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Thursday, July 22, 2010

Updated: July 23, 12:00 PM ET

Billups lends maturity to Team USA's bid

By Chris Sheridan
ESPN.com

LAS VEGAS -- [Chauncey Billups](#) is a man among boys on Team USA, a dynamic so freaky it boggles his mind.

"It's like 'Daddy Day Care,' man. It's so funny; I was talking to one of the guys who just turned 21, and I was saying this is about to be my 14th season. That means he was in kindergarten when I was coming into the NBA, and that just blows my mind. It's crazy," Billups said.



The veteran member of Team USA at 34-years-old, Chauncey Billups is embracing his leadership role.

Billups, who will turn 34 in September, has embraced his role as the veteran leader of Team USA and is a favorite to be named a co-captain along with 30-year-old [Lamar Odom](#), who is the only player on this version of Team USA with experience playing in a major international tournament (the 2004 Olympics).

Billups and Odom are the only members of the team who were born in the 1970s, and coach Mike Krzyzewski is already comparing Billups to [Jason Kidd](#), the voice of reason and wisdom who helped guide the 2008 Redeem Team and its young but emotional superstars to the gold medal at the Beijing Olympics.

Billups is one of six point guards attending minicamp this week, but his spot on the team that will travel to Turkey next month is the most secure of any of the playmakers.

Odom is a lock, too, to survive the cutdown to 12 players.

"They've not so much emerged as leaders; they come in as leaders," Krzyzewski said. "Chauncey and Lamar are both NBA champions, and they understand. They give me feedback from the team on how the team is feeling, and we're going to rely on them a lot."

Of the other 17 players remaining in camp, there are five 21-year-olds, five 22-year-olds, one 23-year-old, two 24-year-olds, a 26-year-old, two players who are 27 and one, [Tyreke Evans](#), who is still two months away from being legally eligible to play a hand of blackjack.

"It's always good to be around young energy," Odom said. "That's what keeps you feeling young."

But the youth and inexperience of the majority of this team are worrisome to the coaching staff and USA Basketball hierarchy, which expected to have a majority of the Redeem Team competing this summer but instead ended up with no returnees from Beijing.

That is what is making Billups, widely regarded as one of the top floor generals currently playing the game, such a valued member of this edition of the U.S. national team.

"I always believe experience is the best teacher, but we won't have the opportunity to go through too many bumps," Billups said.

"I'm really not adjusting that much, because this is the role I play on my regular team. I'm like that veteran leader that's going to be able to not only talk about it, but do it on the court. And these guys look to me as one of those leaders; they ask, 'What should we run here?' And, 'What do you think about this?' And I do the same thing with my regular team, so it's not really that much of an adjustment for me."

Billups was a member of the U.S. team that won the Tournament of the Americas in 2007, but he was dropped from the squad prior to the start of training camp in 2008 when it became clear that Kidd, [Chris Paul](#) and [Deron Williams](#) were going to be the point guards competing in China.

This year, Billups will not only be a playmaker, but will man the 2-guard spot at times, too.

"The biggest difference is these guys are so young, and that's not a slight or anything, but when I played with the other guys, the things that you have to teach with this team went without being taught, just due to experience," Billups said.

"Little things, philosophies, and things you try to talk about defensively, or making one extra play offensively. Before, you would never even have to say that. But you end up teaching and talking about it on this team because most of the guys are 21 or 22. These guys should be in college," Billups said.

Team USA will go through its final minicamp practice Friday before playing a public intrasquad scrimmage Saturday night (**ESPN2 and ESPN3.com, 10 p.m. ET**) at the Thomas & Mack Center.

Three or four players are expected to be cut before the team reconvenes Aug. 9 for training camp in New York, then heads overseas Aug. 16 for three exhibition games in Spain and Greece prior to its arrival in Istanbul on Aug. 26.

And when they get to Turkey, the Americans will be one of the smallest squads competing.

"This team is smaller [than the Redeem Team], a lot smaller. The other team would be able to pressure guys knowing if they shot the ball, Dwight [Howard] was going to get 75 percent of the rebounds, and you had other guys with nice size that could get rebounds, too," Billups said.

"This team is different. We don't have that physical presence that Dwight is, so we've got to gang-rebound and pressure guys and play up-tempo because we don't have guys you can just throw it to on the block and boom, get us a foul or get us a bucket. So because of that we've got to pick-and-roll, play fast, space the court and shoot the ball."

They'll have to keep their cool, too, in hostile atmospheres against physical opponents who will look to rile up the young Americans to see how they handle the pressure.

And just as Kidd counseled Howard and [Carmelo Anthony](#) that they would be the primary let's-force-this-guy-into-a-meltdown targets in Beijing, it'll be Billups and Odom who will be relied upon to be the calming influences.

"The advantage we do have is as a whole, we're more athletic than any other country. But along with that you've got to put the mental aspect together with it, and that really comes with the experience of going out there and going through it," Billups said. "So we'll see what happens."



ESPN Insider Chris Sheridan

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