

BASKETBALL NOTES

Arenas has always been blanketed by insecurity

By Gary Washburn | January 10, 2010

Ten years ago, **Gilbert Arenas** brought prestige to Grant High School in Van Nuys, Calif. Nestled in the East San Fernando Valley area of Los Angeles, the school was hardly known for basketball until a quirky, emotional, but immensely gifted player began lighting up fellow students in pickup games.

Arenas formed a bond with coach **Howard Levine**, who shared a similar quirkiness, but the Dodger Stadium usher and amateur singer realized the best way to deal with Arenas was with stern discipline. Levine helped turn Arenas into his first major Division 1 prospect, and Arenas turned Grant into a Los Angeles City Section power, later having his number retired by the school.

Last week, Levine had to attempt to explain to his current players the inexplicable actions of Arenas. The Washington Wizards guard was suspended indefinitely by the NBA for not only bringing guns to an arena - prohibited by the collective bargaining agreement - but also apparently placing an unloaded weapon near the locker of teammate **Javaris Crittenton**, then baiting commissioner **David Stern** with a series of Twitter posts, absurd postgame interviews, and finally a mockery of his actions by using his fingers as six-shooters during pregame introductions at Philadelphia last week.

Arenas felt the wrath of Stern, whom he called a "mean" man during one of his diatribes. Levine knows Arenas's odd personality better than anyone. He suspended Arenas for an entire summer for suiting up for a rival team as he considered transferring. And Levine advised Arizona coach **Lute Olson** on being patient with Arenas because of his immaturity.

But that was 10 years ago. Levine has little explanation for Arenas's current behavior, besides acknowledging that he has never really embraced adulthood.

"Many thoughts," Levine said when asked his reaction to Arenas's latest issues. "He continues to challenge people. The way he challenged me. The way he challenged Coach Olson. He challenges people to see if they are going to leave him."

This is where Arenas's story strays from your typical NBA-player-who-feels-he's-above-reproach tale. Arenas was abandoned by his mother as an infant and was passed around by family members until his grandmother called his father to come get his son. **Gilbert Arenas Sr.** moved to California to pursue acting and his son showed up at Grant as a sophomore after being told that he would never make the Birmingham High School varsity team.

For years, it seems, Arenas has harbored this sense of abandonment from his mother, and Levine believes it has grown to the point where Arenas challenges authority because he doesn't trust authority.

"Deep down, it's what happened with his mother when he was a kid," Levine said. "He made a statement that I read and he was talking about Stern and said he was a mean man. That's a 5-year-old talking.

"He certainly does not grasp the authority the NBA has over him and certainly did not grasp the complexity of toting around guns.

"He's not a ghetto kid. But I do have an idea of what's going on in the periphery of the NBA world.

There's certainly a lot of hangers-on. And I can certainly understand why some players would feel the need to carry guns. But why he would be playing with guns, I don't understand. He has not accepted the responsibility of being a grown-up."

As far back as his days with Golden State, Arenas was known as a prankster but also someone who was extremely immature. He flourished on the court and his bizarreness became more profound, especially when he achieved stardom. But the league deserves its share of responsibility for his antics.

While teammates were perplexed with Arenas's never-serious attitude and approach, the NBA handed him a blog and called him "Agent Zero." The NBA supported and fostered his quirkiness, and now that it has backfired, the league has to acknowledge that responsibility.

Arenas knew his personality would gain attention, but he has constantly crossed the line of appropriateness. Levine and those close to Arenas cringed when they read his Twitter posts and watched recent interviews. In his own bizarre way, Arenas has been crying out for help with his ill-timed jokes, and his act finally drew the ire of league leadership with an indefinite suspension on his 28th birthday.

"I don't think anybody could talk to Gilbert right now," said Levine, who said he talked with Arenas often early in his NBA career but has not spoken to him in more than a year. "He has put himself in this box and it's a way of protecting himself from people getting close to him."

Although Levine can muster an explanation for Arenas's post-incident attitude, the coach can't ponder a reason why Arenas has become so enamored with guns.

"He's not even close to being a violent guy," Levine said. "He did get in a fight or two in high school, but not in front of me or never in a game. And I saw him in games where the other teams physically tried to beat him up and he never raised a fist.

"There's never been any ounce of a violent nature in Gilbert. But what's a nonviolent person doing with three or four guns?"

Arenas is in desperate need of a mentor or adviser. He fired agent **Dan Fegan** two years ago and since then has plodded along without someone steering him. And instead of apologizing as soon as the police investigation into his gun possession began, he rambled nightly and eventually blamed the media for making it an issue.

"This is something Gilbert Arenas could have avoided if he paid attention to the **Plaxico Burress** situation," said New York criminal defense attorney **Joseph DiBenedetto**, referring to the former New York Giants wide receiver who was jailed for taking an unregistered firearm into a nightclub. "He's constantly giving statements, and to me that's troubling. If I were his attorney, he would make not a single statement. Quite frankly, the way he's coming across, it's coming across as arrogance."

In reality, it may be a cry for help from a scared little boy. Levine believes Arenas has never come to terms with the absence of his mother and he has never trusted anyone to remain loyal, so he challenges their devotion and then cries over the damage.

"If you talk to Gilbert, tell him he can call me," Levine said. "If he needs to get away from things, he can stay with me.

"He got tough love from me, but he also got a lot of hugs from me. I had to tell him this in high school: I am not going anywhere, I am not going to [disregard] him.

"He needs to swallow his pride and come clean with Stern. I told Lute Olson, 'You be tough on him and

he'll come around because he is basically a good guy, a sweet kid.'

"I am not going to turn my back on him. I never will."

SHINING EXAMPLE

Ellis is worthy but he could be star-crossed

The All-Star reserves will be announced in less than three weeks, and Golden State guard **Monta Ellis** (above) deserves a spot on the Western Conference team. He faces major obstacles, however, because the Warriors have one of the league's worst records and rarely get national exposure.

Ellis is playing superb basketball. Just ask the Celtics, who couldn't stop him from dropping 37 points in a Golden State victory last month. He is one of the fastest players in the league, and uses his excellent body control to finish drives strong.

Rajon Rondo should use Ellis as a mid-range model. Ellis's shot from the elbow is nearly automatic and his quickness allows him to get an open shot whenever he wants one.

There was a turning point in Ellis's season. The fourth-year guard considered **Stephen Jackson** a role model, and when Jackson was traded to the Charlotte Bobcats Nov. 15, Ellis considered asking out of Golden State, too. But then he came upon a revelation. He was the senior member of the team, and therefore he had an opportunity to become its leader.

Ellis has seized that opportunity. In 25 games since the Jackson trade (going into Friday's matchup with Sacramento), Ellis averaged 28 points, 5.3 assists, and 2.4 steals, shooting 48 percent from the field. He has turned into an offensive machine whose quickness gives him an advantage reading passing lanes for easy steals.

Although there are more heralded players who will get All-Star consideration, Ellis deserves to go. But will he? It's about time some fresh faces are included instead of rubber-stamping the same veterans merely on reputation.

"The biggest key for me was just to get into game shape," Ellis said. "Staying after practice, getting extra shots up, and to focus more on trying to get everybody else involved, and at the same time lately my shot has been going down."

All wasn't well for Ellis last season. He tore a ligament in his left ankle while horsing around on a motor scooter, then lied to team officials by saying he suffered the injury during summer workouts. He came clean and was suspended for 30 games, and it took nearly the entire season for him to regain strength in the ankle.

"I pretty much had that feeling finishing the season last year," he said. "Sometimes it would get stiff and the weather was bothering it, but it was something I worked really hard on in the offseason. I started working hard in May, and that's when I got my ankle stronger and ready for the season."

That misstep is behind him, and it's time Ellis got credit for the remarkable improvement he has made since being drafted out of high school. Will the Western Conference coaches buck tradition and vote in a newbie? It's doubtful.

LEFT TO WONDER

No movement on Bosh's future plans

On a five-game winning streak and facing the shorthanded Celtics Jan. 2, the Raptors blew an opportunity to make a statement on the road against a wounded team. Toronto has been accused of being soft, and there was no better example than that game, when it trailed most of the way and allowed

the Celtics reserves to make countless big plays in Boston's 103-96 win.

Chris Bosh is Toronto's franchise player, but the pending free agent seems to be losing faith in his organization. Many NBA insiders believe Bosh will leave the Raptors.

He has refused to discuss his status, but you had to wonder about his loyalty when he made his postgame comments that day. Asked if it was disappointing to lose to a team missing three starters, Bosh said, "It doesn't matter. They're a good team. We know they're a good team, especially on their home court, no matter who's playing."

Asked about the Raptors' apparent lack of urgency, he said, "You're just saying that because we lost. If we would have won, it wouldn't even be a question of it. We just lost the game. They played well . . .

"We have 50-plus games left. The season moves on whether we're disappointed, angry, upset, happy, joyful; the season goes on, so you have to be thankful."

In Bosh's defense, the Raptors rebounded with wins over the Spurs and Magic, and another Friday in Philadelphia prior to today's rematch with the Celtics.

If the season ended today, Toronto would be the sixth seed and face Orlando in the first round of the playoffs, an almost certain elimination. Would that be enough progress to keep Bosh around?

ETC.

Blazers show little sense with dollars

Some teams spend money just because they can, and it seems as if the Trail Blazers invested \$21 million in **Andre Miller** because it was sitting on the counter. Portland made an offer to restricted free agent **Paul Millsap**, which was matched by the Jazz. The Blazers used that money to sign Miller, a regrettable decision. Miller got into a shouting match last week with coach **Nate McMillan**, a disagreement that centered around McMillan's decision to have **Jerryd Bayless** make a free throw with 4.3 seconds left and Portland behind by 2 points (Portland eventually lost to Memphis by 4). Miller, a talented guard who has never really found an NBA home, has not fit in with the Blazers. McMillan made **Steve Blake** the primary starting point guard early on, and then opted for a three-guard offense with Blake, Miller, and **Brandon Roy**. Even after scoring 17 points in a 107-98 win over the visiting Lakers Friday, Miller is averaging 12.0 points, his lowest output since his rookie season in Cleveland 10 years and four teams ago.

Twisted spiral

The story of former NBA player **Jayson Williams** continues to head toward a tragic end. Williams, who is awaiting a second manslaughter trial for the shooting of a limo driver in 2002, was arraigned for drunken driving after crashing his sport utility vehicle into a tree last Wednesday. Williams was arraigned by video from a New York hospital, where he was recovering from a broken bone in his neck and facial lacerations. Williams's downfall began with a career-ending injury in 1999, and continued with the shooting of **Costas "Gus" Christofi** in February 2002 in Williams's house. In the past three months, he has had three run-ins with the law, including being arrested in a bar fight in Raleigh, N.C., and getting Tasered by New York police after causing a disturbance at a hotel. Williams's estranged wife has said her husband has an alcohol problem.

Free throws

Former Celtics forward and current Clippers broadcaster **Michael Smith** has pleaded not guilty to stealing \$735,000 in a land development deal that went sour. Smith is continuing to work, but how long can things remain status quo? Earlier this season, Smith was suspended one game after making insensitive comments about Memphis center **Hamed Haddadi**, who was born in Iran . . . Indiana's **Danny Granger** returned from a heel injury Friday night, potentially saving coach **Jim O'Brien's** job. Since beating the Celtics Nov. 14, Indiana had gone 7-20, dealing with myriad injuries - the most damaging loss being

Granger, robbing the Pacers of their leading scorer for 16 games - and the banishment of point guard **T.J. Ford** to the end of the bench. Ford hasn't played since a nine-minute stint Dec. 30 . . . Among those released before contracts became guaranteed was Cleveland guard **Coby Karl**, a cancer survivor and son of Denver coach **George Karl**. Also released were **Pops Mensah-Bonsu** (Toronto) and **Shavlik Randolph** (Portland). Teams are now able to sign players to 10-day contracts, which offer more roster flexibility. Among those who had their nonguaranteed contracts honored was the 76ers' **Allen Iverson**.

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