



Belief in higher calling (as in the NBA)

Despite playing another year in a league that has never sent a player to the NBA, Explosion forward Rashaad Powell knows in his heart he can play with the world's best basketball players.

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This is not about vindication, personification or desperation.

It's not about the thousands of colleges that overlooked him, the mother who was taken from him prematurely or the ailing father who needs his support.

It's not about the tryouts he had with the Continental Basketball Association and the National Basketball Developmental League or the month-long workout he had with the Seattle Sonics last August.

Rashaad Powell could have a thousand reasons why he wants to make it to the NBA, but none of those are what push him.

Quite simply, the NBA is the itch that Powell has to scratch. The prom queen that he needs to take out for dinner.

It's the unattainable goal that he thinks he can attain.

Powell, a 25-year-old swingman for the Everett Explosion, truly believes he can play in the NBA. Now he wants to prove it to himself.

"I'm not seeking the NBA for the fame or the glamour," Powell said as his team started preparations for an International Basketball League season that begins in April. "I just want to play at the highest level. This fall (while working out with the Sonics) just gave me more motivation. I know I can play at that level now."

Everett's IBL expansion franchise doesn't have many big names or budding superstars, but Powell could be the rare athlete who has the potential to develop into both. And he's not the only one who thinks so.

"He has NBA qualities," said Explosion head coach Randy Redwine, who was an assistant on Powell's Seattle Mountaineers club during last year's IBL season. "It's not always how good you are but where you are at the time, and who you know. That's where Rashaad is at right now."

Powell didn't go to a big-time college - he followed up two years of junior college by walking on to the University of Idaho team - nor does he have an agent. Those things have limited his opportunities, and yet he hasn't closed the door on the NBA quite yet.

"It gets discouraging after awhile," he said. "But I have yet to have anyone tell me: 'Rashaad, you're not good enough.'"

The Explosion are so enamored with Powell's potential that they plan to play the 6-foot-5 small forward at both guard positions this season so that he can showcase himself for the NBA.

"We'll let him play where he might be playing at the next level," general manager Nathan Mumm said. "He's undersized to play small forward in the NBA, so (playing him there exclusively) won't give scouts a good idea of what he can do."

Despite being overlooked in both high school and junior college, Powell has developed into the kind of player who can dream the ultimate dream. He proved as much to himself last summer, when an acquaintance set up an extended, pre-training camp workout with the Sonics.

"I did more than hold my own," Powell said, "while playing multiple positions. I played against Ray Allen, Rashard (Lewis), and I honestly felt like I played not only well enough to go to training camp but to make the team."

Instead, the Sonics ended up signing USC product Desmon Farmer, who went to a bigger school and has an agent.

"It's just a matter of (Powell) getting the right break," Redwine said. "What his forte is is that he does everything well. And it could be a detriment to him. He can score, defend, pass the ball, and he's a winner. He did some of anything."

"But that could be a detriment because (NBA) coaches might be looking for a scorer, or they might be looking for a rebounder, or a defender. He's not one of those things; he's all of them."

In his first season as an IBL player, Powell became an immediate star last year while playing with the Seattle Mountaineers. He was named the West team's most valuable player at the annual all-star game and went on to earn a spot on the five-man, all-IBL team. In a league void of familiar names, Powell was such a star that the Mountaineers and Explosion got into an offseason battle for his services.

Of course, Everett won that battle in the end.

He's come a long way since his days at Renton High School, where he averaged more than 20 points per game as a senior but didn't receive a single recruiting letter.

His senior season in 1998-99 struck a tragic note when his mother, a long-time smoker, died of emphysema and left Powell, his brother and father behind.

"The only game she ever attended was my junior year against Highline," said Powell, an assistant coach at Renton. "I still, to this day, think that was my best game ever."

"Every time we go there (during his coaching career), I look up at the balcony area where she was cheering, and it still brings tears to my eyes."

Without any interested colleges - Powell maintains that he had a 3.2 grade-point average in high school, so academics were not an issue - the 6-foot-2 guard went to Chemeketa Community College in Salem, Ore. He grew three inches and eventually transferred to Idaho, which offered him a chance to walk on if he paid his own tuition.

Once again, Powell exceeded expectations. He became a starter for the Vandals and was named the Big West Conference's defensive player of the year as a senior, despite having to play center against players who were five, six, sometimes seven inches taller.

"When we played Gonzaga, I was down there banging with Cory Violette and Ronny Turiaf, instead of chasing (Bulldogs point guard) Blake Stepp around the perimeter," the 6-5 Powell said.

The NBA wasn't interested in a 6-5 center, so Powell started working the minor-league circuit. He says he turned down an offer overseas so that he could stay home and help take care of his father, who had hip and heart problems.

Powell eventually caught on with Bellevue of the American Basketball Association, but promises of a \$2,400-per-month salary resulted in only \$800 for the entire season. He vowed not to play in the ABA again, but when former Sonic and Tacoma head coach Vincent Askew called, Powell decided to play another season. This time, he said, he didn't get a single dime.

"The ABA probably owes me \$10,000," Powell said. "I just let it go. There was a point where guys were trying to rally and collect the money, but ..."

Between ABA seasons, he tried out for the CBA's Yakima Sun Kings, but didn't make the final cut and reacted angrily when an assistant coach told him they wanted to keep his phone number in case a roster spot opened up.

"I told him: 'Don't bother,'" Powell said. "I realize now that was a big mistake, but I was pretty emotional at the time."

Last summer, Powell joined the IBL's Seattle franchise and became an instant hit. He led the Mountaineers in scoring and earned a spot on the all-league team. But he's still not raking in the dough.

"I don't think I've made \$5,000 - total. I don't do it for the money," said Powell, who says he made about \$25 per game with the Mountaineers last summer.

To pay the bills, Powell does data entry in the records department of a downtown Seattle insurance brokerage. His commute from Renton begins around 5 a.m., and he works until 2 p.m. After that, he ran practices for Renton High's freshman basketball team for two hours, spent another two hours assisting varsity coach Rick Comer, then spent at least one day a week heading up to Everett for Explosion practice.

While his schedule was supposed to let up a bit with the conclusion of the freshman season last month, a family emergency forced Comer to take a leave of absence and left Powell as the interim head coach. He helped guide the Indians to the Class 3A state tournament, where they were eliminated in two games.

He didn't mind the extra work.

"I'm a basketball junky," Powell said. "Wherever there's an opportunity to play basketball, I'll be there."

Powell wants to stay in basketball for as long as possible, whether it's as a coach or player. His NBA dream is still alive, even though he's playing in a league that rarely sends players into superstardom.

"I'm a murderous competitor," Powell said. "I love the game and want to play at the highest possible level."

"I don't have the intention of making it as the 12th man at the end of someone's bench. I really think I can play at that level."

And he's not the only one.