

GREECE IN GOOD HANDS WITH STAVROPOULOS

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By Ross McCullough PA International

Nikos Stavropoulos has been to the top of European basketball and is looking to take the country's Under-20 men's team there later this month.

A hoops icon in the country, Stavropoulos once dazzled spectators with an array of passing skills that earned him the nickname 'Magic'.

"Sometimes I'd try to make passes difficult for myself and my team-mates as I really enjoyed playing the game," he said to PA International, looking back on his career.

As a member of the team which won the European Championships in 1987, his place in game's lore is secure.

"It was the best moment in our basketball history," remembered Stavropoulos, a point guard who won 103 caps for the national side. "Being a part of it was great."

Stavropoulos played for Larisa, PAOK and Iraklis over an 18-year period.

His career took off in 21 years ago. After finishing as the second leading scorer in A1, he transferred to PAOK from Larisa for a record 10 million drachmae and went on to help them win the 1984 Greek Cup.

If he wasn't making headlines with his passes, he was doing it with his shooting.

He was the first player ever to make a three-pointer in Greece when it was introduced to the game in the eighties.

Late in his career, in 1991, he was a member of the PAOK side that captured a European Cup and in 1992 he helped the club seize a domestic crown.

When he walked off the court for the last time, he had 18 years of experience under his belt.

Now 45, Stavropoulos is trying to make it as a coach in both the domestic league and for the Hellenic federation.

While the Under-20 Championships will showcase the up-and-coming stars of Greek basketball, it will also highlight Stavropoulos' coaching ability.

He served as an assistant to legendary American college boss Bobby Knight at Indiana University from 1994-97.

"It was a great school for me where I was involved in the strategy and tactics of the side," Stavropoulos said of his time in the US.

After his spell in Bloomington, Stavropoulos was appointed head coach of the Greek U18 men's team.

Drawing on many of the lessons learned under Knight, Stavropoulos has had enormous success. He led the Greek juniors to bronze medals at the Under-18 European Championships in 2000 and 2002, and silver at the Mediterranean Games in 2001.

His best moment as a coach came last summer, he says, when taking Greece to the bronze medal at the FIBA Junior World Championships. The team had blown their semi-final against Lithuania but rallied to beat Croatia.

"We put a lot of pressure on ourselves last summer because everyone in this camp wanted to win the gold," he said. "We didn't play as well as we wanted to nor the game we usually do and so for us bronze was a good result."

He also enjoyed success with A2 side Olimpia Larisa, narrowly missing out on promotion last year.

Stavropoulos compares coaching basketball to playing chess. He is constantly trying to outwit the opposing coach.

"I send him problems and he has to solve them," he said.

Stavropoulos is always looking for an edge. He admits that for the Under-20 Championships in the Czech Republic, he is drawing on the remarkable victory of the Greek football team in Portugal at Euro 2004 for inspiration.

They upset the likes of France, the Czech Republic and Portugal to create the biggest shock in the history of the competition.

"What I said to my players is that these (football) guys played like a team," he said to PA International.

"They didn't attempt to play as individuals and while they had some luck it showed you never know what to expect in games."

While Greece are among the tournament favourites, Stavropoulos knows success for his young charges can only be achieved with a disciplined approach.

"We must stay together and prepare and work really hard if we want to win something," he said.

More info on the Website of Nickos Stavropoulos:

<http://www.magic-camp.com/>