

Anywhere but on the court

After injury, Bobcats star not out of sight

By JENNA FRYER
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

CHARLOTTE, N.C.

Emeka Okafor's calendar is packed this month. He's signed up for two book fairs, an appearance at Opera Carolina, several meet-and-greets, a pair of kids clinics and an engagement with the University of Connecticut's Alumni Association.

The face of the Charlotte Bobcats will be all over town.

Everywhere but the basketball court, that is.

Heading into the weekend, Okafor has missed 36 games with a sprained right ankle. The centerpiece of the franchise has become a forgotten man in his second NBA season.

"I am sure it's difficult for him," said coach and general manager Bernie Bickerstaff, who spent a year scouting Okafor before making him the first pick in franchise history. "Out of loyalty to his teammates, I am sure he wants to be out there and be a part of the franchise that is being built around him."

"I know his conviction, and I know he wants to be a part of things. But this is the hand he's been dealt."

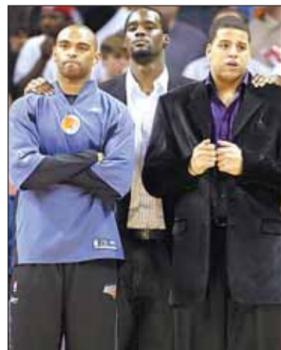
This was supposed to be a big year for Okafor, the reigning rookie of the year. He earned the honors by finishing fourth in the league in rebounding (10.9 a game) and reaching double figures in scoring and rebounding 47 times.

He didn't let down during the summer, taking up yoga to improve his flexibility and weight training to tone specific areas. He also spent two weeks back home in Houston working out with former league MVP Hakeem Olajuwon to pick up new techniques in his game.

Alas, it was all for naught. Okafor sprained his ankle in a Dec. 19 win over the Sacramento Kings. He sat out eight games, but returned to the lineup ready to go in a Jan. 10 game against his hometown Houston Rockets.

He played well in his return, with 21 points and eight rebounds in 35 minutes. But when the game went into double overtime, Okafor's season might have come to an end.

Going after a rebound in the second extra period, he came down and landed on an opposing player's foot. His right ankle — the one that had just healed from the first sprain — gave out underneath him and Okafor had to be helped off the court.



AP PHOTO
Emeka Okafor, center, stands with teammates Alan Anderson, right, and Sean May during a game against the Miami Heat on Monday.

NBA's class of '96

10 years later, draft stands as one of league's best

By BRIAN MAHONEY
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

As far as Jermaine O'Neal was concerned, the proof was right there on the page. The Indiana Pacers All-Star was looking through a magazine when he spotted a list of the NBA's best players and realized he had something in common with a number of them.

"I was saying, 'You look at the All-NBA teams and a lot of those guys are from '96,'" O'Neal said. "When you look at that draft, it was unbelievable."

As they approach the 10-year anniversary of the night their pro careers began, O'Neal and his classmates feel they are entitled to some bragging.

"That was a great class," said Kobe Bryant, like O'Neal drafted out of high school before that was widely accepted. "A lot of great players came out of that draft. I don't think people are fully aware of the talent that came out of that draft."

The 1996 draft produced five players who were All-Stars this year. Four of them (Steve Nash, Allen Iverson, Ray Allen and Bryant) were All-NBA last season. Iverson and Nash have won MVP awards, and Nash and Bryant are among the leading candidates this season.

Need scoring? Try Bryant or Iverson. Nobody's more skilled at running an offense than Nash. For 3-point shooting, you can't do much better than Allen or Peja Stojakovic.

The NBA's two leading scorers are '96ers, and Nash tops the league in assists. Marcus Camby, taken behind Iverson with the second pick, was leading the league in rebounding early in the season before getting slowed by injuries.

No wonder O'Neal has no problem saying what others probably think.

"I'd say that was probably the best draft ever," he said. "I would say that if I had to evaluate just on what's going on in the NBA now, with all the stars we have in the game now."

That would depend on a person's definition of a good draft. It's hard to top Oscar Robertson and Jerry West going 1-2 in 1960; the 1984 draft yielded three future MVPs in the top five picks: Hakeem Olajuwon, Michael Jordan and Charles Barkley, plus John Stockton later in the first round.

But few drafts boast as many talented players deep into the first round. An All-Star team could be fielded just on players taken after the first dozen picks: Bryant (No. 13), Stojakovic (14), Nash (15), O'Neal (17) and Zydrunas Ilgauskas (20).

"It's got to be up there," Nash said during All-Star weekend. "There's a bunch of other guys who aren't here that are having terrific careers, played in All-Star games, gotten max contracts. It's a very deep and talented class."

How Bryant ended up going so low out of Lower Merion High School in Pennsylvania remains a bit of a mystery. Asked recently how 12 teams could have passed on him, Bryant joked that West must have been responsible. The former Lakers executive acquired Bryant's rights by sending Vlade Divac to the Charlotte Hornets.

"I think Jerry West might have had something to do with that," Bryant said. "He was kind of putting out, 'Oh no, don't draft that kid. I saw him work out. He's not that good.'"

Still, Bryant would have been gone long before that if John Nash had his way.

Nash was New Jersey's general manger and said the Nets planned to take Bryant with the eighth pick.

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— Jermaine O'Neal
On the talent in the 1996 NBA Draft

In fact, he says he and then-Nets coach John Calipari told Bryant and his family of their plans at dinner the night before the draft.

But Nash says Bryant called the next afternoon to tell the Nets he wasn't interested in playing for them, probably because he knew where he could end up instead.

"As I recall, we got this phone call somewhere in the vicinity at 2 in the afternoon," Nash said. "By 6, it was apparent to us as to what had happened."

Not willing to take a chance of Calipari's first draft turning into a mess, the Nets instead took Villanova guard Kerry Kittles, the other player they had been interested in. But Nash, who would scout both players on trips to Philadelphia, said he wanted to go with Bryant anyway.

"I was a Kobe guy and I told John not to change his decision," Nash said.

Bryant has helped the Lakers win three titles and he leads the league in scoring this season. Kittles battled injuries throughout much of his seven seasons in New Jersey.

The Minnesota Timberwolves might sometimes wish they could have a do-over on the other big trade from that draft.

The Timberwolves took Allen fifth and traded his rights to Milwaukee, which had selected Stephon Marbury with the previous pick. Marbury wanted out after helping the Timberwolves to the playoffs in each of his first two seasons, and it's since been a constant struggle for the Wolves to find someone with enough skill and character to pair with Kevin Garnett.

Allen has both. A second-team All-NBA selection last year regarded as one of the league's best shooters, he also is well respected within the league. So he could have been talking about his own situation when he said: "That's why sometimes you can't draft on pure talent. You have to draft on personalities, too."

Like any draft, the '96 one had its share of misses. Samaki Walker, Todd Fuller and Vitaly Potapenko were among the players picked in between Kittles and Bryant.

But with a core group currently dominating the league, and players such as Marbury and No. 6 pick Antoine Walker among those who previously have been All-Stars, the class of '96 has reached a level that Bryant isn't sure will be seen again soon.

"I don't know. Maybe not for a while," Bryant said. "Our draft has bred a lot of successful NBA players, a lot of star players. And I'm proud to be a part of that, as we all are. It's not a friendly rivalry, but it's something to be proud of."

BIGGEST HITS OF '96

Here's a look at some of the stars from the 1996 NBA Draft:

Kobe Bryant

Lakers, drafted 13th and traded by Charlotte

Stats

PPG: 23.5
RPG: 5.1
APG: 4.5

Noteworthy: Scored 81 points, the second-highest total ever, earlier this season. He's leading the league in scoring with 35.4 points per game.



Ray Allen

Sonics, drafted fifth and traded by Timberwolves

Stats

PPG: 21
RPG: 4.6
APG: 3.9

Noteworthy: Has been named to the All-Star team five times. Ranks No. 1 in the league in 3-pointers made.



Jermaine O'Neal

Pacers, drafted 17th by Trail Blazers

Stats

PPG: 13.7
RPG: 7.5
APG: 1.3

Noteworthy: A four-time All-Star, he became only the third Pacer to score 50 or more points in a game in a 2005 contest.



Steve Nash

Suns, drafted 15th

Stats

PPG: 13.4
RPG: 2.8
APG: 7.1

Noteworthy: Last season's league MVP, he leads the NBA in assists and free-throw percentage and is fifth in double-doubles.



Allen Iverson

76ers, drafted first

Stats

PPG: 27.9
RPG: 4.0
APG: 6.1

Noteworthy: Was named MVP of the 2000-01 season and has been selected for the All-Star team five times. Ranks first in the league in minutes per game.



BIGGEST MISSES OF '96

Here's a look at some of the players drafted in 1996 who haven't found great success in the NBA:



Samaki Walker

Pacers, drafted ninth by Mavericks

Stats
PPG: 0.3
RPG: 0.4
APG: 0.0



Todd Fuller

Retired, drafted 11th by Warriors

Stats
PPG: 3.7
RPG: 3.0
APG: 0.2



Vitaly Potapenko

Sacramento, drafted 12th by Kings

Stats
PPG: 2.8
RPG: 2.4
APG: 0.3



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