

U.S. Central Boys, Girls Claim Inaugural Jr. NBA World Championships at ESPN Wide World of Sports Complex at Disney

A pair of U.S. Central teams defeated their international counterparts to claim boys' and girls' world titles during the inaugural Jr. NBA World Championship on Sunday at ESPN Wide World of Sports Complex at Walt Disney World Resort.

The Central boys' team – led by the trio of Taj Manning, Mark Mitchell, Jr., and Cooper Jackson – combined for 45 points to lead the squad to a 60-50 win over a determined Africa/Middle East team. The Central girls' turned in a strong defensive performance and a solid shooting effort in the title game to blow past Team Europe 68-38.

Playing out of Overland Park, Kan., the Central boys' used a 9-2 run with just under three minutes to play to seal the win. The Central team finished the tournament with a 7-0 record and demonstrated remarkable poise down the stretch as the Africa/Middle East team mounted one last surge late in the game.

"I was extremely proud of the way our guys handled this entire journey," said Central boys' coach Allen Skeens. "We prepared for this tournament all year by playing teams that were bigger, faster, and stronger and in many cases, more skilled than we were. I think the way we kept things together when the Africa/Middle East team made their run really showed the character that's become a signature of this team. Our goal was to win every quarter (Central won 3 of 4 quarters in the championship game). We felt like if we did that, we would be in pretty good shape at the end of the game."

Manning finished with a game-high 20 points for the Central boys' while Mitchell, Jr., had 15 and Jackson added 10.

Africa/Middle East forward Mohamed Maiga led his team with 17 points while Marouf Moumine added 15 points.

In the girls' championship game, the Central girls', playing out of Kansas City, Mo., shook off a slow start before cruising to their 30-point win. After dropping their opening game of the Jr. NBA World Championship Tournament, the Central girls' posted a 6-1 record and used a combination of speed, defensive pressure and a blistering 53 percent field goal shooting percentage to overpower the Europeans. Speedy Central guard Sania Copland finished with a game-high 20 points.

Head coach Sam Johnson thought his club could gain a significant advantage by pressuring Team Europe's guards.

"I felt like our transition game was going to be a little too fast for the international style of play," said Johnson. "We attacked their guards, and I think that strategy had a significant impact on the game."

Central forced 24 turnovers and converted many of those miscues into easy, uncontested layups. The U.S.

team went on a 16-7 run late in the third quarter to build a 51-30 lead. Central's S'mya Nichols finished the game with 13 points, including 11 in the second half while Tasia Johnson added 12. Raina Tomasicka had 11 points to lead the Europeans.

A total of 32 teams representing 35 countries participated in the event that ran Aug. 7-12 at ESPN Wide World of Sports Complex at Walt Disney World Resort. The six-day global, youth basketball tournament showcased the top 14U boys and girls teams from the United States and around the world, including countries such as India, Australia, China and Mexico.

Teams were divided into U.S. and international brackets before competing for Sunday's world championships. A total of 92 games were played during the week.