

SPORTS

Iverson Could Lead By Example

By JIM LITKE
AP Sports Writer

A league with an image problem lets the poster boy for selfishness take charge of its campaign to win back respectability.

That's thinking so far outside the box it just might work.

The story of how Allen Iverson wound up running Team NBA - er, USA - is too long and involved to recount in full here. Suffice it to say that his former coach, Larry Brown, was as persuasive as he needed to be and that Iverson's bosses at the NBA and USA Basketball moved a lot farther to find common ground than Iverson did.

"I'm happy I was able to make this team without having to cut my hair off and laser my tattoos off, and wear a suit and all that, and stop hanging with the people who love me," Iverson said Sunday at a small college gym in midtown Manhattan, where he and his teammates held their first practice in preparation for an Olympic qualifying tournament later this month in Puerto Rico.

"I'm just happy that I was accepted and picked to be on this team because it shows how far I've been in my career," he added.

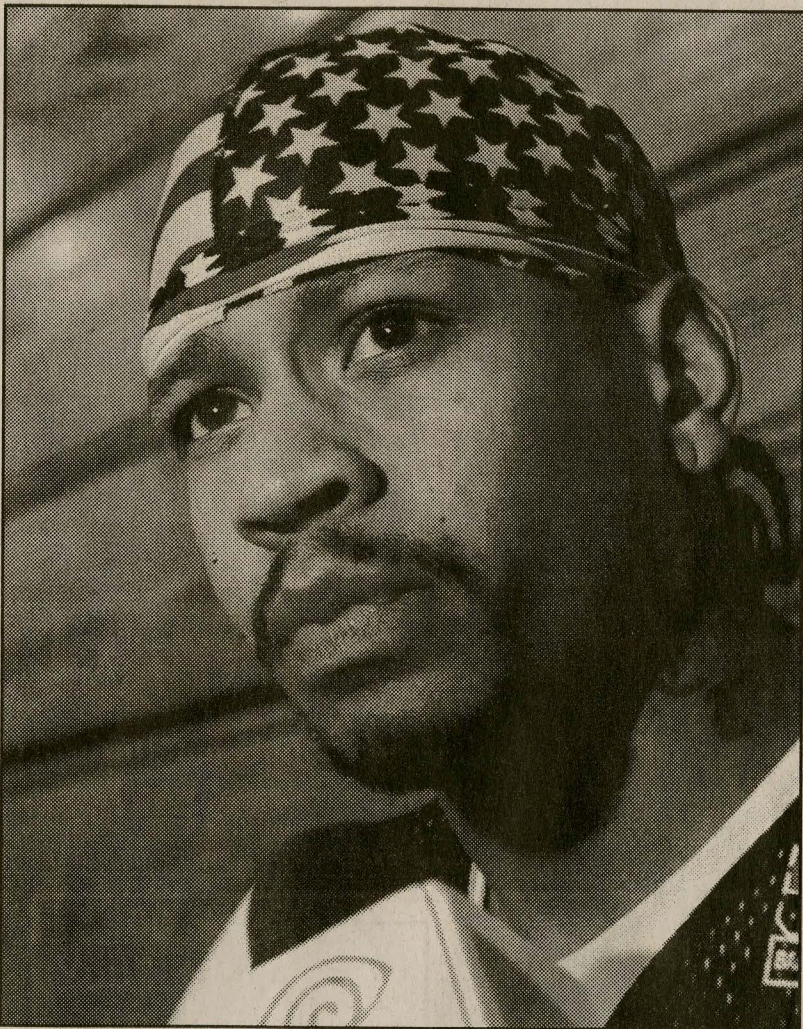
Not to take anything away from Iverson, who's actually changed very little since coming into the league as the No. 1 overall pick of the 1996 draft; what his selection more likely shows is how far the mighty have fallen and how far USA Basketball will venture to see it climb back to the top.

There was a time, as recently as last fall, that the skinny, tattoo-covered 76ers guard had a better chance of seeing his face on a \$5 bill than in the middle of the U.S. national team picture. His country didn't need him. Past U.S. teams had lost more than a few times in international tournaments, but that hadn't happened, ever, to a team made up of NBA players.

Along with a 58-0 record, that changed at last year's World Championships in Indianapolis. First Argentina, then eventual champion Yugoslavia and finally even Spain - Spain! - sent Team NBA spiraling toward a sixth-place finish in a 16-team field.

Finding out the rest of the world could play was nothing like the surprise it seemed at that moment. The NBA had bulked up on foreign talent long enough to know that. It had been almost a dozen years since commissioner David Stern unveiled the original Dream Team at the Barcelona Olympics and some of the kids who grew up overseas and wanted to be like Mike, and Magic and Larry for that matter, turned out to be very serviceable pros.

Many more wound up in Europe than the NBA, but give the



Allen Iverson of the Philadelphia 76ers listens to a reporter's question as he speaks with the media at the USA Olympic basketball team's first practice Sunday at John Jay College in New York. AP Photo/Stephen Chernin.

Yugoslavs and Argentines a little incentive and some extra practice time, then match them against a dozen second-tier American pros and the U.S. recipe for world dominance falls flatter than a poorly prepared soufflé.

Some people griped that nothing the rest of the world did would have made a difference against Team USA at full strength. And to be fair, Shaquille O'Neal, Kobe Bryant, Tim Duncan, Jason Kidd and Iverson all begged off their patriotic duty for one reason or another.

O'Neal and Bryant have done so again, but not Duncan, Kidd or Iverson. And the rest of the squad was selected with an eye toward compatibility as much as athletic ability this time around. So while there is plenty of firepower, Tracy McGrady and Vince Carter, there are also workhorses like Elton Brand and versatile talents like Richard Jefferson and Jermaine O'Neal willing to fill whatever role is necessary.

Give the suits at USA Basketball credit for learning a lesson. Last fall's version of the Dream Team didn't lose to better talent, but to better teams.

The NBA team that was slapped together for the occasion and entrusted to just-fired Milwaukee coach George Karl wasn't just poorly prepared. It was

used to playing the stand-around, I-dunk-then-you-dunk style that passes for pro basketball too many nights in an 82-game regular season.

It was no coincidence that U.S. squad failed to recognize, let alone stop, a well-designed inbounds play against Argentina, or muster enough moxie to disrupt the fourth-quarter tear that Yugoslavia used to knock off the Americans.

That's where Iverson & Co. come in. There will be only a little more prep time for this team than the last one, but the talent is better and meshing it will be easier. Iverson might have a reputation for playing selfishly, but Brown is gambling that a U.S. team with him on the floor won't lack for smarts or energy.

And anybody who's watched Iverson play in an All-Star game knows how devoted he is to playing the right way when playing with people he respects.

"It's so easy playing with Jason Kidd. It's so easy playing with Tim Duncan," Iverson said. "All you've got to do is play basketball, you never have to press and feel you have to put it all on yourself. You just let the game come to you."

"If one of those guys gets going, you get him the ball. If I'm going," said Iverson in what could be a preview of things to come, "they'll do the same for me."

Seahawks Impressive In First Exhibition Game

By TIM KORTE
AP Sports Writer

SEATTLE (AP) - Matt Hasselbeck and the Seattle Seahawks got off to a good start, keeping the momentum going from last season.

Hasselbeck completed six of his first seven passes on an opening-drive touchdown and finished 8-of-11 for 75 yards as the Seattle Seahawks beat the San Diego Chargers 20-7 Saturday night.

"We had good tempo," Hasselbeck said. "Guys were playing fast on both sides of the line of scrimmage. It was exciting. It was a lot of fun out there."

Shaun Alexander and Maurice Morris each scored on 1-yard touchdown runs as the Seahawks built a 14-0 halftime lead. Rookie Josh Brown added two field goals in the fourth quarter.

"I'm glad we got to start with some PATs," Brown said. "The first-game jitters were in, but it got more relaxed as the game went along. The team played great. They set up some opportunities for me to kick some field goals."

The Chargers didn't use standout running back LaDarian Tomlinson, who wasn't hurt but didn't play as a precaution against injury.

"They were missing a pretty good running back, but it's always a good way to start," Seahawks coach Mike Holmgren said. "When you win a game like that, it always gets your confidence going."

The Seahawks also made plenty of big plays on special teams and the defense denied the Chargers from

the 3 late in the third quarter when Terrel Bierria intercepted a pass in the end zone.

With Drew Brees and Doug Flutie done with their work, Chargers reserve Cleo Lemon led a long drive inside the 5. His third-down pass to Tim Baker was deflected by Seattle's Willie Williams and intercepted by Bierria.

"We wanted to do things we had worked on in practice and continue to get better," Seattle cornerback Doug Evans said. "We ran to the ball and made plays. That's what a good defense does, the swarm drill."

Hasselbeck played two series and turned the offense over to rookie Seneca Wallace, who threw a 41-yard pass to Taco Wallace early in the fourth quarter. That led to Brown's 29-yard field goal with 9:15 to play.

Wallace finished 6-of-9 for 78 yards with one interception. Jeff Kelly played the last six minutes but didn't throw a pass.

Brown added a 47-yard field goal with 5:52 remaining. Linebacker Marcus Bell forced a fumble by scrambling San Diego quarterback Seth Burford, and rookie lineman Rashad Moore was credited with the recovery for Seattle.

The Chargers fumbled three times, losing two.

"This is a game of field position, and we had seven starts at or inside our 50-yard line," Chargers coach Marty Schottenheimer said. "Penalties contributed to that. Turnovers contributed to that."

Burford broke up the shutout with a 13-yard TD pass to Grant Mattos with 1:55 left. That score was set up when Seattle's Jerheme Urban fumbled a punt that was recovered by San Diego's David Binn.

Hasselbeck looked sharp, though not quite as polished as late last season when the Seahawks averaged 475 yards a game over the season's final six weeks. That led the NFL over that span.

"That's my hope, that we can continue where we left off last season offensively," Holmgren said. "That's a big challenge because it's a new season with new dynamics, but Matt's playing with a lot of confidence. That helps."

Hasselbeck led Seattle to a 7-0 lead on the opening drive, moving 80 yards in 12 plays as Alexander scored.

He twice completed passes on third downs, finding Alexander for a 15-yard gain on third-and-6 at Seattle's 39 and throwing 14 yards to Koren Robinson on third-and-5 at the Chargers' 26.

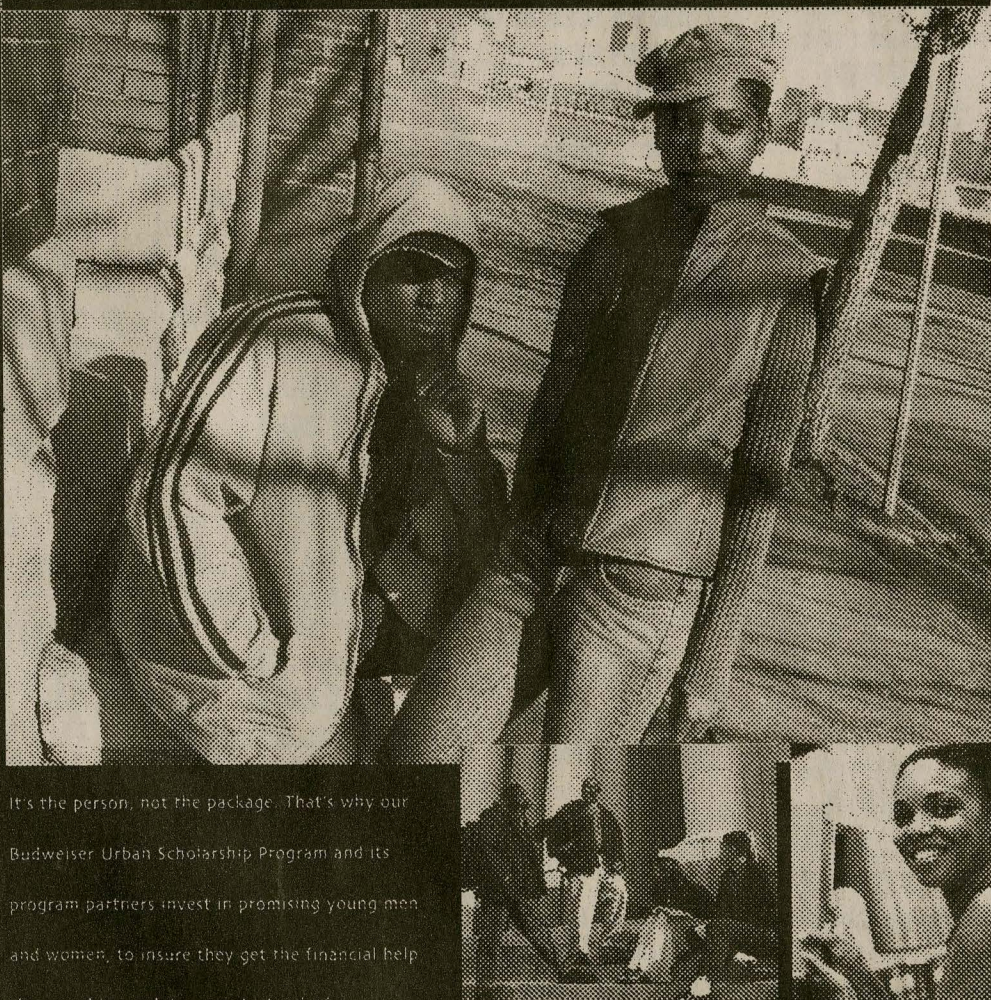
Hasselbeck also had a 9-yard scramble to San Diego's 31.

"I've done a fairly good job of remembering what goes on there (last year)," Hasselbeck said. "What we did is act like we didn't know anything and really paid attention to every little detail that our coaches were telling us."

Brees, working from a no-huddle offense to open the game, was 7-of-10 for 34 yards but played only two series. Flutie was 5-of-10 for 39 yards.

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