



By Michael Wallace
Grind City Media

MEMPHIS – As an educator and longtime Grizzlies fan, Marsha Saul understands both the opportunities and challenges that come with maintaining structure and delivering meaningful lessons to a classroom full of eager and energetic kids on a daily basis.

So when Saul recently signed her own kids up for a camp session with **Memphis Grizzlies Youth Basketball**, she was hoping for a fun weekend in a place where they could blow off some steam, shoot some hoops and score some cool gear while doing so.

The swag, hoops and exercise all met expectations, of course. But those things only scratched the surface of everything the Saul family experienced with Grizzlies Youth Basketball.

In other words, it's about learning the fundamentals of basketball and life beyond.

“My boys had a blast, learned a lot and were pretty awestruck at getting to meet and work with (members of) our beloved Memphis Grizzlies,” Saul shared of her family's experience. “The clinic was incredibly well-organized! I'm a teacher, I know what a task it is to get kids to listen and keep them engaged. And (Grizzlies Youth Basketball) did a fantastic job of that, especially with such a large number of kids. We're already counting down the days until the next clinic.”

Grizzlies Youth Basketball director **Antonio Perez** longs to see those days return soon when his program's camps, clinics and events resume in-person activities when safety guidelines allow. But the COVID-19 pandemic has hardly tempered the enthusiasm and impact Grizzlies Youth Basketball continues to have in Memphis and the region for youth, families and school officials.

“We charge ourselves with teaching the game the right way to young people, so we do that not only here in Memphis but across the entire region via camps, clinics, leagues, tournaments, special events – you name it,” said Perez, who has guided Grizzlies Youth Basketball since 2016. “But we're not only teaching on-court skills, we teach core values like sportsmanship, leadership, and teamwork. We see it as a great way to cultivate the next generation of NBA fans.”

To that end, Grizzlies Youth Basketball is always looking to build connections with communities throughout the region. Each year, the Grizzlies hold youth camps and clinics during the organization's caravans that travel throughout Tennessee and into Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama, Kentucky, Missouri and beyond. The goal is to spread excitement and grow the fanbase of one of the NBA's most exciting young teams, led by **Jaren Jackson Jr.** and **Ja Morant**. But the priority is to reach youth of all backgrounds, genders and communities to

teach fundamentals of the game, as well as fundamentals of core life values.

Presented by Nike, Grizzlies Youth Basketball also holds coaches forums and referee seminars that include valuable insight and lessons from NBA players, coaches and staffers from across the league. One of Perez's top priorities is to expand pathways for regional school athletic directors, coaches and middle/high school sports personnel – **such as those from the TSSAA** – to partner with Grizzlies Youth Basketball to continue fostering growth among scholastic boys and girls.

One of the more exciting programs the Grizzlies have developed is the **“Play Like the Pros”** initiative, which allows boys and girls teams at the middle and high school levels to play their games at **FedExForum**. That experience includes tickets to Grizzlies games for those youth teams, coaches and parents to then watch the Grizzlies play a home game that same evening.

“Play Like The Pros is by far one of our most popular experiences,” Perez enthusiastically points out. “It provides the once-in-a-lifetime thrill of competing on an NBA court.”

That's just one of many ways the Grizzlies are expanding their brand and reach through Grizzlies Youth Basketball and Jr. NBA outreach.

The family atmosphere within the Grizzlies Youth Basketball experience allows parents and guardians to see



Play Like The Pros

deposits for the upcoming 2021-22 season are currently being accepted.

For more information email
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in real time how quickly their campers are catching onto lessons. In addition to the hands-on instruction from Grizzlies players and coaches, the growth parents have seen in their young athletes underscores the quality of the programs.

Grizzlies fan and parent Melanie Wade called it a “once in a lifetime” experience when she watched her son, Ryan, take the court alongside Grizzlies players during the team's annual open practice when Grizzlies Youth Basketball participants were invited to attend.

“Ryan is still on Cloud 9 and talks about it almost every day,” Wade said. “How cool was it to be able to play on the Grizzlies basketball court with his favorite players as his teammates? He absolutely loves the Grizzlies.”

That appreciation resonates deeply with Grizzlies Youth Basketball as it continues to develop and expand its impact in Memphis and throughout the region. While the COVID-19 pandemic has suspended in-person camps and clinics for health and safety reasons, it has not stopped Perez and his staff of coaches, volunteers and administrators from spreading the game.

“The challenges of COVID were not unique to us, but we didn't want to stay dormant for an entire year,” Perez said. “So we tasked ourselves with providing a lot of virtual content, and we've come out of it with an extensive library of tutorials and virtual workouts so that kids can continue to improve their skills at home safely. That being said, our preference is always to be on the court and in the gym, so we certainly have an eye on a return to the court and getting back to doing what we love.”

And when things return back to normal, Grizzlies Youth Basketball will be ready to re-open the courts, camps and clinics stronger than ever.

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