

SPORTS - NUGGETS

Nuggets need Billups' leadership more than ever

By Benjamin Hochman
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He's been a lottery pick and a bust.

He's been Mr. Basketball and Mr. Big Shot.

He's been Finals MVP and a homecoming king.

He's been a world champion (figuratively, upon winning the 2004 NBA title) and a world champion (literally, this summer at, yes, the world championships).

He's seemingly been it all in basketball — through ups and downs — but Chauncey Billups will now need to be something new. The glue.

Sure, he's been a leader and a quarterback and all those sportsy titles you give to, well, a floor general. But this season, the Nuggets could find themselves in a clutter. Carmelo Anthony, arguably the greatest talent in franchise history, could be traded at some point. New guys will pop onto the roster. And numerous players are already injured, even before the first game. The Nuggets have enough talent to compete in the Western Conference, but it will be up to their glue to make them work together and stick together.

"That's what I love to do," Billups said of leadership. "Orchestrate, run the show, try my best to keep everybody happy. That's my job description."

Entering his 14th season, Billups is coming down from one of the biggest highs of his career, preceded, in fitting roller-coaster fashion, by a career low. In the summer, Billups was a leader on the world championship team in Turkey, which didn't feature any superduperstars, save Kevin Durant, yet played melodic, team basketball; Billups' fingerprints were all over that squad. But in the spring, Billups walked off the court in Utah, dumbfounded, after the Nuggets — title contenders in March — were ousted in the first round of the playoffs in April.

"You don't really learn until you know what happened, you understand what I'm saying?" Billups said, speaking for the Nuggets. "You just don't say, 'All right, we lost, we'll see you next year.' You've got to recognize the reasons why you lost, and then you have to learn from that."

The Nuggets are back at work. They have completed one week of camp, and from players to coaches, all accounts are positive. The way the Nuggets are approaching

practice is, really, the only way they can — as if Melo will be on the team all season. The guys are playing hard. Taking drills seriously. Yearning for learning. Billups is being Billups.

"He's a good teacher, especially for the young guys on the team," Anthony said. "I think experience has a lot to do with it. Guys look up to him, guys know he's a leader, guys have seen what he did in the past."

Last spring, when the Nuggets fell apart, even Billups admitted that 13 years into this NBA thing, he was still learning the intricacies of leadership. Well, Nuggets faithful are hoping that his lessons last spring, and his triumphs this summer, will provide the Nuggets with some Elmer's-like cohesion this fall (or winter), when Melo is, most likely, dealt before the February trade deadline.

See, six key Nuggets have been together since the 2008-09 conference finals season, but if Melo is traded sooner rather than later — and with Kenyon Martin and Chris Andersen on the shelf — the new-look Nuggets will be just that.

But few players in the current NBA have intangibles like Billups, and this makes coach George Karl optimistic amid uncertainty.

"He knows how to win games, he can do it playing well and he can do it playing poorly, which is very unusual," Karl said. "He just kind of feels the game as it happens. He understands what is going right and wrong on the court. And the combination with me, we do a good job at figuring out how to win down the stretch and winning in the fourth quarter."

Naturally — and perhaps unfairly — people wonder if Billups' summertime adventures will affect his stamina come next spring. The guy did turn 34 last month. Karl is well aware of this, and has said that Billups will likely play in the "low-30s" range in regards to minutes per game; Billups played 34.1 last season. Ty Lawson, entering his second season, will not only play more minutes at point guard, but also more minutes alongside his mentor.

"I just love playing with him," Billups said. "He listens to everything. He's tough. He brings speed to the floor. And having two playmakers on the floor is always good."

Benjamin Hochman: 303-954-1294 or bhochman@denverpost.com, Twitter @nuggetsnews

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Safety Michael Lewis leaves the San Francisco 49ers

By Jerry McDonald
Oakland Tribune

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Michael Lewis has become the latest member of the 49ers to say "thanks, but no thanks" to the Mike Singletary regime.

His agent, Rodney Williams, told Comcast SportsNet that his client will not return to the team, saying: "The relationship is beyond repair. We've asked to be released."

As the 49ers practiced Friday before boarding a flight to Atlanta, Taylor Mays and Reggie Smith were taking reps at strong safety. Lewis, a starter in all 50 games he has played since joining the 49ers in 2007, was not present.

"I told him to go ahead and do what he has to do," said Singletary, the 49ers' coach. "As far as if he will make the trip or not, I'm not sure at this point. It depends on if things can be worked out or not. It's personal reasons, and that's on Mike. I don't talk about that. You have to talk to Mike about that."

According to an NFL Network report Monday, Lewis and linebacker Takeo Spikes were to be benched after the 31-10 loss to the Kansas City Chiefs. But asked about changes in the lineup Wednesday, Singletary said the starters would remain intact.

Lewis, 30, is a nine-year veteran who joined the 49ers as an unrestricted free agent from the Philadelphia Eagles. He agreed this past offseason to accept a substantial pay cut from a reported \$4 million to \$2 million.

Singletary declined to answer when asked if Lewis' absence had to do with football or was a family matter, nor would he say if Lewis would start if he

went to Atlanta.

"I don't want to get into if he were here or not," Singletary said. "All I know is he's not here for personal reasons."

Lewis follows the footsteps of defensive lineman Kentwan Balmer and running back Glen Coffee, who also left the team of their own volition.

Balmer, a first-round draft pick in 2008, left the club Aug. 9 and eventually was traded to the Seattle Seahawks for a sixth-round draft pick.

Coffee, a third-round choice in 2009 and the backup to Frank Gore, left the team Aug. 13 and announced his retirement, saying he wanted to focus more on his religious beliefs than on football.

Singletary said the club didn't have a replacement strategy for Lewis, whether it be plugging in Mays, Smith or a combination of the two.

When Lewis left the Chiefs game for five plays, he was replaced by Smith, who also worked at the position in training camp.

At practice Friday, Mays, a 6-foot-3, 230-pound rookie from USC, got most of the work with the first team.

"The thing is, Reggie has been here for three years,



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so he has a good feel for what we're doing," Singletary said. "Taylor, in case he has to play, whether it's a sub situation or a base situation, it's just a matter of him knowing as much as he can, and we want to get him all the reps he possibly can."

Mays wasn't eager to discuss his role. He has played only on special teams through three games.

"I haven't played the first three games on defense, and I don't know if that's going to change or not," Mays said. "We'll see what happens."

Smith referred questions about Lewis to Singletary and said, "I just have to be ready for anything."

That will be a good motto when facing the Falcons on Sunday. Atlanta beat the 49ers 45-10 last season, has the No. 6 offense in the NFL at 385.3 yards per game and has one of the best tight ends in NFL history in Tony Gonzalez.

- Wide receiver/returner Ted Ginn Jr. (knee) and center Eric Heitmann (fibula) didn't practice and are listed as doubtful. Cornerback William James (ankle) was limited and is questionable. Safety Dashon Goldson (knee) and Spikes (knee) are listed as probable.
- The 49ers have a 4-11 road record under Singletary, with two of those wins coming against St. Louis and one against Buffalo. When asked about the qualities of a good road team, Singletary said, "I don't know. I hope to become one of them real soon. I couldn't answer that." One thing that might help -- a fast start. In none of the 15 road games under Singletary have the 49ers scored more than seven points in the first quarter.

sunday's game

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