

Markelle Fultz's Lonely Search for His Jump Shot

Fultz was the Philadelphia 76ers' top pick in the draft last summer, largely because of his jump shot. It has now gone missing and nobody knows why.

On Pro Basketball

By KURT STREETER MARCH 9, 2018

PHILADELPHIA — He looked utterly alone.

Two hours before tip-off, in the glass and granite arena that is the home of the Philadelphia 76ers, the first pick in last summer's N.B.A. draft struggled with the part of his game that has mysteriously gone missing.

His jump shot.

Markelle Fultz, a moon-faced teenager in a black hoodie and black shorts, was careful not to shoot from too great a distance. He dribbled, spun and gathered himself. The gym, still empty of fans, was quiet as a grave. He lifted the basketball a foot from his forehead.

He drew in a breath.

When he had let fly from near the free throw line, the shot knuckled into the basket. This one clanked against the rim and bounced off. Again. Another clank. Again. Another clank. Finally, a shot eased through the net. But then one struck

hard against the back of the rim, creating a thud that died in the cold air.

It felt sad, like watching a dancer try to remember how to pirouette.

Even later on this recent evening, when he was surrounded by his well-wishing, backslapping teammates before a game against the Charlotte Hornets, it felt melancholy. Markelle Fultz, only 19, was on the margins, an outsider. He hadn't played in a league game since October. The 76ers were having their best year in recent memory, but Fultz, their wunderkind, has had nothing to do with it. He might play again this season, but it doesn't seem likely.

You could see the burden. This was supposed to have been the start of a can't-miss professional career. His shoulders slumped. He shook his head in disbelief. He sank his 6-foot-4 frame into a padded blue chair and watched his fellow Sixers warm-up. Every shot they took had rhythmic confidence.

Last season, his only year in college, at the University of Washington, Fultz made basketball look easy. He was one of the nation's leading scorers. His jump shot was slightly awkward, but deadly accurate. On his three-pointers, he hit 41 percent — exceptional under any circumstance. But more so because he was the only star on a moribund team. Opposing defenses swarmed him like wasps.

The 76ers became enchanted by his ability to score, pass and dissect the game. They traded for the No. 1 pick to get him.

He would be the capstone of the Sixers' long, arduous rebuild. It was called the Process — a gambit that used losing as a way to position Philadelphia for upper-tier draft choices. The Process was a bumpy ride, but the 76ers, their fans, and astute N.B.A. insiders said adding Fultz to a lineup alongside Joel Embiid and Ben Simmons was the making of a team that could win a championship.

Then, during the summer, something happened.

Fultz turned into a sniper who couldn't shoot straight. When basketball season started, during his first and only 75 minutes of play, he shot as if he were still

learning the game. “That’s a bad looking shot right there,” said the former N.B.A. coach Jeff Van Gundy, during an early game on national television. His tone dripped with understatement. “That does not look fluid at all.”

Fultz was sidelined. The official word: He had injured his shoulder.

A scapular imbalance, his doctors said. The injury, they said, would require him to relearn basic movements.

How had it happened? The official answer: Fultz hurt himself over the summer when he tried to adjust his jump shot.

Not true, said Keith Williams, his longtime trainer.

Then came a thicker line of speculation. Could this be mental pressure? After all, Fultz wasn’t even 20 years old.

Was it the yips? The kind of mental block that can make a major-league baseball player throw away routine tosses to first base? The kind that can make a professional golfer fluff easy putts?

Nobody, maybe not even Fultz, knows.

The Sixers will not let him talk to reporters about what is wrong.

Video snippets have bounced across the internet, brief and inconclusive, taken during warm-ups or workouts far from the fans’ glare. One shows glimpses of Fultz unsteady from point-blank. In another, taken over the last week, he stands alone at 3-point range, and actually hits his shot.

He is like a ghost. He is there, but he’s not there, especially when it counts. During games, he is with his team, but he is not on the court. At the Hornets game, he sat on the bench near the assistant coaches. He wore street clothes, a purple coat and skinny black pants.

During timeouts, he hovered near players who got instructions from head

coach Brett Brown. But never too near. Or he watched the on-court entertainment. The cheerleaders. Or acrobats dunking from trampolines.

On one play, Simmons sprinted past a defender and flung himself skyward. He dunked with his trademark combination of power and grace. The fans, and the bench, rose in unison for an earsplitting ovation. Fultz nodded his head, but sat with his hands clasped together at his waist.

At halftime, out in the concourse, Sixers' fans wore red, white and blue jerseys. Within eyeshot, only one bore the name Fultz.

But he was on the walls, in banners hailing him along with Simmons and Embiid. One photo showed Fultz looking over his right shoulder. His face was cherubic, still framed by a hint of baby fat. He could be mistaken for a high school junior.

At a concession booth, Philadelphians, notoriously hard on pro athletes, spoke words of encouragement. "This has to be a mental thing," one man said. "Give the kid some time to work this out." He paused. "Who among us doesn't have some sort of mental thing?"

"At this point, it's just a sad story," said another. "You watch the guy and, honestly, he's shooting like my 6-year-old. At this point, all we can do is hope for him. Hope. Who would have thought that when we got him?"

On the court, the 76ers, who had been losing, mounted an electrifying comeback. People roared: "Trust the Process! Trust the Process!"

When the clock struck zero, the Sixers won, 110 to 99.

Markelle Fultz stood with his hands in his pockets. Part of the team, but not part of the team. He clapped softly. He hugged a teammate.

Slowly, he walked off the court, down an aisle, and out of view.

A version of this article appears in print on March 10, 2018, on Page D1 of the New York edition with the headline: When Jump And Shoot Is No Longer That Simple.

©

4

One subscription. Endless discovery.

SEE MY OPTIONS

Subscriber login