



High court experience: CU senior Javon Coney was invited to join a pickup game with President Obama.
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Brooks: Coney Plays In A Pickup Game To Remember

BOULDER - Javon Coney had been in plenty of pickup basketball games in Chicago, but never one like this. This time, the guys who showed up were, ah, a cut above - maybe not in overall ability but most certainly in stature.

On-the-court etiquette might have unknowingly gone up a couple of levels. Here's a for-instance: If the guy guarding you continually sticks his hand in your mid-section, do you slap it away? If he casually brushes your elbow during your jumper, do you call it?

Probably a "yes" in both instances . . . but then again, do you let it go if that guy happens to be your Commander-in-Chief?

"Good 'D,' Mr. President?"

Not saying that Barack Obama is a court weasel (a gym rat, most definitely) but only that if the President of the United States is in your three-on-three game, the format might change.

Play to 15, win by two . . . call your own fouls . . . take it back past the top of the key . . . let the skinny left-handed dude score at will . . .

It wasn't like that, according to Coney, a Colorado senior-to-be who played with/against Obama over Memorial Day

weekend in a gym in their hometown. Regular games, regular guys (with one notable exception), claimed Coney.

When I asked him to critique Obama's game, he paused ever so slightly then answered, "It's good . . . he probably can't move like he once did (Mr. POTUS is 48, after all), but he can still shoot. He tried to get after it and hustle; one time he dove for a loose ball."

OK.

Then I asked Coney what probably was an unfair question: "If you're choosing teams, is Barack Obama your first pick?"

Coney's reply (for the record, he was chuckling): "I would pick him first . . . yeah, definitely."

Politically correct answer from a guy who voted for Obama two years ago - but had no idea at the time he would ever rub (exchange?) elbows with him on a basketball court.

In a nutshell, here's how the game was arranged:

Coney's father, Lester, served on Obama's national finance committee during the presidential campaign, and Coney's older sister, Chanel, also did volunteer work at Obama's Chicago headquarters.

Primarily through those family connections and at least one previous Super Tuesday hoops opportunity (Obama liked to play on those dates during his campaign), Coney met Reggie Love, Obama's personal aide and a former basketball/football player (receiver) at Duke earlier this decade. He captained the 2005 Blue Devils basketball team.

"He became kind of a mentor to me," Coney said. "From then on, I've kept in contact with Reggie. After my sophomore year, I had a chance to go Washington and shadow Reggie. Our relationship grew and he's been a great mentor."

Love knew Coney was a CU basketball player. Coney was an invited walk-on for former coach Jeff Bzdelik three seasons ago. With the Memorial Day weekend approaching, Coney received an e-mail from Love telling him that Love was arranging a small group to play hoops on that Saturday.

Coney, scheduled to leave Boulder for Chicago the previous day, said, "I'm in . . . We played for almost two hours and during that time switched up sides - depending on who was tired and needed a break.

"I was the youngest guy there and most of the older guys tired easily. A couple of times, I was on his (Obama's) team."

Coney is "hopeful" of getting another e-mail from Love inviting him to play again with the president. "It was really an unbelievable experience; I'm very grateful they would include me in something like that," he said. "I'd love to do it again."

In the meantime, he's in the midst of an eight-week summer internship at a Chicago investment firm and also doing conditioning work in preparation for his final season at CU. A 6-foot-3 guard who was all-state as a senior at The Latin School Of Chicago, Coney played more as a sophomore (23 games) than he did last season as a junior (7 games). But his most notable game - statistically, at least - came during his freshman season when he scored 15 points on four-of-five shooting from the field (three-for-three behind the arc) in a 68-49 loss at Nebraska.

After his increased playing time as a sophomore - he started once against Oklahoma State - Coney thought there was a possibility of going on scholarship.

"I thought I was playing pretty well," he said. "Even though I wasn't scoring a lot, I was contributing on defense and rebounding."

But the scholarship didn't materialize, and the following season saw the arrival of a new guard - Alec Burks, the eventual Big 12 Conference freshman of the year. A month after the season ended, Bzdelik left for Wake Forest.

Coney came to CU with the idea of developing into a scholarship player, but he admitted playing against Big 12

competition was "kind of a culture shock coming from a small private school . . . It was definitely a new level for me."

Nonetheless, he believes he's grown as a player and has tried to help his teammates on and off the floor. He rooms with senior-to-be Cory Higgins, whom he met before their freshman seasons at a Michael Jordan Basketball Camp in Santa Barbara, Calif. They hit it off immediately, found out later they were both bound for Boulder and have been "great friends" ever since, Coney said.

He's anxious for the 2010-11 school year and preseason practices to arrive, hoping to take advantage of what he believes might be a fresh start under new coach Tad Boyle.

His first impression of Boyle and his staff: "I haven't spent tons of time with them, but he (Boyle) seems like a guy who truly cares about his players. He'll treat the players and the program like his own family. I think they're all dedicated to helping everybody on the roster improve.

"I just want us to continue in the right direction and have a successful season."

After that, he'll likely try and put his CU degree (political science) to work. He's already developed what could be a few valuable contacts.

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