

Utah high school stars deal with life on bubble

By Chuck Gates
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Olympus High's 6-foot-6 wingman **Nicholas Paulos** has it made.

Or so you'd think.

The just-turned 18-year-old Basketball Jones is tops on his Titans team in both scoring (15.2 ppg) and rebounding (6.4 rpg). Late last month he showed what his silky jump shot is capable of when he poured in five three-pointers and 26 points in leading his team to a 31-point torching of Woods Cross.

He's on a first-name basis with former UCLA basketball coach and mentor Jim Harrick — yes, that same Jim Harrick who won two-thirds of the more than 700 Division I basketball games he coached in, along with being the only head coach not named Wooden in UCLA's splendid basketball history to capture an NCAA championship for the school.

Matt Barnes, his head coach at Olympus, lavishes praise on his senior star for his work ethic and putting teamwork ahead of personal aggrandizement.

His name has been linked to Utah State, Portland, Drake, Davidson, Northern Arizona and UC Santa Barbara as possible Division 1 destinations where he might continue the next chapter of his hoops dream.

Even after Paulos and his teammates stubbed their toe at home against Bountiful in their regular-season finale last Tuesday night, they still managed a gaudy 18-3 regular-season record and continue to eye greater glory entering this week's state 4A tournament.

Yes, Paulos appears to have it made by every measure, except the bathroom scale, where after three trips through the line at Chuck-a-Rama he still weighs a wispy 170 pounds, inviting doubters to take aim.

In the insanely competitive world of

Division I basketball, twig-like 6-7 wingmen don't get to write their own tickets. Instead, they're dispatched to Bubbleland — a basketball void where each week they must demonstrate their mettle while seeking to play their way onto a D-1 roster, not unlike Roman gladiators of old.

Paulos finds himself in good company. Bubbleland is forever filled with skilled Utah prep players viewed as too thin, too short, a step too slow, or perhaps academically challenged to be considered automatics to move onto basketball's next level.

Bubbleland's population this season includes South Sevier's 6-3 shooting guard Dillon Bishoff; Provo's 6-4 small forward Ryan Durrant; Brighton swingman Sam Wunderli; Lehi center William Walker; and Paulos, according to Dave Hammer, who runs Intermountain Hoops, a college scouting service.

Each has a knock against him, Hammer said. For Paulos, it's that he's too thin. The same goes for Durrant, son of former BYU standout Devin Durrant. Walker is undersized. Bishoff competes at a small school. Wunderli might have the best shot of the lot to make the D-1 jump.

"It's not the deepest group," admits Hammer, who said in normal years the number of players on the bubble is about double this class of 2010.

Interestingly, Hammer said, Utah has its normal number of blue-chippers who have already been plucked to play at the next level, such as Mountain Crest's 6-11 Cal Hanks (SUU), Provo's 6-6 Kyle Collinsworth (BYU), Alta's 6-7 Kyle Davis (SUU), Bingham's 6-8 Ben Clifford (Utah State) and Waterford's 6-10 Neal Monson (Utah).

All of Utah's prep players on the bubble this season have a chance to play D1 basketball, Hammer said, although not all will begin their

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careers at four-year schools. For some, the next step will be one of the state's strong junior college programs.

Four-year schools might choose to not offer a bubble player a spot, preferring they attempt the JC route first where their progress can be monitored, he said. Players needing to develop particular aspects of their game, or needing to fill out physically, often fit into this category, Hammer said. If they come around, they eventually get their shot to play D-1 basketball.

Hammer's assessment is that Paulos' pencil-thin frame remains his only negative. "He has the talent and is a very good player, but everyone hopes he fills out."

Barnes has watched Paulos improve each year, getting stronger, faster and more athletic, while blossoming into an outstanding shooter.

"Whoever takes a chance on him (at the next level), someone will be getting a nice player," the Olympus coach said.

Harrick, a family friend, who has periodically worked out Paulos and watched him play in person about a month ago, sees similar upside.

During his own storied coaching career, Harrick has seen every kind of player and considers Paulos a late bloomer.

"He's a very young kid for who his best basketball will be in the future," Harrick said. "There's a chance for him to be a terrific player. He's a wing that can score the ball. He may have to sit out a year to let his body catch up with his height, but he will be a fine Division I player."

Despite such high praise, Paulos knows he's still battling for recruiting respect.

"Sometimes it's hard," he said. "I've put in a lot of work and I'm a better player for it. So when the focus is on my physique and not what I can bring to the table, it can be a little frustrating."

But he doesn't feel pressure to increase his performance statistically to compensate for

perceived physical shortcomings, which can be traced to his growing six inches the past two years.



Nicholas Paulos

Although an extra 30-40 pounds would be welcomed, he doesn't feel it's held his game back as he uses his good height and long body to his advantage on the floor.

He's also trying to remain realistic about his basketball future and pondering all options relating to extending his playing career. One consideration, he said, might be attending prep school for a year — a suggestion from Utah State — that would allow his bulk to catch up with his height.

Father **Bill Paulos** says watching his son's career has been a joy peppered with consternation.

"Nicholas has always been the player people have underestimated," he said. "He's had to get better every year and he's earned whatever comes his way."

"As a parent, you never really know if the sacrifice is worth it, but we've just been following Nicholas' lead. He missed proms, parties and a bunch of things teenagers like to do. He just loves playing ball," the elder Paulos added. "His dreams have always been to win a state championship at Olympus and play Division I college basketball."

For the moment, Paulos the player is ready to set aside his collegiate aspirations to concentrate on turning that first dream into reality by helping bring Olympus its first basketball state championship. Following the Bountiful loss, however, the road turned tougher as the Titans must begin their title quest by traveling to Smithfield to face Sky View on Tuesday.

Paulos is undeterred.

"It's been our main goal all along to win that state championship," he said. "Coach says that we're mature and experienced enough to do it."

Another chance, it would seem, for him to measure up.