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BILL DWYRE

Veteran Chauncey Billups is keeping up with young Clippers

Much-traveled guard might be 35, but he hasn't lost a step and lends valuable experience to a youth-dominated and contending team.

Bill Dwyre

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With his name, Chauncey Billups should be leading Parliament, not fastbreaks.

It turns out there is no mystery to the very British-sounding label placed on him at birth.

"My mom just liked the sound of it," he says.

Clippers fans do too. This is already the season of their dreams, with continuing fulfillment appearing likely.

The Clippers are good because they have young superstar Blake Griffin, who throws spikes into the hearts of opponents with dunks that leave Staples Center with 19,000 mouths agape. They are good because they have established superstar Chris Paul, who throws daggers of his own with three-point dash and drive-to-the-basket dazzle, especially near the end of games.

And they are good because they have Billups, a combination point guard, shooting guard and coach-on-the-floor elder statesman. He scored eight points in Wednesday's 107-105 win over the Utah Jazz.

That he is with the Clippers, a team he had no interest in and was, quite frankly, underwhelmed by, is an amazement. That he is here, at age 35, playing third fiddle to Griffin and Paul and enjoying it — after a career in which he was most valuable player in the playoffs and led various teams to seven consecutive conference finals — is also an amazement.

Long forgotten is that he was the third pick in the 1997 draft. Third picks are seldom flops, even when they leave as sophomores from a less-than-traditional basketball powerhouses such as Colorado.

Billups was never a flop, just a mystery. The Boston Celtics, who drafted him, traded him halfway through the season to Toronto, which soon traded him back home to Denver. Denver, which should have taken a long look, didn't. After 68 games and two seasons, Billups was in Minnesota, and two



seasons later, in Detroit.

It was in Detroit where he found his easy chair and comfortable mattress. In six seasons and two games of a seventh season, he averaged about 16.5 points and 6.0 assists per game and led the Pistons to six consecutive conference finals. That included his playoff MVP run in 2004, when his Pistons beat the Lakers in five games in the Finals.

Billups had been Mr. Basketball as a prep in Colorado, and he certainly was that in Detroit. He made sure high-scoring Rip Hamilton got the ball a lot, and in the right spots. His cool often staved off the explosions of Rasheed Wallace. And when the game was on the line, Billups was willing and able to put it on his shoulders.

After an especially awe-inspiring run of late heroics, Pistons broadcaster George Blaha decided a nickname was in order. The veteran Blaha, having taken over after the retirement of Methuselah, knew something special when he saw it.

"Something kept running through my head," Blaha says. "Every time Chauncey made a big one at the end, I'd be humming the R&B song, 'Mr. Big Stuff.' That was a one-hit wonder by Jean Knight, back in 1971."

Instead of "Mr. Big Stuff," Blaha labeled Billups "Mr. Big Shot." And it stuck.

They remember in Michigan.

"I walk into a Mexican restaurant," Blaha says, "and a guy tells me he's a big fan because I had given Chauncey the Mr. Big Shot name."

Blaha says he worried about what Billups thought of the nickname.

"It was the ultimate compliment," Billups says now. "It was never a burden."

Two days into the 2008-09 season, Billups was traded from his beloved Pistons back to Denver, for Allen Iverson. Making the trade was General Manager Joe Dumars, who had been such a hero to Billups in his playing days that Billups wore Dumars' No. 4 in high school.

Was Billups offended by that trade?

"Offended? Yes, I was," he says. "It wasn't about Allen. He was a friend. It was what I had done in Detroit, my body of work."

He was not so offended that he didn't do well, leading the Nuggets to a conference finals series, his seventh in a row, and averaging 17.9 points and 6.4 assists.

Nuggets Coach George Karl, having suffered through two seasons of Iverson in the twilight — forced shots and minimal defense — immediately understood the value of acquiring Billups.

"If we hadn't made the trade," Karl told the Associated Press recently, "I don't think I'm here right now."

But Billups was swept away once again as part of the trade that sent his Denver teammate, Carmelo Anthony, to the New York Knicks. Then, although willing and eager to play a second season in New

York, Billups was waived under the league's new amnesty clause that allows teams to avoid having certain salaries counted against them.

So there was a now-distressed Billups, one of the league's premier players, saying he would play only for certain teams and undoubtedly hoping to clear waivers and become a free agent. Of course, he couldn't stop teams from claiming him. Had he been able to, the Clippers, who got him two days before they traded for Paul, would have been rejected.

"I'd been in the league a long time," he says. "From the outside, looking in, it never looked like the Clippers competed. I wanted to go to a team that had championship aspirations."

Now, after a start that has a big city and a competitive sports league buzzing about them, Billups says, "What used to be the Clippers is no longer the Clippers."

Thursday night, Karl and the Nuggets will be at Staples. They lost to the Clippers in Denver on Sunday, in a game in which Billups led the way with 32 points. Something else Karl said recently about the moment he heard his Nuggets had acquired Billups is further revealing.

"When I heard, I was downstairs in my house," Karl said, "and I actually think I got down on my knees and thanked God."

We understand, George.

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