

# An Open Letter To the NBA

**W**ilfredo DeJesus is a 15-year-old shooting guard who starts on his high school's J.V. team, but he sees some varsity playing time. A sophomore whose mental quickness matches his physical abilities, he displays solid form in his accurate jump shot.

He is tenacious, persistent and a good sport. He is reserved, though when he speaks, he means what he says. Like many his age in Hartford, he loves the NBA. He doesn't sport much NBA gear, but he watches co-workers spend their stipends on Lakers fitted baseball caps and matching shirts.

Wilfredo, I think, would rather work hard and hope for his name on the back of an NBA jersey. Yet he is not so ignorant as to base his entire future on hoops. He studies auto body at A.I. Prince Tech here in Hartford, and after school (though not during basketball season), he practices journalism here at *Echoes*.

Wilfredo started at *Echoes* in Sept. 2001. His first story—"Is Fighting Worth Hurting?"—drew on personal experience to explore how violence causes more problems than it solves. Some high priced NBA talent could learn this lesson.

For his second story, Wilfredo wanted to interview UConn star forward Caron Butler. I showed Wilfredo how to call UConn for press credentials. Wilfredo researched Butler's past, scouring the net, magazines and the Huskies' media guide.

I chauffeured him to a UConn media day in Storrs. We watched a UConn practice close, and after the voracious Husky press corps finished with Butler, he sat with Wilfredo for about 15 minutes and patiently answered all his questions.

The next day during pre-game warm-ups, Butler recognized Wilfredo on the press table, and shook his hand. Wilfredo was aglow. The story led our January cover package.

In June, the Heat drafted Butler, and Wilfredo wanted to write a follow-up. He was hungry for the story, and his daily regimen of web-based research for stats and info showed it. He called the Heat and sent copies of *Echoes*, to no avail.

Working 20 hours a week for *Echoes* last summer, he spotted an opportunity in the *Courant*, Jim Calhoun's Annual Charity

Basketball Game at the Mohegan Sun Casino Aug. 8.

Wilfredo endured the rigamarole of phone calls before landing press passes. We arrived at the casino early to interview as many NBA players as possible, like Travis Knight and Richard Hamilton. Of course, when Butler walked on the court, reporters descended on him, leaving Wilfredo's 30 questions moot. The horde moved to Ray Allen

(whose Ray of Hope Foundation doesn't return phone calls), and Wilfredo approached Butler. Butler apologized for not having the time, and gave Wilfredo his cell phone number. Wilfredo left feeling like he hit the jackpot.

The cellie route proved a dead end. *Echoes* provided Wilfredo with a calling card to try from home, but as Butler later revealed, pro basketball players have free time when students are in school, and they start work when school lets out.

The next option Wilfredo saw was the Miami Heat versus the Boston Celtics on Dec. 18, 2002. Starting in September, Wilfredo tried regularly with the Boston and Miami media offices. By early December, he had nothing. I came off the bench to assist.

Jeff Twiss, head of the Celtics media relations office, cordially explained the Celtics' policy prohibiting high school journalists from obtaining game credentials. Twiss noted that at one time, the Celtics granted access to high school students, but that practice has stopped. He feared an avalanche of requests from immature youth. While *Echoes* sees itself as a professional media outlet with the highest standards of excellence, the Celtics said no.

My impassioned pleas about the NBA having some responsibility to help educate its urban audience, and about the Celtics having a prior relationship with Hartford (they used to play about six times a year in the Civic Center) couldn't sway Twiss. I respect his job. On Wilfredo's behalf, I accepted an interview with Butler after the Heat's morning shootaround.

I called the Heat a few days before to confirm the noon appointment, and Tim Donovan, their media relations person, had never heard of us. I was confused. I know Wilfredo called the Heat often. Donovan related kindly that if we talked to him sooner, we might have been able to secure game passes.

We trudged through Boston's bitter cold to the Fleet Center to catch the end of practice. We met Twiss, who approved us through security. Once inside, Donovan greeted us warmly and told us we'd have about 10 minutes with Butler, but he had to share it with a Hartford television news crew.

After practice, Butler saw Wilfredo and said hello while the TV crew mic'ed him. Wilfredo was nervous, snapping pictures, afraid to interrupt the camera's geometry. Just as they took the mic off Butler, Donovan returned to fetch Butler. Disappointment dunked Wilfredo. The team bus is leaving, Donovan said.

Quickly, I suggested that Wilfredo and Butler walk and talk, and Donovan acquiesced. On the three minutes of tape, Butler's voice gradually drowns under the roar of the nearing diesel engine. Goal accomplished, right? See page 13.

Heading home, I seethed with private rage. A five-hour drive through heavy traffic for three minutes of face time? Just a few years ago, Butler, in one of Wisconsin's roughest 'hoods, was like Wilfredo, clearing snow off playground courts, lacking resources because of misplaced government policies, aspiring to astronomic odds of pro ball millions. When a youth wins the hoops lottery—be it Butler, Allen, or Hamilton—the system elevates them to a stratosphere where regular interpersonal contact is impossible.

I tried to console Wilfredo. "Listen," I said, "in five years, when the NBA contributes more to youth education programs and it allows high school students to cover games regularly, and more youth like you have this opportunity to take a day off from school to study journalism, you can say it started because you only got 3 minutes with Caron Butler today."

— Ken Krayske

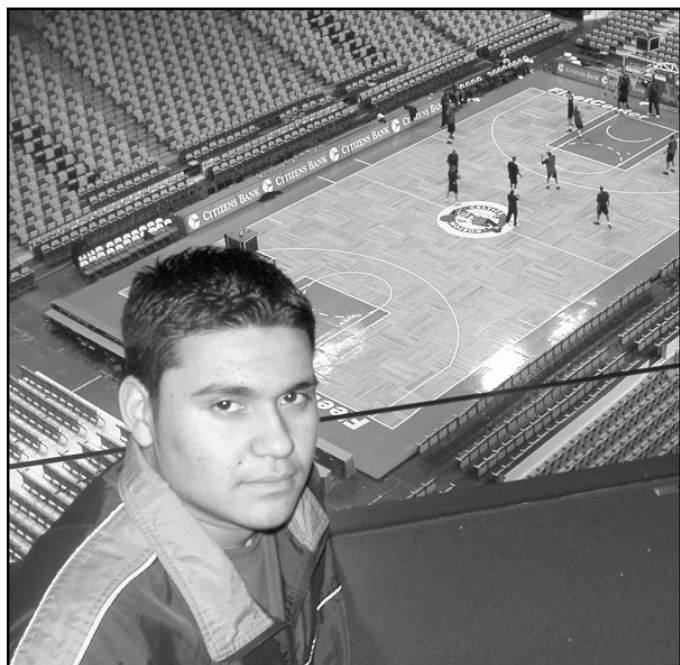


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Above Wilfredo DeJesus at the FleetCenter in Boston, MA.