

# YAHOO! SPORTS

## Billups' wisdom resonates with Team USA



By Adrian Wojnarowski, Yahoo! Sports Sep 9, 12:58 am EDT

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ISTANBUL – Looking back, Chauncey Billups thinks about his immaturity, the seasons lost to foolishness, and it makes sense he's here. He thinks of the loneliness, a lost soul drifting until Terrell Brandon reached down and lifted him with wisdom and guidance. Yes, he's making up for lost time now, a thirtysomething determined to thrust himself into every championship circumstance left in his basketball career.

Mostly, he loves the mentoring. He talks to these Team USA kids in the buses, the hotels, moments of truth on the basketball court. He doesn't lecture. This is a burden of responsibility that he goes out of his way to take upon himself.

"I never had this when I came into the league," Billups said. "By instinct now, this is what I do."

Practice was over at the Besiktas Turka Arena on Wednesday, and Billups was still the final player on the floor. He was getting some more shots up and making sure all those young players were watching him work. He turns 34 this month, and these national team summers perhaps ought to belong to the twentysomethings. Most of his peers can't be bothered, but Billups desperately wanted a chance to play for Team USA. This team needs Billups in 2010 the way it needed Jason Kidd in 2008.

"Yeah, I'm making up for some lost time in my career," Billups said. "I'm pretty sure there isn't a guy my age in the league who's experienced the kind of success I have, would volunteer to be here giving their summer up. But for me, in my first five years, I



didn't play very much. And when I did, I didn't play that great. I'm still fresh. I've still got some really good years left in me. I've still got a lot of things I want to accomplish."

He has an NBA championship and a Finals MVP, and the trade to Denver had been a chance to chase titles all over again. Now, it's uncertain. He thinks he wants to be a general manager someday. Coaching? Billups shrugs and scrunches his face. "I'm pretty sure I could do it – and probably do a good job of it – but I don't like the young egos, the young attitudes, in the league."

He's a student of the game's chemistry, the way organizations run, the way teams are cobbled together. What unfolded over the past year in Denver – the dysfunctional management structure – troubled him and leaves him with some anxiety. Former GM Mark Warkentien made the trade for Billups with Detroit in 2008, was voted the NBA's Executive of the Year and then was forced out this summer in that Nuggets cesspool.

Along the way, Warkentien sometimes had the power in the organization. Sometimes, it was executive Rex Chapman. Another adviser, Bret Bearup, has outgoing owner Stan Kroenke's ear. Mostly, it was a cat-fighting mess that took its toll on the organization.

"I'll just say this: I've never seen nothing like that before," Billups said. "Nobody knew who was what there. Nobody knew who to ask a question. I've never seen uncertainty upstairs like that in this league. Never. ...I know this: It had to come to a conclusion."

It did, and the Nuggets are now left with this: a 30-year-old owner, Josh Kroenke, and a young GM, Masai Ujiri, who has mostly been an international scout. Billups has a strong relationship with Josh Kroenke, says they share a vision and he met with Ujiri on the new GM's visit to Istanbul this week. Billups found Ujiri sincere, compelling and left the meeting with a respect for the man. "But with that being said," Billups allowed, "there's a lot of inexperience there. There's not a track record there."

Billups understood the level of performance and mentorship that Denver wanted out of him, and he gave it to them. Carmelo Anthony now wants to leave, and a league source told Yahoo! Sports' Marc Spears that the Chicago Bulls have made themselves the frontrunner for the All-Star forward.

Billups told management this: Find a way to keep Anthony. There's no trade out there that makes us better. Billups will talk to Anthony, but he says he's not going to try to convince him to stay. "I can't push my loyalty for the Nuggets onto him," he said. 'Melo will do what he wants to do, and Billups knows it. "He's not a kid anymore," he said. "Carmelo is a grown man."

If the Nuggets undo this roster, some sources with knowledge of the team's management believe they're inclined to want to keep Billups. Billups is the

hometown kid, an ambassador, the perfect elder statesman for a young, transitioning roster. He has heard it too, and his message has been unmistakable: I love home, but I love winning more.

“For the rest of the time that I’m playing, I want to be playing for something,” Billups said. “I want to be trying to win a championship. I’m not the kind of guy who is just going to ride his career out, say, ‘I’ll play as long as I can and whatever happens, happens.’ No, that’s not me. I want to play for *something*. I want to play for the whole thing.”



The precariousness of these Nuggets has bonded Billups' appreciation for what he had with the Detroit Pistons. He thinks about that championship season in 2004, that seven-game Finals loss in '05, and understands that shaped everything he became in the NBA, and everything he wants to be when he's still done playing. Joe Dumars was the general manager who believed in Billups, who turned over a team to him and surrounded him with an improbable cast that all fit together, that owned the East the better part of a decade.

When Billups becomes a GM, he'll do it like Dumars. “I learned so much from Joe – how to treat guys, how to be honest and upfront with them,” Billups said. “He had the perfect balance of knowing when to be cool and friendly with guys, but also an ability to let guys know that this is a job and I am the boss, and there's a way you're going to have to do things here. But it was never like he made people feel he was looking down on them.

“He built that team perfectly, and I don't think it will ever be done in that fashion again. No max guys, a lot of guys teams had given up on. ...No, there will never be a championship team again like we had.”

For Billups, an NBA championship is most unlikely with or without 'Melo in Denver. Deep down, he knows it too. That's all right. He's still coming hard for it, all the way to this little gym on a big Istanbul hill to work up a good sweat on Wednesday. Oldest guy on the court, and here was Chauncey Billups chasing a world championship for the United States, chasing all that lost time and lost opportunity when he never had someone in his life like he turned out to be.

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## Young talent flourishes in WPS

### Story Highlights

Young stars such as Alyssa Naeher, Jordan Angeli have burst onto the WPS scene  
 FC Gold Pride owns the best regular-season record and is still going strong  
 Philadelphia is slumping and star Amy Rodriguez is experiencing a goal drought

Women's Professional Soccer is close to honoring its year-end award winners. Several young players who will not receive any hardware quietly pieced together solid seasons for which they deserve recognition. Here is a list of the WPS' best XI newcomers:

**GK, Alyssa Naeher, Boston Breakers** -- The 22-year-old Naeher has emerged alongside the Washington Freedom's **Ashlyn Harris** as the league's best young goalkeepers. Naeher has been rewarded with a call-up to U.S. national-team camp thanks to her shot-stopping ability and awareness. She rarely makes costly mistakes.

**D, Ali Riley, FC Gold Pride** -- A finalist for WPS Rookie of the Year, the 22-year-old Riley is a left back who can get forward and defend. She is part of the best defense in the league and already one of the best attacking outside backs thanks to her superior left-footed delivery from the flanks.

**D, Whitney Engen, Chicago Red Stars** -- Like Naeher, Engen got the [call-up to the preliminary roster](#) by U.S. coach **Pia Sundhage**. Chicago veteran **Kate Markgraf** is 34, making Engen the potential long-term answer to ensuring that the Red Stars continue to have one of the best defenses in the league.

**D, Nikki Marshall, Washington Freedom** -- Marshall gets inserted into this lineup as a defender because of the abundance of strikers already on the list, but she is versatile enough to be an effective center back or forward. Her speed up top is lethal and she proved that in her few appearances up front. That raw athleticism makes her a great defender as well.

**D, Holmfridur Magnúsdóttir, Philadelphia Independence** -- Whether being accused of dirty play or knocked for inconsistent play, Magnúsdóttir has her critics. She did little in her early season role as a forward, but she has proved to be a great outside back who can get into the attack.

**M, Jordan Angeli, Boston Breakers** -- Arguably the favorite to win WPS Rookie of the Year, the 24-year-old Angeli is the surprise of the season. She is the model for a player who works hard and positions herself properly to exploit opportunities, as evidenced by seven goals from just 13 shots on goals this season.

**M, Brittany Taylor, Sky Blue FC** -- Perhaps even more versatile than Marshall, Taylor can play anywhere on the pitch. That flexibility is the reason she has played every minute this season. Superior athletic ability makes her a great defender and attacker, and her technical ability in the final third also makes her lethal pushing forward.

**M, Kelley O'Hara, FC Gold Pride** -- O'Hara will be considered a midfielder for this list. She is one of the fastest attackers in the league, a physical player who is not afraid to throw her weight around and make defenders uncomfortable. It's an approach that has helped her tally four goals and three assists.

**F, Lauren Cheney, Boston Breakers** -- Cheney is a classic target forward who can hold up the ball against any player, but she has been up and down in 2010. If she can find consistency, she will surely be **Abby Wambach**'s eventual replacement as the U.S. team's target forward.

**F, Casey Nogueira, Chicago Red Stars** -- Nogueira is another player who struggled with consistency. She started just 12 of 24 games, but she is one of the craftiest American players on the ball and has superior dribbling ability.

**F, Veronica Boquete, Forward, Chicago Red Stars** -- Boquete played only three games for Chicago after winning the USL W-League Championship with the Buffalo Flash, but she is more creative than most young players in WPS. She plays a classically beautiful Spanish style of soccer and she could be an answer to a lack of production from Brazilian forward **Cristiane**.

Five things to know in WPS

**1. Crunch time for Washington Freedom, Sky Blue FC.** The fourth and final playoff spot is still up for grabs on the final weekend of play. Washington (7-9-7, 28 points) has a one-point edge on Sky Blue FC and the advantage in scheduling. The Freedom host the last-place Atlanta Beat while Sky Blue FC must defeat the Boston Breakers at home Saturday. Last time out, Boston embarrassed Sky Blue FC 4-0. Sky Blue FC has struggled to create quality goal-scoring chances all year and it will be hard for the defending champion to match Boston's firepower. Look for Washington to find its way into the playoffs.

**2. Untouchable Pride.** FC Gold Pride (15-3-5, 50 points) has shown no signs of slowing down. Sunday's 2-0 win over Boston makes the WPS regular-season champion unbeaten in its last 12 games. FC Gold Pride has outscored opponents 27-8 during that stretch. Center back **Rachel Buehler** anchors a back line that both starts the buildup and denies opponents significant looks at goal.

**3. Philadelphia slumping.** Wednesday's 2-0 loss to Chicago was the third straight for Philadelphia, which has hit a rough patch at the worst time of the year. Philadelphia (10-9-44, 34 points) has scored just one goal in that stretch and star forward **Amy Rodriguez** has not scored in almost a month. The Independence's reliance on Rodriguez could hurt as the playoffs begin.

**4. Americans get the call.** U.S. coach Sundhage named her 30-player preliminary roster for the Oct. 2 and Oct. 6 friendly matches against China. The group includes midfielders **Tobin Heath** and **Carli Lloyd**, who are returning from injury, and features several young players. Sundhage deserves credit for giving UCLA junior **Sydney Leroux** a chance after Leroux impressed with five goals at the FIFA Women's U-20 World Cup in July. She could prove to be a super-substitute to provide energy at the forward position. She is the next great American forward with incredible speed and work rate.

**5. Internationals absent again.** Several WPS stars will be missing from their teams again Saturday because of Women's World Cup qualifying. Many of the absences will affect the two matches with playoff implications. The fact that these conflicts have surfaced again after the 2009 postseason was altered by international absences is a concern. WPS needs its teams at full strength down the stretch, and if that means adjusting the calendar to accommodate FIFA dates, then that is what has to be done. The quality of critical games should not be diluted because of scheduling conflicts.

*Jeff Kassouf is a freelance writer who runs [The Equalizer](#), a Web site devoted to women's professional soccer news.*

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## By any name, Seahawks' Tyler Polumbus is a candidate to replace Russell Okung

**By Danny O'Neil**  
*Seattle Times staff reporter*

RENTON — "Troy hasn't been with us but a week," coach Pete Carroll said.

Actually, coach, it's Tyler. Tyler Polumbus. He's the offensive tackle the Seahawks acquired in a trade with Detroit on Aug. 31, the one who started eight games for the Broncos last season.

Polumbus is a candidate to start at left tackle Sunday when the Seahawks open the season against San Francisco. Rookie Russell Okung is out because of a high ankle sprain. Chester Pitts, who is coming off knee surgery, is the other possibility.

"Whether we go with Chester or whether we go with Troy Polumbus, we'll have to wait and see," Carroll said.

Though Carroll is eight months removed from USC, it appears he's having a hard time letting go of the men of Troy.

Art Valero, the Seahawks assistant offensive-line coach, acknowledged the difficulty that uncertainty at the left tackle poses.

"We just continue to move on," Valero said. "That's just the thing we have to do. It's not what happens to you that matters, it's what you do about it. Whomever that guy is, whether it's Chester Pitts, whether it's Tyler Polumbus, you've got to go."

This presumably would apply to an offensive lineman named Troy, too. If the Seahawks had one, which they don't.

*Danny O'Neil: 206-464-2364 or [doneil@seattletimes.com](mailto:doneil@seattletimes.com)*

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## Panthers defensive line looks a bit different

By Darin Gantt - [dgantt@heraldonline.com](mailto:dgantt@heraldonline.com)

Once upon a time, the Carolina Panthers had names on their defensive line.

Once upon a more recent time, they had players, and then just the one.

Now, the Panthers have question marks, a group of young linemen who barely resemble previous traditions, but hope to grow into something that can carry the team into the future.

The early indications from the Panthers new-look line have been good, but they'll be tested against a veteran New York front Sunday, and how they'll hold up remains a mystery at the moment.



JEFF SINER

Panthers defensive end Tyler Brayton will be a mainstay on the defensive line this season.

"It's going to be exciting, because they've got some exciting players in there, and everybody's going to be hungry," former Panthers defensive end and preseason television analyst Mike Rucker said of the line he used to anchor. "I know it's probably hard for fans, because they just want to win now. But when you look at that group for the next few years, there's some nice upside, so they should be in good position for the next few.

"It's hard sometimes to look at the long haul, but I think people are going to see some big plays, and they're going to see some mistakes too. That's all part of growing."

Getting to this point has been very much a process for the Panthers, who used to be able to count on the defensive line as the bedrock of the defense, if not the entire roster.

The false front of the George Seifert era was supposed to be good, and at previous points in their careers the late Reggie White, Chuck Smith, Eric Swann and Sean Gilbert were. But if it was intended to be a Mount Rushmore it quickly became a rock-slide, and when coach John Fox took over he had to remake it in a hurry.

Looking back, it was easy to be spoiled early in the Fox years. Having a star such as Julius Peppers on one end, a force such as Kris Jenkins in the middle, and complementing them with a Pro Bowler like Rucker and solid players such as Brentson Buckner, Shane Burton and Al Wallace, the line was able to dominate.

But then Jenkins went away, and age got the better of the rest, leaving Peppers to bring along a new group.

Now he's gone, and for much of the preseason, folks wondered if they'd be able to do anything.

But the Panthers didn't find themselves without playmakers up front all at once, and likewise have been building toward this point for some time.

"The defensive line, that's really a position you have to try to always add to," Panthers general manager Marty Hurney said. "We've brought in some young pass-rushers, and defensive tackle was an area we started looking at aggressively last season. You want to be able to stay ahead, because the best way to keep yourself in a position where you re-tool instead of rebuild is to keep turning it over, keep adding talent.

"It's not easy getting a defensive line to that point, but you just need to keep injecting young talent."

To this point, there's at least some reason for optimism. The Panthers had 18 sacks in their first three preseason games (when the regulars played), and while no one expects that pace, there's at least evidence of improvement.

Former third-round pick Charles Johnson has been in the pipeline for three years now. He was able to come in, learning from both Rucker and Peppers, and finally looking like he's ready to be an every-down player. Then when the first hints became evident that Peppers was a short-timer here, the reclamation began in earnest.

Everette Brown was envisioned as the bridge, a guy who'd play with Peppers for a year, then take over. Then when hit with injuries at defensive tackle early and often, the Panthers methodically went after a new group. General manager Marty Hurney scouted preseason games of teams switching from 4-3 defenses to 3-4s, looking for guys who were odd fits in new schemes but might work here. He landed Louis Leonard in one trade, the now-gone Tank Tyler in another, and found potential starter Derek Landri on the waiver wire from a similar situation last December.

Put them together with sixth-round rookie Greg Hardy, a solid veteran in Tyler Brayton and the surprising scrap-heap addition of defensive tackle Ed Johnson, and the Panthers have a group they think they can trust now -- at least more than outsiders think. For a unit described this offseason as the worst in the NFL by one national outlet, the Panthers are quietly confident in what they have now.

Defensive line coach Brian Baker was all smiles during training camp, and not just because the hyper-intense coach had the kind of young lineup that's perfect for his kind of high-intensity instruction.

"Yes, because these guys are good enough to help us win," Baker said. "I've been places in my career before where I was in a similar seat, and you're looking for the best of a bunch of bad guys. I don't think that's the case here. I think we've got a good pack.

"Foxy and Marty did a good job of getting good guys in here who could play. We've got some guys with talent, and now we've got to make the play to their ability and the best guys will be on the field."

But they're still so young.

Other than the Brayton, who has 78 career starts, this is an extremely untested group.

The other eight linemen on the roster have a total of 35 starts between them, and 21 of those came from Ed Johnson.



And while Brayton laughs and said he felt like a kid the last two years (working alongside elders like Damione Lewis, Maake Kemoeatu and Hollis Thomas), he knows he's going to be looked to for wisdom this year. Throughout came, he was on the lookout for drooping shoulders, knowing the young players were still very much in the early stages of their NFL educations.

"I'm just being vocal as far as encouraging guys, instead of just being so focused on myself," Brayton said. "Some of the young guys, they'll make a mistake and you'll see them put their chins down. You're like, 'Hey, it's a long season. Just do it right the next time and that's how we learn and grow.' So far it's just been kind of encouraging guys.

"I feel like we have a bunch of talented, young, enthusiastic guys. And that's going to make for that sorting out process to happen faster. But sometimes there are things outside your control. Everyone is working hard, it's going to sort itself out."

With that youth, however, there will inevitably be some growing pains.

It was easier in the past, knowing they could bank on double-digit sacks from Peppers. Baker said he never saw evidence of the "Michael Jordan syndrome," where other players would stand around waiting for him to make the Superman play. At the same time, it adds pressure to four ends in particular who have never been looked at this way, the guys who will have to each be better than they've ever been.

Take away the 25.5 career sacks between Brayton and Charles Johnson, and the rest of the linemen on the Panthers roster have 8.5 sacks between them.

"It's just going to mean each one of the four of us is going to have to step it up a little bit more," Brayton said.

"When you don't have that one so-called superstar out there, it just takes more of a group effort. I loved playing with Pep. He was a hardworking, down-to-earth guy and he just loved to get after it, so he's going to be missed. But at the same time we've got to move on and be the best that we can be as a group."

Who steps up? Who knows?

But unlike past incarnations of the Panthers line, there are a number of young options here at once, and you get the sense that they, like Rucker, are excited about the possibilities.

"Hopefully the whole front. Hopefully everybody eats," Johnson said when asked where the pressure would come from. "You have to take it on yourself to step up to the opportunity. When it comes, you better hang onto it."

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