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## Have globe-trotting prep basketball teams gone too far?

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By David Leon Moore, USA TODAY

LAKEWOOD, Calif. — Arriving at the big high school basketball game these days isn't as simple as hopping on the team bus and heading to a rival gym.

Before tip-off of a recent clash of nationally ranked teams at Duke's Cameron Indoor Stadium, Huntington (W. Va.) needed a court order for its suspended star, O.J. Mayo, to take the court — a case that continues with another hearing Friday.

The other team, Lakewood's Artesia, needed a coast-to-coast red-eye flight, part of a five-games-in-six-days ordeal — during final exams week. The players missed two days of classes.

Upon his return to class, Artesia guard Malik Story sat down to take an algebra final and "was about half-there mentally. ... I think I did bad. I tried to remember stuff, but I couldn't. I was so tired. I just wanted to go home and go to sleep."

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He got no sympathy from his algebra teacher. "I knew that was going to happen," Karen Woi says. "The coach should have realized that was going to happen. It was bad planning by the coach. I don't think they should have made that trip."

She's not alone.

Artesia's marathon hoops journey might be an extreme case. But increasingly, in a world of national rankings, including the USA TODAY Super 25, and games shown on ESPN channels, elite high school basketball teams are doing everything they can to seek exposure, revenue for their schools and maybe a better spot in the rankings. The question is: Who is willing to regulate this?

"We're blowing ... high school basketball totally out of proportion," says Len Elmore, a former college and NBA player who is a practicing attorney, an ESPN college basketball analyst and a member of the Knight Commission, a watchdog panel seeking reforms in college sports.

"It's not just ESPN. It's not just USA TODAY, and it's not just the various Internet sites that focus on high school sports and recruiting," Elmore says. "They're just contributory to the culture, this cult of celebrity that's now trickled down to the kids."

Loren Grover, the Artesia coach and a history teacher, says his administration didn't balk at the proposed trip despite the timing.

"I don't think it's excessive, not if we can compete at that level," says Grover, in his first year as head coach. "It's a good opportunity for these guys. Some of them have never flown in an airplane in their lives. How many of them will ever get the chance to play in Cameron Indoor Stadium?"

Grover adds, however, he probably won't schedule another week like last week.



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"That was more a rookie mistake than anything. I'd at least try to get a day of rest in there."

By comparison, Artesia's schedule would not have been allowed in the NBA. The league limits teams to playing two games in a row — or, at the most, four games in five days, NBA spokesman Tim Frank says. And under the NBA's labor agreement, teams cannot play back-to-back games across more than two time zones.

The events surrounding the Artesia-Huntington game got a lot of people thinking of ways to regulate the increasing number of long road trips involving missed class time.

The National Federation of High School Sports says it's up to state or local federations to set restrictions on out-of-state travel.

"We have a policy within our federation that students should not be missing class time to play in these games," executive director Bob Kanaby says, "but we have no regulatory power over that."

The California Interscholastic Federation-Southern Section, the governing body for most Southern California schools, including Artesia, also has no restrictions on out-of-state trips. CIF-SS Commissioner Jim Staunton says a provision limiting out-of-state games or limiting missed class days would have to come from member schools.

"We would very seriously consider a bylaw to address that type of thing," he says.

The schools, for now, must decide how to balance athletic ambitions and academic requirements.

#### **Schools jumping at dollar signs**

The rise in showdown interstate games between hoops powerhouses, many shown on ESPN, ESPN2 or ESPNU, accelerated when LeBron James became a phenom at St. Vincent-St. Mary High School in Akron, Ohio, early this decade.

James had been on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* when ESPN showed his team's game against Oak Hill Academy of Mouth of Wilson, Va., on Dec. 12, 2002. That was the first regular-season high school basketball game ESPN had shown since 1989.

Now ESPN does about 10 such games a year. The next will be Feb. 22: Mayo, the best player in the country this year, and Huntington against St. Patrick High School (Elizabeth, N.J.), No. 1 in the USA TODAY rankings.

Burke Magnus, vice president and general manager of ESPNU, says his goal is to identify and focus on the top player in a given year.

He says he is concerned about schools missing class time to play in these games: "Had we been involved in the Artesia game, with their schedule, I certainly would have been uncomfortable with that kind of arrangement."

ESPN, though, leaves the matchmaking and business arrangements to outside organizers such as Paragon Marketing, which is arranging the Huntington-St. Patrick game at Marshall University in Huntington.

Rashid Ghazi, a partner at Paragon, says his firm pays the expenses of the traveling teams at such games. Each school also is guaranteed \$1,000 or a percentage of the gate — 33% for each school for one game, 20% for a doubleheader, with Paragon taking the odd share.

A big gate means a big payday. Ghazi says the game between Huntington and Hyattsville (Md.) DeMatha on Jan. 6 at Marshall netted each school "upwards of \$25,000."

"Money is now starting to creep into what's going on in high school sports," says Peter Roby, director of the Center for the Study of Sport in Society at Northeastern University. "That's disturbing."

#### **Rankings motivate teams**

Some schools chase the money. Some chase a chance to move up in the rankings, particularly the USA TODAY rankings.

Was that a motivation for Artesia to take the game against Huntington despite the difficult schedule?

"Yes, absolutely," Grover says. "We were ranked pretty high. The only way you can really tell who's better than anyone else is if they play each other. The only way that can really happen is if you have events like this."

Despite a strong basketball tradition at Artesia, Grover says he doesn't feel a lot of pressure to win or rise in the national rankings. "But I know a number of programs where there is a lot of pressure to win," he says. "They need to be nationally ranked every year. It's just one of those things, you know?"

Monte Lorell, USA TODAY's managing editor/sports, says the rankings were "never intended to lead schools to do some of the things they're doing in terms of scheduling or in adding pressures to win. It was really a way to give a broader national perspective.

"And we've never given up the aspect of covering the issues and trends in high school sports."

One school accustomed to being ranked every year, and certainly a willing participant in the proliferation of national-showdown games, is Oak Hill. Oak Hill played another school in the Super 25 rankings, Mater Dei, at the Duke doubleheader in which Artesia and Huntington played. (Like Artesia, Mater Dei played in California the night after the Duke event, but Mater Dei had gone three days without a game before playing at Duke and went two days without a game after the back-to-back games.)

The small Baptist school, No. 2 in the USA TODAY rankings, in southwestern Virginia has two varsity squads. Players on the gold team, usually stocked with transfers, rarely attend the school for more than two years en route to a top college program. Alumni include NBA players Carmelo Anthony and Jerry Stackhouse.

Players on the red team play a different schedule and rarely move up to the gold squad.

The gold team in the last eight seasons is 301-11. Four times it finished No. 1 in the USA TODAY Super 25, most recently in 2005. Last year it finished No. 2.

"The banner hanging in the gym says it all: 2006 national runner-up," Nolan Smith, the lone returning player, said at the start of the season. "It's a motivator for the upcoming season. ... When you put on the Oak Hill uniform, you are expected to win."

#### Discipline under scrutiny

Mayo was nearly kept out of uniform for his team's widely anticipated showdown against Artesia by the two technical fouls that triggered an automatic two-game suspension from the West Virginia Secondary School Activities Commission (WVSSAC).

But Mayo got a West Virginia circuit court judge to issue a temporary restraining order, allowing him to play and help Huntington beat Artesia 73-66.

Mayo's lawyer is expected to argue Friday that Mayo never should have received a second technical foul. Huntington Principal Greg Webb says the school has shared with the judge a home video that shows a different view than the video widely circulated last week on the Internet showing the referee issuing both technicals.

Webb says the school plans to discipline Mayo but, citing federal privacy rules, declined to discuss the details. He also says Mayo's family thinks it "deserves the right to be heard in court" because there is no appeals process in the state activities commission rules.

Elmore says he laughed when he heard a high school player was using the legal system to contest a technical foul. "That judge," he says, "ought to take a long look in the mirror."

Mike Hayden, the WVSSAC executive director, wasn't surprised Mayo and the school are contesting the suspension. "Unfortunately, it does happen," he says. "State associations have a problem with local courts making political decisions based upon their own communities rather than enforcing the rules that have been handed down."

Artesia is at home, getting ready for its playoffs, and the team's players have had a chance to catch up on their sleep, if not their grades.

Still, Story, who could barely stay awake during his algebra final, thinks the Duke trip was worth it.

"It was a great experience ... traveling, being on a plane," he says. "We felt like a college team, or an NBA team."

*Contributing: Chris Lawlor, Janice Lloyd, Dick Patrick*

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## **FIVE GAMES IN SIX DAYS**

**Jan. 26:** Artesia defeats Glenn High of Norwalk (Calif.) 82-33 in a league game.

**Jan. 27:** Artesia travels to Carlsbad, Calif., about 70 miles south, and beats Crawford High of San Diego 85-76 in a non-league game.

**Jan. 28:** Off.

**Jan. 29:** Artesia defeats Mayfair High of Lakewood 77-72 in a league game. After the game, Artesia buses to Los Angeles International Airport and boards a red-eye flight at 10:40 p.m. PT to Raleigh-Durham (N.C.) International Airport.

**Jan. 30:** Artesia arrives at Raleigh-Durham about 6:30 a.m. ET and heads to Cameron Indoor Stadium on the Duke campus for a practice. The team practices, then leaves the arena about 10:30 and goes to its hotel. By the time all of the players and coaches can get a room, it is 2 p.m. They take a nap, get up about 4:30, leave for the gym at 6:30 and start playing Huntington High of West Virginia at 8:30. They lose 73-66, return to their hotel and eat pizzas about midnight. It's their first day of missed classes - and final exams.

**Jan. 31:** They board an 8:40 a.m. flight from Raleigh-Durham to Los Angeles. After arrival, they bus to the Artesia gym and arrive about 1:30 p.m. PT. At 6:30, they play La Mirada High in a league game, winning 72-55. It's their second missed day of finals.

**Feb. 1:** Some of the Artesia players have to get up Thursday morning to take finals. Some won't make them up until early the following week.