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Las Vegas Spring Showcase ends with a bang

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Las Vegas, Nev.- Ninety-six AAU basketball teams arrived in Las Vegas this past weekend with the hopes of bringing home the 17 & under championship at **Hal Pastner's Spring Showcase**. Teams from as far away as Australia, Miami, Illinois and Washington attended the tournament.

Here is a look back at some of the action:

Houston Hoops outlast SoCal for Showcase Championship



Both the **Houston Hoops** and **Southern California All Stars** went through pool and bracket play without a blemish on their record and when they squared off Sunday afternoon it was their fourth game of the day and seventh in the last two.

The Houston squad was led by recent Oklahoma commitment [Damion James](#) who occupies the No. 5 spot on the Rivals150 for the class of 2006. In addition to James, Houston also boasted several strong prospects from the class of 2007. The SoCal teams included 10 Division I prospects including UCLA commitment [James Keefe](#) and perhaps the nation's fastest rising prospect in [Chase Budinger](#).

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James solidified his spot among the nation's elite in 2006

As might be expected, the game was a see-saw affair that saw both teams tied at the half with James playing like a man possessed for the Hoops and the SoCal big men playing hard in the paint. SoCal pushed its lead out to eight halfway through the second half when 2007 point guard [Jai Lucas](#) took over with a barrage of mid-range jumpers and drives to the basket. Arizona pledge [Nic Wise](#) added three hard drives to the basket for buckets. The game, however, was not decided until a charge call against Budinger in the final seconds. The Hoops held on for an emotional 68-64 thriller.

Leading scorers:

Hoops: Damion James 18, Jai Lucas 16, Nic Wise 8
SoCal: Chase Budinger 19, Taylor King 16, Taj Gibson 8

Whole lot of Love for Kevin in Vegas

The most dominating prospect in the tournament was not in the championship game, in fact he isn't part of the rising senior class. **Portland Elite Legends** big man [Kevin Love](#) was as thorough as an assassin and as reliable as "old faithful" with a yeoman like effort in every contest.

Love, 6-foot-9, 240-pounds, is never going to blow anyone away with his athleticism or impress with rim rattling dunks, but he will put on a clinic from inside the paint with his incredible footwork and basketball I.Q. With impressive

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body control, the Oregon native uses his wide frame and strength to shield his defender and score or get to the free throw line. Rebounding the ball is one of his biggest strengths and anything within a 5-foot radius is sucked into his big mitts and quickly passed to a guard to get the Elite fastbreak off and running.

Currently rated No. 3 in the class of 2007 by Rivals.com, Love also showed a strong face-up jumper that extends to outside the three-point line and the ability to shot fake, put the ball on the floor and get to the rim. His best performance of the tournament was against the H-Squad where he poured in 25 points on 11-14 shooting and 24 rebounds despite playing only half of the second period due to their 20-point lead.

Chasing the top small forward honor

If Love was the MVP then SoCal small forward [Chase Budinger](#) wasn't far behind. Tipping the tape at 6-foot-7 this year, a full two inches taller than last season, Budinger still has the athleticism that enabled him to become one of the country's top volleyball players. In addition to his near 40-inch vertical jump the California native consistently hit the long jumper and when overplayed took a couple of dribbles and attacked the basket.

With a solid mid-range jumper Budinger has a versatile offensive game and is a threat from anywhere on the floor although his finest moments often come in transition where he pulls up off the dribble or finishes with flair.

Last season he was a bona fide high major recruit but if his play this weekend is any indication Budinger will make a push among the nation's elite.



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Budinger was one of the top performers at this weekends Spring Showcase

Florida big man vastly improved from last season

Miami Tropics center [Jason Bennett](#) was the most improved player this weekend. Last year the 7-foot-2, 240-pound Bennett had trouble scoring in the paint with unorthodox footwork and a stiff upper body. This year, however, Bennett has come full circle. Not only has Bennett developed into a solid low post scoring option but has extended his arsenal to include a nice, soft baby-hook which is virtually impossible to stop.

Always an impressive shot-blocker, Bennett showed off his new found strength and stamina throughout the weekend while playing under control and consistently being involved on both ends of the floor. Just as importantly he has learned to play within himself and not become frustrated when things don't go his way.

Other player observations

Class of 2007 Arizona magic combo guard [Jerryd Bayless](#) showed flashes of greatness especially with a several high flying dunks in traffic where he showed total disregard for any defender in his way. However, it was disappointing to see him stand around so often on the perimeter away from the action.

Texas Ambassadors point guard [Bryan Beasley](#) was another lead guard who enjoyed a good tournament whether it was running the offense through him or

the 6-footer taking over the scoring load with nice drives and finishes near the basket or utilizing his pretty outside jumpshot that he shot consistently well.

Cal made a good decision when they offered California Elite shooting guard [Patrick Christopher](#) and the Golden Bears scored a major coup when they landed a commitment from 6-foot-3, 165-pounder. Christopher was a consistent outside threat and the highlight for his Elite.

Originally part of the class of 2005, SoCal All Star forward [Tai Gibson](#) was reclassified last year and is now a rising senior. On the surface it looks like a good move with the 6-foot-8, 200-pounder showing a maturing offensive game to go along with his defense where he uses his long arms to block shot and rebound.

For colleges looking for a big man with a tremendous upside should look no further than SoCal center [Taylor Harrison](#) who at 6-foot-9, 225-pounds runs the floor well and is active on both ends of the floor. While he needs to get bigger and stronger he has that athletic body and developing game that means he will likely spend at least a couple of years in college.

Houston Hoops small forward [Damion James](#) solidified his position among the elite players in the class of 2006. James, 6-foot-8, 225-pounds, got stronger as the tournament progressed and he saved his best games for the last two when the Hoops needed him the most. He has always been strong offensively but he has stepped up on the defensive end as well.

There is a lot to like about class of 2008 point guard [Brandon Jennings](#) who ran the SoCal offense like a veteran. The 6-foot lighting fast prospect uses his under control style and handles to find his big men when needed and limited his turnover by showing a strong basketball mindset.

Class of 2007 Houston Hoops power forward [Gary Johnson](#) continued where he left off last year with another high energy tournament. Johnson, 6-foot-6, is an undersized post player who relies heavily on a strong work ethic to make things happen against bigger and stronger opponents.



The big news surrounding 2007 prospect [Taylor King](#) was his decommitment from UCLA but the 6-foot-7 small forward enjoyed a solid tournament that was highlight with his 16-point effort in the championship. His outside shot was on for the most part and he also posted up the smaller defenders.

2007 point guard [Jai Lucas](#) was a floor general and a major factor in the Hoops title run. Lucas, 5-foot-8, 140-pounds, made several big baskets down the stretch and moved to the off guard position when the Hoops went with a three guard line-up. But when the game is on the line you can look for Lucas to be at the point.

Soto is one of the top guards in the 2006 class

It was surprising to see 2006 combo guard [Christian Polk](#) used at the point for the Arizona Magic throughout the tournament. Polk, 6-foot-2, did a nice job of running the offense although the Magic were beaten handily on several occasions. Polk,

however, sacrifices some of his offense as the lead guard.

The physical transformation of class of 2007 prospect [Isaiah Rusher](#) was impressive. The 6-foot-9 power forward has added 15-20 pounds of muscle and although his offensive arsenal is still a work in progress it was good to see him throw that new found weight and strength around in the middle.

Miami Tropics point guard [Josue Soto](#) was outstanding throughout the weekend. Soto, 6-foot-1, 180-pounds, has always been able to score but has now figured out a way to get his teammates more involved and also knows when to reward his big men for working hard in the post.

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