

Playing Time Squabbles and Roster Politics—Views from the USA Bench

By Ric Bucher, NBA Senior Writer

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The thrill is always the same when you get the call. You have been selected to be a member of the men's Olympic basketball team of the United States. You have been chosen to follow in the footsteps of the Dream Team, widely considered the greatest basketball team ever assembled. You are one of the Ordained Dozen. This is something so much more than playing the game simply to receive an education or a paycheck or even win a championship for your local fanbase. You have been entrusted with protecting the thing in which all your countrymen—fellow basketball players included—take the most pride: their absolute superiority in basketball. To have USA emblazoned across your chest—an entire nation's faith riding on your shoulders and all the world watching as you blow by a Lithuanian or box out a Spaniard or score over an Argentine—has to be as sublime as a sport can get. That is what your mind's eye sees when you get the call. Heart racing, muscles trembling, adrenalin pumping, all in the service of your country and countrymen.

But what if you get that call and are rewarded with little more than a front-row seat? What if you give up your summer vacation and fly halfway around the world to represent your country and you never break a sweat?

It happens to someone every four years, and it is happening again on the U.S. national team. Someone finds himself watching most of the action in his warm-ups.

Someone has to be the 12th man. This year, there are two candidates for the dubious honor—Harrison Barnes and Draymond Green. After a season in which both played critical roles for a Golden State team that won 73 games and came within a minute of its second straight NBA title, each has found himself playing fewer than 12 minutes per game in Rio.

For the first time in a long time, Barnes and Green, like the Team USA 12th men before them, are sitting and watching—and it just happens to be the most meaningful event they have ever been a part of.

It's like being invited to be part of the Beatles...and then finding out you're Ringo. "The game is going on, and you're not in at times you would normally be in," says Shareef Abdur-Rahim, who assumed the role of the 12th man for the 2000 Olympic team after a season in which he averaged 20.3 points and 10.1 rebounds while playing 39.3 minutes a night for the Vancouver Grizzlies.

"I was used to everything being centered around me," Abdur-Rahim said. "And, while I might not feel I was better than the guy playing in front of me, I knew I was better than the guy the other team had. That was a tough dichotomy. I don't know if I adjusted, but I sucked it up."



Months after leading the Grizzlies in scoring and rebounding in his fourth season in the NBA, Shareef Abdur-Rahim averaged fewer than 11 minutes per game in the 2000 Olympics.

As did Carlos Boozer, who played more on a bronze-medal-winning team in 2004 but only a team-low six minutes a game on the 2008 gold-medal-winning "Redeem Team."

"It was tough," says Boozer. "Every part of me wanted to be out there. It came to the point, sometimes you just have to accept it."

Sometimes that is far easier than other times.

Prior to 1992, when the U.S. squads were strictly made up of collegiate players, the egos weren't quite as expansive or the reputations quite as established. Even in '92, the 12th man was practically predetermined: Christian Laettner, who had just finished his career at Duke and been drafted third by the Minnesota Timberwolves, was the squad's only player with no NBA experience among a host of future Hall of Famers.

Laettner, who led Duke to two NCAA championships, not only understood his place on the team—end of the bench—he was perfectly comfortable with it. After all, some in the basketball world saw him as fortunate to be given the spot over the top two picks, LSU's Shaquille O'Neal and Georgetown's Alonzo Mourning.

"I tell people this all the time, and it may shock them," Laettner told director Zak Levitt in a 2012 Dream Team documentary. "But my most enjoyable year was my freshman year because they don't expect nothin' from ya, except carry the luggage, do the laundry and get our doughnuts. And that is easy. The harder thing is to be the leader."

After watching Charles Barkley drive baseline and dunk over Karl Malone attempting a two-handed block, Laettner added, "I felt like, man, I cannot believe I am a part of this practice!"

With Laettner having no expectations, Larry Bird struggling with back issues, John Stockton recovering from a broken leg, Magic Johnson playing his first competitive basketball since being diagnosed with HIV and the team still crushing every

opponent, head coach Chuck Daly's task of making sure everyone got playing time was infinitely easier.



Despite being the No. 3 pick in the draft and after winning a pair of national titles at Duke, Christian Laettner understood his role was to play off the bench for the original Dream Team in 1992.

Four years later, one of his assistants, Lenny Wilkens, became the head coach and faced a tougher challenge. He had to deal with a fully available roster, the lofty standard set by the '92 team and far less harmony.

"The first Dream Team was one of the greatest experiences of my life," says Barkley. "The second Dream Team was one of the worst experiences of my life. [In '92,] for a couple of months, we got along like it was the greatest thing. In '96, guys started complaining about playing time; guys were, like, 'Well, I should be starting,' and I was, like, 'Wait a minute. You all ain't even that good compared to the team I used to be on.' We had a couple guys—I'm not going to throw anyone under the bus—who skipped practice because they didn't start or weren't getting enough practice time. It was not a lot of fun hearing guys bitch all the time about who was starting."

The joy and novelty of simply being part of Dream Team I didn't carry over to Dream Team II. Even though there were a handful of returnees, there was a leadership void without Michael Jordan, Magic or Bird among them. Add a half-

dozen younger talents all itching to prove they were the next wave of greats—Shaq, Penny Hardaway, Grant Hill, Gary Payton—and the harmony wasn't the same.

Stockton wound up battling Hakeem Olajuwon for 12th-man honors, playing 96 minutes over eight games, while Olajuwon logged 88 over seven appearances.

"Those were the two guys who weren't bitching and complaining, that's why!" Barkley says. "I think my minutes went down, too. I told Lenny, 'Coach, I got my gold medal, man.' The older guys played less because the younger guys were complaining the whole time. Stockton really wanted to play more in '96 because he was banged up in '92. He ended up playing less because the young guys were complaining."

Rudy Tomjanovich, who succeeded Wilkens as head coach, took extra measures to avoid such unrest. He enlisted then-national team director Jim Tooley—now CEO and executive director—to sit on the bench during the 2000 Olympics in Sydney and keep track of minutes to make sure everyone played as equally as possible.



"If you started, you'd get a five-minute run in and get subbed out," Tooley says. "We were trying to keep players' minutes balanced. That's what we could get away with."

Tomjanovich also felt he had a roster whose strength was its depth and balance. With Kobe Bryant prioritizing his marriage that summer and reigning MVP and leading scorer Shaquille O'Neal saying he wanted to spend more time with his family, the team's biggest stars were Kevin Garnett, Gary Payton and Jason Kidd.

"We just kept rotating guys in and out and changing the starting lineups," says Tomjanovich, now a scout for the Los Angeles Lakers after 13 seasons as a head coach, the first 12 with the Houston Rockets. "If guys did get it going, we'd leave them in a little longer, but that was about it. It was a difference of a couple of minutes."

Still, some players sacrificed.

Added in July when a lingering ankle injury forced Pistons forward Hill to rescind his invitation, Abdur-Rahim was the main cog for a Vancouver Grizzlies team that went 22-60—the most wins he'd enjoyed in his four NBA seasons—which left him looking forward to being part of a winning team. While he didn't assume his late addition meant he wouldn't play all that much, he didn't complain when he logged 81 minutes over eight games.

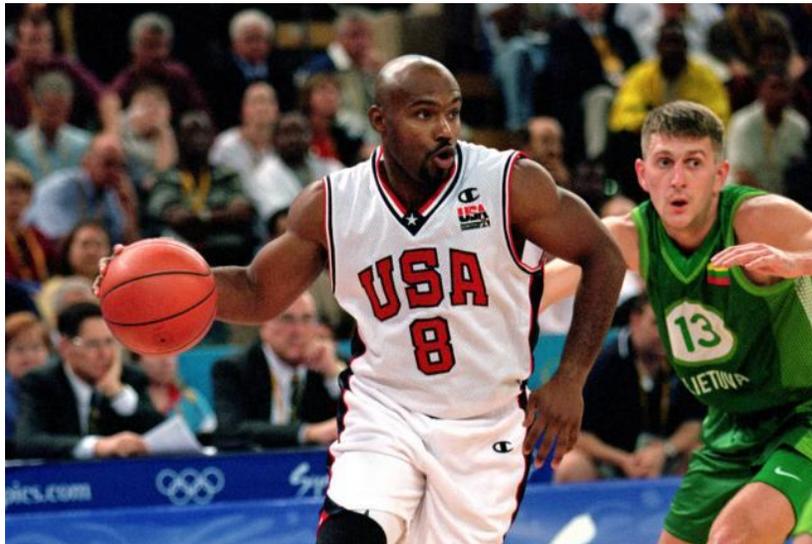
"Where I was in my career, the guys that were playing in front of me and playing more than me were far more accomplished," Abdur-Rahim says. "I hadn't won a lot to that point. I felt lucky to be in that situation. So whatever benefit I could get out of it I wanted to just enjoy that, enjoy representing my country and winning an international championship. I played in every game, so I felt a part of it."

Tim Hardaway, meanwhile, was one of the first nine players selected even though he was nearing the end of his career and battling knee issues every step of the way. He squeezed out one more full season as the starting point guard on a 50-win Miami Heat team before hopping from Dallas to Denver to Indiana to last two more, but he knew once Olympic practices began he wouldn't play much.

"You can tell when you start practicing which way the coach is going to go," Hardaway says. "You just have to accept it because it's a team doing something for its country. After the first couple of games, you knew when you were going to come in and how long you were playing and what you were out there for. When you see what your role is going to be, you accept it. When you play, you play."

Hardaway, who averaged 13.4 minutes in eight games, took solace in the chance to hang for a couple of months with players he wouldn't have otherwise. "Being

around the fellas, telling their stories about how they grew up," he says. "You find out everybody basically grows up the same way, just in different places."



Eleven seasons into his NBA career, Tim Hardaway found minutes were hard to come by at the 2000 Olympics but found enjoyment in being around his NBA brethren in Sydney.

More than who comprised the roster, Tomjanovich had greater concerns with the way the team was selected by a then-11-man committee. There were no tryouts or training camp to determine who should be on the team; the group, consisting of seven NBA executives, two former national team players, an NCAA representative and a nonvoting chairman, decided who should be on it by assessing who was playing particularly well that NBA season. The general belief among NBA players and executives was that committee members put their personal favorites on or kept players they disliked off the roster.

"Too much politics involved," says current Team USA executive director Jerry Colangelo.

"It was an anointment," says Tooley. "That was the word we used here. And sometimes that anointment was done in advance; maybe it was made in December, with the Olympics in July or August. Well, while he's among the 12 best in December or January, he may not be come July because he had a bad second half of the season or he got hurt or whatnot. So we were kind of committed to that. Now the

way we do it, waiting as long as we can to get as much intelligence on a player's conditioning and health as we can, is much better."

Tomjanovich recalls being on a conference call with the committee in January 2000 to discuss how to fill the last three roster spots. "I'm not sure all the committee guys were on the phone," he says, "or that they weren't handling other business while we were on the call. I mean, they had other jobs, and this was in the middle of the day."

During the call, Tomjanovich pointed out that there wasn't a small forward among the first nine players and asked that the committee give one of the last three spots to the Toronto Raptors' Vince Carter. It voted instead to add Pistons small forward Hill, Heat center Mourning and Bucks shooting guard Ray Allen. Hill and Mourning were locks, and the committee apparently questioned if Carter, who was the leading All-Star vote-getter that year, would handle the 12th-man role as well as Allen would.

Tomjanovich eventually got his wish several months later, when power forward Tom Gugliotta needed reconstructive knee surgery and withdrew from the team. Carter replaced him in March.

Ultimately, Carter proved to be one of the team's most valuable players. Not only did he drop an iconic dunk by leaping over 7-foot French center and Knicks draft pick Frederic Weis, but he nailed a crunch-time three-pointer that helped Team USA get past Lithuania, 85-83, in a tough semifinal game. "He ended up being one of the heroes on that team," Tomjanovich says.

Hardaway did not, but still walked away from the experience with a gold medal that became even more valuable when he ended his career without an NBA championship.

"I see it as better than winning an NBA championship," Hardaway says.

Four years later, the committee had a much bigger challenge than finding NBA stars who would devote two offseasons to practice and travel and then mostly ride the pine for actual games. The 2002 FIBA World Championships were arguably the greatest embarrassment in U.S. men's basketball history. Despite serving as hosts with the tournament held in Indianapolis, the committee found itself struggling to find top-level NBA stars willing to play. The squad didn't even earn a medal, finishing sixth. Head coach George Karl openly clashed with his leading scorer, small forward Paul Pierce, resulting in Pierce being benched for the final game.

That collective face-rub to American basketball pride inspired a group of the league's best players to sign up for the 2003 FIBA Americas Championship in Puerto Rico and help Team USA qualify for the '04 Olympics in Athens, Greece. With Tim Duncan, Jermaine O'Neal and Allen Iverson leading the way, the squad rolled to a first-place finish.

Security concerns in the wake of the 9/11 attacks prompted much of the team to pass on going to Athens the following summer. Duncan and Iverson remained, but O'Neal, Carter, Allen, Kidd and Tracy McGrady were among those who said no. They didn't decline all at once, either—it was a gradual disintegration, as if each defection prompted another to think, "Well, if he's not going, I'm not going."

"As we lost a guy, we'd get the committee together and say, 'Hey, so-and-so is out, who do we think should be next?'" Tooley recalls. "We'd come up with a name, then call the player and his agent and say, 'Does he want in?' Maybe the next week, we'd lose another player or two; we had to reconvene. We filled holes. Maybe we should've had better foresight and said, 'This guy bailing out is not going to be the last guy; let's reconfirm everything and start anew.' When we wound up plugging holes, we didn't have a great team chemistry there."

The squad ultimately was composed of a mish-mash of styles and personalities. Duncan and Iverson were the lone established superstars. Stephon Marbury was the team's only true point guard. [Emeka Okafor](#), the newly minted second pick of the draft by the Charlotte Bobcats after a sensational season at UConn, bolstered the front line along with second-year pros Boozer and Amar'e Stoudemire. And

then there was the promising threesome that had just finished its rookie season: LeBron James, Dwyane Wade and Carmelo Anthony.

The young roster was coached by Larry Brown, who never has tolerated young players and their mistakes all that well. And according to one Team USA source, Brown had a quiet disdain for both zones and three-point shooting, staples of the international game. The U.S. squad lost three games and finished with the bronze.

"I have an incredible amount of respect for Larry Brown," Boozer says. "He wasn't communicating to us young guys—'You're young, you're not going to play that much'—but that was OK."



Larry Brown and some his young stars on the 2004 U.S. national team struggled to find a harmonious rhythm on or off the court.

It wasn't OK with Melo that Brown communicated through the media, telling reporters that Anthony was separating himself from the group, a public revelation that caught Anthony by surprise after meeting with Brown to clear the air privately.

Anthony played 47 total minutes in seven games. Stoudemire (57) and James (91) didn't play much more.

Okafor played a grand total of 14 minutes in two games, but that didn't surprise him. He was in a New York hotel room days before the 2004 NBA draft, being fitted for his draft-night suit, when he received the call. No one ever told him he'd be the

12th man, and he couldn't recall ever coming off the bench before on any team, but he prepared to do just that.

"I was a college guy; there were 12 people on the team and there are only so many minutes to go around," he says. "If I don't play, no hard feelings, I'm the youngest guy on the totem pole. My mindset from the get-go was: You just got drafted, you're about to go into the NBA, what a great time to be around some guys who have had success in the league. I'm going to have a great learning experience and I'm going to get a gold medal out of it. That was my mindset.

"I'm not going to feel a certain way about not playing. I am going to feel a certain way about not winning."

Reminded of that 2004 experience and asked what he might've learned from it, Anthony practically winces. "Just enjoy it," he says unconvincingly. "Enjoy the moment."

It was a situation Anthony never should have been in, believes Colangelo, who became the executive director of the Team USA basketball program shortly after the '04 debacle.

"The system that was in place as to how players were selected offered four positions to four guys who hadn't earned it," Colangelo says. "It was LeBron, Carmelo, Wade and Stoudemire. They hadn't paid their dues, but they were young stars, and it was kind of a promotion play: Let's create and develop a following or a branding for four young guys. Well, because of what transpired, that led to a total change when I took over. And one of the first things I asked for was total autonomy when it came to picking players and coaches."



After the United States finished with a bronze medal in Athens in 2004, Jerry Colangelo assumed control of the U.S. national team and quickly tapped Mike Krzyzewski to be the program's coach.

Colangelo invited the head coach of every Olympic team and nearly 20 national team players—Jerry West and Jordan among them—to offer suggestions on what was wrong with the program and how they could make it better. More than anything, though, he relied on his experience as general manager of the Phoenix Suns, where he won four Executive of the Year awards, to build the roster. No more making the team simply out of the best talent who would say yes.

"The result of our thinking was that we weren't selecting an All-Star team; we were selecting a team," Colangelo says. "We wanted role players. We wanted people who had a specific job and role off the bench, and that's how we started."

He also made sure that the players were aware going in what their roles would be. That, along with the benefit of an extended training camp, allowed players who weren't sold on that role to bow out gracefully, an opportunity players such as Chauncey Billups and Rajon Rondo have exercised.

That, in turn, made it infinitely easier on the 12th men. Boozer played less in '08 than in '04, but he was prepared for it. And while he might not have resented Brown not saying how he planned to use him, he appreciated that Duke's Mike Krzyzewski, the head coach since 2008 (and Boozer's college coach), did.

"I didn't know what my role was going to be until we got to Beijing for the Olympics and Coach K sat down with all of us," Boozer says. "It was me, Michael Redd, Tayshaun Prince—J-Kidd started but didn't play a lot—so it was four of us who didn't get a lot of minutes. But it was OK because we'd go hard at practice to make guys better. The great thing about Coach K is he talked to us about it. He said, 'Look, I'm going to play these eight guys, and when I need you, I need you to be ready.' For me, that was great professionalism by him. Because of who Coach K is and the team that we had, you don't have to do that. You can just coach your team the way that you want to coach them. But he actually talked to us about it and was like, 'There is going to come a time, possibly, in the tournament, where I'm going to need you guys. Maybe someone gets in foul trouble, maybe someone gets injured, maybe we have a matchup situation that you can take advantage of, whatever the case may be.' I was totally OK with that."

Knowing his playing time might be limited allowed Boozer to focus on the rest of the Olympic experience.



Told he was likely to play off the bench for the U.S. in 2008, Carlos Boozer said he was free not to worry about playing time and focused on enjoying the Olympic experience, which included a gold medal for the team.

"Once I moved my ego out of the way and just accepted my role and that this is for Team USA, this is to win the gold, I enjoyed the whole process," Boozer recalls.

"From the opening ceremony to practices to watching Michael Phelps win eight gold medals, watching our track team, watching the girls' team. There were so many aspects of the Olympics outside of our world of trying to redeem ourselves that made the experience so amazing and so rewarding. My dad got to watch the whole process; my dad, who put the ball in my hand when I was four. It was awesome on so many levels."

Colangelo has since had to deal with some of the same circumstances that the committee did. In 2012, Blake Griffin was a late scratch from the team after injuring his knee in training camp. Anthony Davis, the first pick of the draft but without a minute of NBA experience, was awarded Griffin's spot—but only after considerable investigation into how Davis would handle it.

"Our reaction was, 'Let's take a young Anthony Davis and groom him,' and that's what happened at the last minute," Colangelo says. "I may have the final say, but there's a collective collaboration by our staff when it comes to decisions. We talked it through; we looked at other candidates. As far as Anthony was concerned, we had discussions with Monty Williams, his coach then at New Orleans. We talked to John Calipari, his coach at Kentucky, and we were told that he would jump at the opportunity. So when I called him, he said he'd be on the next plane. He did, and that was really a terrific experience for him."

It's not yet clear who will end up at the end of the bench this summer in Rio. Colangelo and Krzyzewski have again had to wade through a host of issues—from stars (LeBron) declining to play to others citing injury (Steph Curry) to personal health concerns at the venue (the Zika virus and security issues)—resulting in a less-than-robust pool of talent from which to choose. In talking about his squad's strengths, Coach K sounds similar to Tomjanovich in 2000: relying on depth and versatility rather than pure star power to get the job done.

"When Coach K re-upped after '08 and he wasn't sure about doing the whole thing over again, I said, 'Well, one thing is for sure: It won't be the same,'" Colangelo recalls. "It never is. Things change. People change. We've evolved with the times."

It's also inevitable, though, that someone will wind up at the far end of the bench, watching more than playing. Someone who is supremely talented and, in their way, making perhaps the greatest sacrifice of all: contributing by not demanding that they be given a chance to play.

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