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Miramonte's Sabrina Ionescu Continues Rise to National Prominence

By Karl Buscheck



Sabrina Ionescu Photos Gint Federas

when the light really went on for me that she's going to be really special."

Ionescu has not only become a special player, but also one who is in extremely high demand. She won gold medals with the U16 national team at the FIBA Americas Championship in 2013 and the U17 team at the World Championship in 2014. The reigning East Bay Girls Basketball Player of the Year had a chance to go for the hat trick in 2015, but instead opted to spend the summer with the Cal Stars, battling for a national title.

"I mean it was definitely a hard decision," Ionescu said. "I had to talk with my family and obviously Kelly. I think just playing for the program for so long - working to achieve that one goal - that gave me the motivation to stick with my club team that I've been a part of forever to try and accomplish that goal."

The decision ended up paying off for Ionescu, as the guard and her teammates went on to claim first place at the Nike Nationals in North Augusta, S.C., last month. In the title game, the Cal Stars smashed past the Indy Lady Gym Rats 78-47.

"It really speaks to the team player she is and her basketball IQ - that she recognized how good this team was and the potential it had to win a national championship," Sopak said. "And that's what she wanted to do."

The national title was just the latest accomplishment for the Cal Stars, who have become a powerhouse on the club basketball scene. Since Sopak founded the Cal Stars back in 2006, the club has graduated 100 players to the collegiate ranks. During that run, Sopak has coached an array of stars, but few are as impressive as Ionescu.

"She definitely has some God-given ability, she's worked on her craft," Sopak said. "What separates her is her competitiveness. She's going to dive for a loose ball. She's going to do a lot of things that people of her stature are either A, too good to do, or B, just have never have been asked to or will do. She cares more about what's on the scoreboard than her individual accolades."

Ionescu's brothers - one who is nine years older and another who is her twin - deserve a lot of the credit for the development of her competitive spirit.

"I think they've definitely turned me into the player I've become," Ionescu said of playing

A two-time gold medalist and recently-crowned national champ, Sabrina Ionescu has officially arrived as one of the premier girls' basketball prospects in the entire country.

"Early on, she could definitely do some things naturally that other kids couldn't do," said Kelly Sopak, who has coached Ionescu since third grade - first at the club level with the Orinda-based Cal Stars AAU team and later at Miramonte.

Sopak has had a front-row seat during Ionescu's rise to national prominence and the coach points to seventh grade - when Ionescu developed her outside shot - as the moment when everything started to click.

"Once that happened, I realized how great she was because of her ability to get other people involved, her ability to get to the basket, her ability to get to the free-throw line," Sopak said. "That's

against her brothers as a kid.

There are plenty of college coaches who want to see just how much better Ionescu can become. Ionescu is currently choosing between Texas, Oregon State, Oregon, Cal and UCLA.

"It's kind of crazy to think about," Ionescu said, when asked about being attached to many of the most prominent programs in the country. The guard has already lopped a slew of big name schools off the short list, including Duke, UConn, South Carolina and Notre Dame.

Sopak expects Ionescu to make her final decision in November, but for now, she'll be focused on doing what she does best: getting better one day at a time.

"She knows the level that she's supposed to play at everyday," Sopak said. "And I think she relishes the opportunity to live up to that expectation."



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