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Utah Jazz: Rookie guard Alec Burks is ready to burn

Rookie, 'inner fire' could bring needed athleticism to Jazz at shooting guard

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Tyrone Corbin's eyes lit up.

The Jazz coach had just been asked about rookie guard Alec Burks. What makes Burks unique? What separates him from the rest? What do you see in the kid, coach?

Grit, Corbin said. Fight. A confident, consistent attack on the court. A quiet, low-key vibe off it. All action, little talk — a silent assassin.

Enes Kanter has received the spotlight during Utah's buildup toward the 2011-12 season. But by the time the Jazz tip off Dec. 27 against the Los Angeles Lakers, Burks could be the most important rookie on the team's young roster.

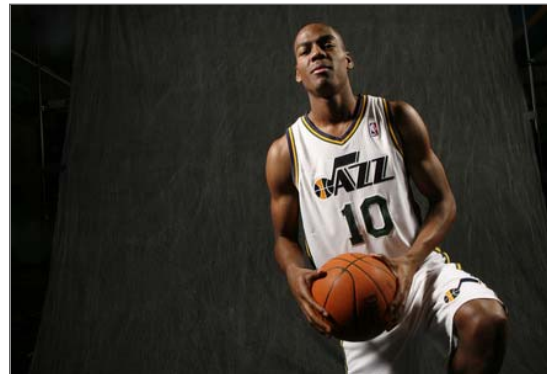
"I love his inner fire," Corbin said.

Utah needs Burks to burn.

Gordon Hayward played big for the Jazz toward the end of 2010-11 after struggling through much of his rookie season. Jeremy Evans became a fan favorite because of his Jumbotron-worthy dunks. Derrick Favors showed the potential for dominance after joining Utah via a late-season trade.

But none matched the production of Wesley Matthews, who played in 82 games and started 48 for the Jazz in 2009-10, averaging 9.4 points while shooting 48.3 percent from the floor and 38.2 percent behind the 3-point line.

Matthews was snatched up by Portland the following summer. His firepower hasn't been replaced.



Francisco Kjolseth | The Salt Lake Tribune New recruit Alec Burks, a promising 19-year-old prospect is poised to help the Utah Jazz.

A season after Matthews' departure, Utah still doesn't have a definitive answer at shooting guard. C.J. Miles, Raja Bell and Hayward are competing for minutes, with Miles and Hayward trying to prove they can bring the dynamic athletic consistency required at the 2 in the NBA.

Less than nine months removed from his sophomore season at Colorado, the 6-foot-6, 193-pound Burks is attempting to prove the same.

The No. 12 overall pick of the 2011 draft was knocked during workouts for being more of a driver than a pure shooter.

He did everything within his power to address the concern during the NBA lockout, adding range while training with Hayward in Indiana and Chauncey Billups in Colorado. Once camp started, Burks was two steps ahead of the game.

"I feel like I always could shoot," Burks said. "I just didn't shoot a lot because I get to the rim so much. I feel like it's just going to prove a lot of people wrong."

As for Hayward, "I felt like he just helped me out during that whole time we was in Indiana."

Burks grew up in Grandview, Mo., a suburb about 20 minutes from Kansas City. Ask Burks about life in Grandview and he says "a lot of people want to act tough because that's the cool thing to do."

Burks has an edge, but his mother kept him from crossing the line.

"I know if I came home and I act like that, my mom slap me," Burks said. "That's what saved me away from all that."

Instead of acting tough, Burks learned the game. Inspired by his older brother, Burks started playing ball in the fifth grade, quickly realizing he could "do a little bit with it." By his junior year at Grandview High School, a little bit had turned into a lot.

Now, the 20-year-old Burks is competing with the 35-year-old Bell — who made his name battling on the court with heart, grit and fight — for playing time.

Bell said Burks' slashing ability is obvious. What could separate the rookie from the pack is an unselfish passing touch.

"That's important," Bell said. "When you have someone who can get to the rim, the next thing you want to do is make sure he can make smart decisions when he's there, and [Burks] does that pretty well."

Ex-Utah coach Jerry Sloan often started rookies, preferring to have one young gun on the floor who could defer to veterans.

Corbin says he's open to putting Burks in the first rotation if he's the best man for the job.

If the kid from Grandview gets the nod opening night against Kobe Bryant?

"If he start me I might cart[wheel] around here," Burks said. "If he don't I'm going to come off the bench and do what I do."

Reporter Steve Luhm contributed to this story

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Alec Burks file

Position • Guard

Year • Rookie

Age • 20

Vitals • 6-foot-6, 193 lbs.

Draft • No. 12 pick in 2011 NBA Draft

College • Colorado

Hometown • Grandview, Mo.

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