the East and West coasts, where the wide-open "playground" style of play is prized. There are none at all in Indiana, where the players tend to be kids from down the street in small towns and where coaches emphasize teamwork. Year after year, the names of Indiana University basketball players are relentlessly dull: Scott, Kent, Jim, Ted, Randy, Mike, Steve, Rick. Only one escaped this tedium, a young man of such consummate skill that his surname became superfluous in basketball chatter. Just ask any NBA fan who Isaiah is.

Worse, dullness is the rule throughout the major college ranks. For example, this year's prime all-America candidates are named Alford, Manning, Robinson, Smith and Williams. Nothing much going there. Those looking for excitement may have to be content with the fact that three of the top ten forwards in the country have the name Reggie.

Still, one always finds a few names that are simply fun to gaze upon or roll around on your tongue - even a few to put through such National Puzzlers' League drills as reading them backwards or inside-out. The first to catch my eye was in the Great Alaskan Shootout, a beginning-of-the-season tournament that gets a lot of press coverage because, untypically, it attracts strong teams. Otherwise, one would rarely hear about a player from the University of Alaska at Anchorage, even one who is six feet ten inches tall. Meet Hansi Gnad. Dang, I thought, is this going to be a useful reversal? Nah.

The next followed swiftly, when Indiana University opened its season against Montana State, whose leading scorer is one Kral Ferch. Maybe his parents did it backward for a lark? Shann Ferch also plays for the team; is it necessary to add that he's a brother? Nnahs. The two get a lot of ribbing about their names, which they take good-naturedly; they laugh and point out that their father was dead set against a plain Tom, Dick or Harry. And, they add, if you think our names are odd, wait until you hear what he named our dog. Roll over, Zando.

With such booty in hand, I decided this might be the best crop since Olden Polynice played at Virginia last year. I dug a little deeper.

The influx of foreign players into the college ranks certainly helps. Houston Baptist alone suits up Fred Goporo (he'd love to drop the middle O, thank you), Bruno Kongawoin and Djibril Kama-ra, all from Africa. Bo Cucuz of Northwestern was "originally born" in Yugoslavia, according to a scouting report. Hmm. If you'd like to try your own whelp joke, Christian Ansgar Welp, a seven-footer from West Germany, plays for the Huskies of Washington. Akin Akin-Otiko plays at Oral Roberts. I do not know where either he or Jacek Duda of Providence is from, but only one guess is allowed for the latter's nickname (yes, Zip-a-Dee Duda). Duke lured an immense Egyptian named Alaa ("the Pharaoh") Abdelnaby, with cries of Alaalujah. Incidentally, Duke is coached by Mike Krzyzewski, on whose name almost everyone has given up; they call him Coach K. Last year, Dukies camping out overnight to buy tournament tickets temporarily created "Krzyzewskiville, population 300," complete with a sign to that effect. Not bad: ten consonants out of fifteen letters. But no match for Centenary's Gene Vandenlangenberg, who clocks in with sixteen letters and eleven consonants. If players had their names instead of numbers on their jerseys, Gene's would be three sizes too large.

Never fear, native Americans can easily hold their own. Nevada at Las Vegas starts Armon ("Hammer") Gilliam, a born rebus. The skills of Tyrone ("Muggsy") Bogues are neither tyro nor bogus. Bogues (one syllable), who stands all of five feet three, scored 58 per cent of Wake Forest's points in one game. Don't be surprised if Dennis Hopson of Ohio State hops on UCLA's Pooh Richardson backing into the hoop. St. Michaels, of Winooski, has signed Novelle Mangaroo. Vanderbilt has Barry ("Go In") Goheen, and also Clem Glen - or perhaps Glen Clem, nobody is quite sure. Players do have fun with their nicknames. Ernie ("Pop") Lewis of Providence claims to have a brother named Snap and a sister named Crackle. Portland's Greg Anthony and Greg Attaway are known as the Gaga Twins. But there is room for improvement. Missouri's star forward is Derrick Chievous, and I marvel that he hasn't been dubbed "Never Mis." Texas A&M is missing a shot by not nicknaming its star "Used" Carl Lott, as is Miami, missing Kevin ("Hey") Presto, and Iowa State, "What The" Sam Hill.

Jacksonville guard Cleveland Williams has twin sons named Cleveland and Treveland; it has been noted that their mother's name is not Cincinnatalie. Dallas Comegys (pronounced comma-gees, not come guys) plays in Chicago, and New Orleans is led by Ledell Eackles. Yule probably soon be hearing about Noel Christmas, who plays at Hackensack High School.

Unfortunately, press coverage of women's basketball remains spotty, so I have found very little in that direction. But one name makes up for much: Yulonda Wimbish, of Texas.

The leading scorer of Cal Poly at Pomona is one Zenon M. It seems Zenon's father was a disc jockey whose last name was invariably shortened to M, so he made it legal. Zenon thinks that's cool, but seems to have some doubts about his first name, as he prefers to be called Z. He signs his last name in quotation marks: "M". Cal Poly wishes he had a brother so it could field the M&M boys.

There is something extra fetching about Wyoming star Fennis Dembo. His last name, backwards, sounds like an abbreviation for obstetrics. But it is his given name that charms. Fennis, a southern lad who took at once to the cold cattle country of the West, is a demonstrative player - a wild man on the court. This is not usual in those parts, and the Wyoming fans love it. They immediately named him "Electric" Fennis - neat! It turns out, moreover, that Fennis has a twin sister (are you ready for this?) with the name of Fenise. Both names were chosen by an older sister, Zona (no Zona defense jokes, please). With the additional clue that Fennis and Fenise are the youngest of eleven children, can you deduce how they got their names?

DIMBOXES, EPOPTS, AND OTHER QUIDAMS

Many authors, from Sperling to Lipton to Hellweg to Byrne, have written books celebrating words with odd meanings. The best of these have attempted to impose some sort of order upon a very heterogeneous and idiosyncratic corpus: Lipton's collective nouns are an outstanding example. In a \$5.95 paperback published by Workman in 1986, David Grambs has produced the best book yet of this genre: 500 epithets to "describe life's indescribable people" from *dimbox* (a smoother-over of others' disputes) to *epopt* (one initiated into a secret system). The great charm of this book lies in the extended definitions, typically a paragraph in length, which wittily comment on the foibles displayed. The *demi-vierge* is "not necessarily a stripless tease, just a staunch protector of home plate"; "some females, who don't like limp excuses, believe in calling a *spado* a *spado* [an impotent man]"; and a *quondam quidam* is a person who used to be an anybody but is now a definite somebody. Willard Espy said it best - "the freshest, funniest collection of ad hominem nouns you will ever see." Buy!