

The Rookie Sensation

Could former UConn star Caron Butler earn NBA Rookie of the Year?

By WILFREDO DeJESUS

Being picked 10th in the 2002 NBA draft felt real good, said Miami Heat small forward Caron Butler. He came out of the University of Connecticut where he was a great basketball player the two years that he played for the Huskies. Before the draft, Butler led UConn to the Elite Eight in the 2002 NCAA Tournament, where the Huskies fell to eventual national champion Maryland.

Butler, who will turn 23 on March 13, 2003, is from the projects of Racine, Wisconsin. When he was 14, he was serving time for gun and drug charges. He learned to play basketball at age 16 in jail, and has wanted to play professional ball since then.

"It was also a dream come true," Butler said of being able to play in the NBA. Butler and I spoke at the Fleet Center in Boston before his game against the Celtics Wednesday, Dec. 18, 2002. At about noon, the Heat had a practice in the empty Fleet Center, and after the shoot-around, I went on the famous parquet floor to talk with Butler about his new life in the NBA.

"It is just a big accomplishment for me, my family, and especially for all of my fans." Nine other teams let Caron go at the draft. Butler said he was mad at the time, but he didn't take it personally.

"It was business," he said, adding that he couldn't get mad at the other teams for not drafting him. Butler was also happy that he was drafted by the Miami Heat, and he wants to see what he can accomplish with them.

Butler is a leading player on a team that is struggling in the NBA this year. Halfway through the season, Butler has started all 42 games. He's averaging 37 minutes, 13 points, 5 rebounds, 2 assists, and 1.67 steals per game. His field goal percentage is .400%, his 3-point percentage is .343, and his free throw percentage is .828. Butler is ranked 15th in the NBA in steals with 70, so far.

"I am not going to give up because I know what it takes to win," he said. He is also with a coach that loves to win. To Butler, Pat Riley is a great coach and a great person. On and off the court, he said that Riley takes care of his players.

Butler said that Riley wants the best for Butler and the rest of his players.

Coach Riley tells Butler to continue to work on his jump shot, so that he can improve it. He should also work on his conditioning and his all around game. Butler's goals for this year are just to work hard continue playing like he's been playing and to win basketball games. Caron said he wants to work on his individual accomplishments.

So far this season, a lot of people didn't expect Butler to be doing so well. He was the NBA Rookie of the Month in November and he has earned a lot of playing time. He said his progress so far is great.

"I am going to have to continue to work hard and I'll be in the Miami Heat starting line up. I help this team a lot," Butler said. He brings versatility to the game, he can draw two defenders and pass the ball off and get his teammates more involved in the game. That is going to be his strength this season, Butler said. He is one of the best rookies in the league this season.

Caron can get the rookie of the year award if he continues to work hard on his game. It's not going to be easy for him though, because there are more incredible rookies playing great basketball. One of these incredible rookies is Yao Ming. At seven feet, six inches tall he's a big guy and a great player. Ming is big and he's unstoppable because of his size. He is going to give Butler, and all of the other rookies, great competition for the award this season.



Above Miami Heat small forward Caron Butler relaxes during a tv interview at the Fleet Center in Boston.

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