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Still a Big Shot

Even past his prime, Billups remains a critical piece of Pistons puzzle

by Keith Langlois, Pistons.com | @Keith_Langlois

A half-dozen Pistons wrapped up Monday's practice with a spot shooting competition from around the 3-point arc. Chauncey Billups smoked the field, a nod to not just his acknowledged shooting prowess but to his competitive streak and ability to embrace a challenge.

They're the qualities that propelled him to leadership and made him an attractive target in free agency when Joe Dumars, after redefining his roster, knew what was still missing was what Billups offered in volume – the ability to project a confident aura amid the chaos of an NBA season or a game down to its critical final possessions.

That's why he's likelier to finish games than to start them, where it would be more difficult to keep a 37-year-old's minutes in check. And Billups expects to be on the court to shepherd a young team rippling with athleticism and potential through those turbulent moments. "Yeah, absolutely," he said Monday. But if he's not, well ...

"One thing I will tell you, if I'm not, I'm just not," he said. "Ain't no riff. No big deal. Hopefully, we win it and no big deal. I'm not going to ruffle no feathers. I'm not here for that."

What he's here for, as he's said since his July re-introduction complete with the No. 1 jersey he made famous, bequeathed to him by Andre Drummond, is to leave the Pistons in a better place, to push them along to the heights he knew as MVP of the 2004 NBA championship Pistons.

He's encouraged by the first week but will be in his teammates' ears with a steady drumbeat of messages to keep their focus riveted on the only goal that matters: winning.

"I like the energy," he said. "Everybody is fed up with how it's been here the last few years and looking to move past that and start playing some meaningful basketball here. I'm telling these guys we expect to make the playoffs, but it's just not going to happen because you have an upgraded roster. People still don't respect the Pistons right now. You've got to go get it. You've got to go out there and grind and earn your respect and that part of the process, people don't know how hard that is. That's why I'll continue to keep the message going."

"In my opinion, our playoff race starts opening night. We're not good enough to cruise and turn it on after the break. These are meaningful, right now."

Maurice Cheeks has figured out pretty fast that he has an invaluable resource in Billups, not just for what he can mean for 48 minutes between the lines but for everything he'll provide as Cheeks' de facto surrogate in all the moments he'll interact with players in the locker room, on the team bus and over a dinner on the road.

"I think we've got a lot in him," Cheeks said. "As he has shown out there in these practices, he can still play. His knowledge surpasses everything, because he's probably been in every situation imaginable. We've got a guy who can still play. Things that I don't recognize, he can recognize. And as players get tired of hearing from me, they can hear from him. We've got a valuable asset in Chauncey that can still do a lot of things on and off the court to help us win games."

Cheeks is letting Billups dictate his level of participation through training camp. Billups said he'll probably play in four or five of eight preseason games, not just to limit his load, he said, but to give young players, particularly Kentavious Caldwell-Pope, enough work to have him as ready as possible for the Oct. 30 opener.

He acknowledges he's no longer in his prime. That doesn't mean he can't hit the same heights, only that he can't hit



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them quite as often or for the same duration. He understands that he can't carry the Pistons for long stretches, as he could in his first go-around.

"I think that Brandon (Jennings) and Josh (Smith) and Greg (Monroe) and those guys are going to have to be the best players on the team," he said. "If I'm the best player and the most important piece out there, then we're probably not going to win that much, to be honest with you. I'm going to lead on the floor. I'm going to lead in the locker room. Do the same things I do. And I'm going to be out there to make some plays, make some shots. I'll be out there facilitating and just trying to help them along."

He's comfortable with a complementary role, in large measure, because his eyes have been opened to the talent surrounding him after a week of training camp.

"I love our size," he said. "I love that we can change up in so many different matchups and lineups. I love that we, a lot of times, are going to have two playmakers on the floor, whether it's myself and Will (Bynum), myself and Brandon, (Rodney) Stuckey and Brandon. You're going to have playmakers on the floor, guys that can make plays and get into the paint. I love that. That's kind of where the game is going right now, having guys out there who can make plays. I think we're going to be a pretty good shooting team, as well. Contrary to what everybody thinks, we've got some shooters, man."

None good enough to beat him on Monday, he left unsaid, but an endorsement from Mr. Big Shot bodes well for chances of the Pistons dispelling doubts about their perimeter shooting ability.

- Gigi Datome (hamstring) and Peyton Siva (calf) did not practice on Monday. Greg Monroe sat out the latter portions with a minor hamstring irritation. Cheeks said he wasn't sure whether Monroe would play in Tuesday's preseason opener vs. Maccabi Haifa at The Palace.

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