

Billups the coolest dude in Detroit

MITCH ALBOM

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BY MITCH ALBOM

FREE PRESS COLUMNIST

He moves fast when he takes it slow, and he takes it slow even when racing downcourt. He can scare you with a smile on his face, show strength without flexing a muscle, be the shortest man on the floor yet the biggest player out there. He is respected even more than he is liked -- and he is liked as much as anybody in the league.

Hey, NBA. We know LeBron is coming to town, with his Eddie Murphy-like commercials and eight-figure shoe deals. But LeBron can stay in the biggest bed in the biggest suite in the fanciest hotel.

Chauncey Billups is still the coolest man in Detroit.

It's not even close. New York has Jeter and L.A. has Kobe, but when you step into the Motor City, if you want one guy to ensure that you never pay for a drink or a meal, one guy to guarantee you are hailed, slapped on the back, and always, always listened to, it's the point guard from the Rocky Mountains with the smoothly shaved dome and the stylish clothes.

Cool Breeze.

"We might have to get him one of those fur coats and hats," Joe Dumars laughed when I suggested that, if this were the 1970s, Chauncey could be Super Fly -- or at least Walt (Clyde) Frazier. He is a leader, a guy you want to be like and a guy you want to like you. When he takes you under his wing, you're behind the velvet rope. He will throw an arm around your shoulder, then call you, "Boss." He'll be respectful as a cadet, but tough guys will step out of his way. This is a man who earned the nickname "Smooth" when he was in fifth grade. Fifth grade? Who's smooth in fifth grade?

"What was cool to you back then?" I asked Chauncey.

"New shoes," he said. "But they cost money. They used to have layaway plans, you know? So when a shoe first came out, my mom would be like 'I'm gonna put it on layaway.' By the time you got the shoe, it wasn't brand new anymore. It had been out a while, and people weren't impressed.

"That didn't sway me, though. I wore 'em proud."

Why was that?

" 'Cause I knew the way I carried myself was more important than any shoe," he said. "Besides, they were new to me."

Cool Breeze.

An A-list of buddies

Chauncey Ray Billups has a butler's name, a gymnast's body, an assassin's jump shot and a father's touch. When we spoke over the phone Saturday, he was on the sidelines of his daughter's soccer game in Rochester. He is not embarrassed by that. Billups fits in everywhere, like a Zelig of the NBA. He seems natural in a shopping mall, behind the wheel, sitting across from David Letterman or surrounded by All-Stars in Las Vegas.

People gravitate to Billups. They just want to be around him. He proudly says "I ain't got no enemies." But when you ask him to name his closest friends in the league, he exhales.

"Who, well, Tyronn Lue, Kevin Garnett, Al Harrington, we're tight, Baron Davis, oh -- Stephon -- Stephon Marbury, Jared Jeffries, Damon Jones, D-Jones is one of my closest buddies ..."

He keeps going, but we only have so much space. And of course, that's not even mentioning his fellow Pistons, whom he holds on an even higher level, and who only look up to him the way the way Buffy and Jody looked up to Mr. French.

"He's at the head of the table, and he determines how people eat," Kevin Garnett once told the media of Billups. And that's Kevin Garnett talking! Chauncey's teammates always have felt that way. Remember, he didn't enter the league with LeBron hype. He was the third pick of his draft class -- after starring at Colorado -- but the Boston Celtics gave up on him, and eventually, so did Toronto, Denver, Orlando and Minnesota. The funny thing is, at all those stops, Billups says, he played and acted the same way as he does now.

"My demeanor, how I am, it never swayed, man," he says. "A lot of guys in this league when they're not playing a lot of minutes they got a chip on their shoulder, they're mad at everybody. I've never been that way."

Perhaps that's why Dumars, as president of basketball operations, was so quick to snag Billups for the team he was building, a team devoted to effort, not ego. Billups was the perfect captain for that kind of ship, because nobody works harder, yet nobody can be more relied upon down the stretch. Remember, Billups didn't earn the nickname "Mr. Big Shot" for playing a shrinking violet. He can clank 10 jumpers in a row, but in the final seconds of the fourth quarter, his aim will go deadeye and the longest shot will swish through the net.

And in an era where free-throw shooting is a nail-biting experience, Billups is one of the rare players who allow you to exhale. In the clinching Game 6 against Chicago on Thursday night, he went to the stripe 14 times. He made all 14 -- including six in the final 68 seconds.

"Who else would you want with the ball at that point than Chauncey?" Dumars asked.

Think about it.

We'll wait ...

Always a nice guy

When Billups, 30, was growing up in Denver, there was a convenience store nearby called Junior's. Like any kid, he wanted to go there often, but "because it was a rough neighborhood" he wasn't supposed to go alone. No problem. He'd simply convince three or four cousins, and they'd follow him. And if cousins weren't around, he'd go to the park and pretty soon have a small posse by his side.

"For whatever reason, I've always been able to talk to anybody, any age, any race," he says. "No matter what background you got, I'm comfortable."

He developed this openness from two sources, he says: his mother and the older kids he emulated while playing basketball at the Skyland Rec Center in Denver. There, he dribbled the way they dribbled, shot the way they shot. But the thing he remembers most is when they talked to him. Maybe just a word, a nod, a "how you doing?"

"They made me feel so good, and they didn't even know it," he says. "It's why I do what I do, why I am like I am with people, because I know what it meant to me, just to take a little time -- and it's really no time at all -- just a 'how you doing? How's it all going?' If I can help a person out, be it a kid or a grown man, whatever, I'll do it."

Which is what makes him cool, because he's not too cool to do that. Billups perspires, but he doesn't sweat. He inspires excitement, yet he remains calm. You could send him to the Middle East, and he'd get both sides talking. You could drop him into a domestic dispute, and they'd all come out holding hands. He shoots straight. He straight shoots. When you ask him a question, he responds so matter-of-factly, you sometimes assume it's a cliché -- until you listen and realize you haven't heard it before.

Like the other night, after the Pistons eliminated Chicago and someone asked about the effect of blowing a 3-0 series lead and scrambling to win in six.

"I think a loss or two wasn't too bad for us," he said. "Things were coming too easy, we were just kinda running through the whole thing."

How often do you hear that? How often do you find a guy equally at home on the streets or in the mountains, at a nightclub or at a Children's Hospital charity event? How often will a guy admit that as a kid he idolized Michael Jackson, even had a knockoff copy of the jacket Michael wore in the "Beat It" video? ("I never wore no glove, though," Chauncey said, "but I mighta tried on one of those pairs of socks.")

How often does a man admit he started shaving his head when he was 22, because he was on the road a lot "and I don't like new people cutting my hair"? And now you can't imagine him looking any other way.

How often does a point guard who likes to shoot command the praise of coaches, players, GMs, media and fans alike -- and almost unanimously?

He is the engine under the hood. The man in the back room whispering in smoke. Bring on Cleveland and the Eastern Conference finals, with LeBron this and LeBron that. King James is clearly a superstar, but there's a difference between being a superstar and being a standard setter. And there could be a reason why James wears a 2 and a 3 and Chauncey wears a 1.

This may not be the flashiest team. This may not be the flashiest town. But the road to any Eastern Conference crown travels through Detroit, so you might as well get to know the sheriff. We call him Chauncey. He doesn't do layaway anymore.

Contact MITCH ALBOM at 313-223-4581 or

Can you say, Man Crush ...

Jeez, what a weirdo Mitch is.

Posted: Mon May 21, 2007 12:05 am

beeswax2231

Now I understand why the sports teams in Detroit do not let Mitch inside the locker rooms after a game. He gets a little too attracted to married men.

Posted: Sun May 20, 2007 9:54 pm

beeswax2231

Now I understand why the sports teams in Detroit do not let Mitch inside the locker rooms after a game. He gets a little too attracted to married men.

Posted: Sun May 20, 2007 9:45 pm

DTownFanInChicago

WE MUST RESIGN CHUANCEY! He is the brain, heart and soul of this team. He has to be one of my top 5 Pistons of all-time and is the epitomy of what a Detroit Piston is. Joe, PLEASE do whatever it takes to resign him.

So Mitch spoke to Chauncey while he was at his daughter's soccer game yesterday?? What a guy! I had the Shock game on Saturday and there was Chauncey with his family supporting the D-troit Shock, then later he and Rip are spotted at the Tiger game!

Almost sounds like he's doing a political campaign, eh?

Posted: Sun May 20, 2007 7:59 pm

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I made

About the Author

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