

AROUND TOWN

No Joak

Joakim Noah has a lot to prove after his stellar college career, but where does he fit in?



PHOTO BY OSCAR LOPEZ

- BY MATT WOOD -

The Joakim Noah you probably know is the one pop-locking at center court with Verne Lundquist after

Florida won the SEC championship last year, or maybe the one telling Jim Nantz that nobody really understands how “big” he and his Gator boys were going to party after they won their second straight NCAA title.

The Bulls’ number one draft pick has made a reputation with his aggressive, emotional style of play and, let’s face it, rather curious appearance. Did you see the suit and bow tie he wore at the draft? Don’t say you aren’t just a little curious about what that guy’s going to say and do now that he’s playing on basketball’s biggest stage.

But how will Noah adjust to having to earn his playing time on a talented Bulls roster that returns seven of its top eight scorers from a team that won 49 games last year?

“I don’t know what to say,” he says. “I’m just gonna work hard, and do what I gotta do. I’m gonna be who I am, and I mean I’m excited about this situation. I can’t wait to start playing

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games.”

He does a good Nook Laloosh, but he doesn’t sound like he necessarily expects to sit on the bench either.

“I don’t know what’s going to happen,” he said. “I don’t think anybody knows what’s gonna happen, so I mean I don’t think it’s fair to just make a judgment right away.”

Yet it’s ultimately up to Scott Skiles and the Bulls coaching staff.

“I know that those aren’t things I can control. As a player, I know that the only things I can control are how hard I play in practice, and how hard I go when my name is called.”

Skiles and Bulls GM John Paxson believed they were getting something good when they drafted Noah in the first round. Not only is he a physically gifted, versatile player, but he has that emotional fire that, while irksome to opposing teams and fans, means that he’s going full-tilt all the time.

“Joakim just wears everything out on his sleeve, the emotions, the intensity,” Paxson said. “[Andres Nocioni] gives us that to some degree, but Joakim is going to speak his mind a few times during the year, but that’s okay. He brings it every day.”

Part of what made Noah such an attractive pick was that he had won at the college level, a fact that Paxson says the team doesn’t specifically target in the draft, but still scores highly in their evaluation. Look around the lineup: Duke, Kansas, UConn, etc.

“We do our evaluation based on talent and skill level and that type of thing, but there are a lot of intangibles that we throw into the equation, and coming from a winning program, that means something,” he said. “You’ve played in big games, and you’ve won in pressure situations.”

No one ever doubted Noah’s talent or drive though. The real question is how quickly he can ramp up his physical style of play to the NBA.

“Physically, he’s got such a relentless style, which we would never dream of trying to take away from him, that’s who he is,” Skiles said. “But just seeing in a pro game, can he, if he

played big minutes, could he carry that style through? Is he in good enough shape to do that? Because he's always wanting to bang people and rebound the ball, and can he hold up to that physically? Those are the kinds of things with young players that you just don't know."

On top of questions about general physical strength, Noah also has an achy shoulder, though he says it feels good. In typical fashion, he attacked the rehab with gusto. Paxson said that while he was traveling in August, people in the front office would send him emails saying Noah had been working out at the Bertie Center every day, five hours a day, working on both his rehab and his basketball skills and conditioning. Noah said he didn't see any choice in the matter.

"It gets really really boring because it's repetitive, and it's always the same thing," he said, "but it's something I had to do."

Fans got a first taste of how well Noah had recovered during the Bulls' first preseason game against the Milwaukee Bucks. He entered



PHOTO BY OSCAR LOPEZ

late in the first quarter and promptly dunked, then blocked a shot on the next possession. He finished with six points, four rebounds, four assists, a steal, and the one block in 23 minutes; not a mind-blowing line, but one can also see in this game and others the all-around game he could develop given more seasoning.

While he was getting grilled about his preparedness and the condition of his shoulder, Noah seemed

remarkably mature and humble, definitely not the same kid who nearly made Lundquist wet his pants last spring.

"I'm the luckiest dude in the draft. That's the way I feel about it," he said. He said he still plans to play with the same kind of emotion that made him (in)famous in college. But at the same time, he realizes he's now a much smaller fish in a much bigger pond, if at least for a little while.

"Just to be in this situation, I feel like I can learn so much from all of these guys. I couldn't be more fortunate."

As far as the expectations he carries on his near 7-foot shoulders, he said, "My expectations are how hard I'm going to work.

"My expectations aren't a set goal of how many points I'm going to score, or how many minutes I'm going to play because those aren't things I can control ... It's not really about putting expectations on you, it's just about having fun, and fun is winning basketball games."

If that's the case, then Paxson is hoping that Noah will enjoy himself again this year.

"I think he's going to find a way into our rotation quite easily. He's going to have to work at it, and work for it, but we need his size and athleticism, and he's going to find his way. I don't have any doubt about that."

Matt Wood is a regular contributor to Chicago Sports Weekly.

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