

Greene: Zaza Accepts Bench Role, All Star Leaps Revisited

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Zaza Shows Maturity: In only the rarest of occasions will you find a NBA player that has spent an abundance of time toiling on the bench as a reserve before becoming a professional.

Most players that eventually don NBA uniforms have always been one of the top (if not the best) players on their respective team's coming up through the ranks of high school, college or international play.

So it's no surprise that the transition phase from star to role player impacts some players' mental edge and once productive guys see steep declines in their overall game when moved to the bench.

That's because even the most effective bench players don't hear their names called nightly over the PA system of your local arena for doing the little things such as setting effective screens to free up franchise players or receiving court burns from diving for loose balls. Doing the subtle things that don't appear in a nightly box score is a thankless job and typically goes unnoticed unless the player in questions misses one of those dirty work types of assignments.

Hawks center Zaza Pachulia is currently in his sixth season defending the interior for Atlanta. From 2005-07 Pachulia started 125 out of the 150 contests he suited up, recording solid averages of 11.9 points and 7.4 rebounds during that time period. Yet when the franchise drafted current team captain and All-Star center Al Horford in the 2007 draft, Pachulia's role with the team basically shifted overnight. The veteran had to quickly make an adjustment from averaging 30 minutes per game to 15 minutes --- quickly.

Even though Pachulia readily admits he'd like to play more minutes, his focus has shifted to overall team success and winning is now his top priority.

"Everybody would love to be a starter," Pachulia explained to HOOPSWORLD without hesitation. "All players. "There is no one player who's happy with his minutes. Even the guys who play 40 minutes want to play 45. It's a very normal feeling (to want to play more)."

"Our coaches and management think that I'm better coming off the bench," continued Pachulia in reference to his role on the team. "I've been here long enough to realize what the right thing to do is. If it's a help to my team then I don't care where you play me. But experience brings maturity in knowing your role on the team. If you don't want to accept your role it's going to be very hard for you and very hard for your team to play hard and win games."

The goal for the Hawks this season is making a deeper postseason run after being bounced from the playoffs in the second round the past two years. Pachulia believes that the Hawks'

front office has assembled a solid group of guys with the mental toughness to overcome injuries and individual egos that derail some franchises.

"When you go into the next level, the next level being championship and playing in the finals you need the right minded people," Pachulia stated in reference to individuals sacrificing personal statistics for team success. "Everybody has to do their job and know their role within the team if they want to be successful and be one of the top teams."

"We've started sharing the ball better and it isn't about who scores how many points," Pachulia stated while pointing around the locker room at his teammates. "In a lot of the games we won we've had over 30 assists and that's a great thing to see us sharing the ball with great offensive weapons."

The 2011 season is just at the quarter mark and the Hawks have already endured their share of adversity.

Leading scorer and four-time All-Star guard Joe Johnson is out until January after undergoing elbow surgery. Veteran forward Maurice Evans has started in Johnson's place but also admits that his own knee in which he had offseason surgery isn't 100 percent yet. Starting small forward Marvin Williams also missed four games earlier in the season with a bone bruise to his knee.

Keep in mind that in 2010 Atlanta's starters missed only 11 games the entire regular season. However, Pachulia believes the team is growing closer because of the early injury challenges especially with Johnson missing from the lineup.

"Me and Joe (Johnson) signed with the Hawks together (back in 2005). Since the time we've been teammates, I don't remember many games that Joe has missed (over the years)," stated Pachulia to HOOPSWORLD. "So it's a very unusual situation for the whole team. Especially since you're talking about our leader and go to guy. But (due to) the maturity of this team guys have stepped up like Josh (Smith) Al (Horford) and Marv (Williams)."

"It's beautiful to see everybody evolve," continued Pachulia. "Even without Joe we've won pretty good games, down in Orlando and in New Jersey. "We're going to continue to play the same way and try to get as many wins as possible until Joe rejoins us – hopefully soon."

Johnson's ability in the past to stay off the injured list was impressive as the veteran missed a total of only nine games from 2007-10.

"We've been around for enough time to realize that injuries are part of the game," stated Pachulia calmly. "It's a long season, especially when you play in the postseason and play at a high level it's (injuries) going to happen."

"We'd like to see everyone healthy and dressed in a uniform, but guys that don't get that many minutes have a chance to step up," explained Pachulia referring to the increased minutes Atlanta's bench has been receiving in Joe's absence.

"So far I think we're handling it (adversity) good. We just have to keep getting better."

All-Star Leap Revisited: Before the season started we looked at a **handful of guys that had the potential to make the leap** to All-Star status this season. In the Eastern Conference, the frontrunners to secure their first selection to the midseason classic were Josh Smith, Andrew Bogut, Brook Lopez, Andrea Bargnani, John Wall, Brandon Jennings and Stephen Jackson.

- Smith's numbers are roughly the same as the 2010 season, but the Hawks' team captain is shooting 47 percent from three-point range. Amar'e Stoudemire's presence will likely keep Smith out, but he's on pace for the first All-Defensive first team honors of his career
- Bogut is on pace to average a double-double for the third straight season, but has been slowed by various nagging injuries.
- Lopez has overcome an extremely slow start shooting wise, but has struggled to satisfy head coach Avery Johnson's demands on numerous occasions.
- Bargnani is averaging a career-high 21.3 points and while the Raptors aren't playing near the .500 level as a team, their performance up until this point has quieted a lot of skeptics after losing power forward Chris Bosh in free agency. Bargnani has been the driving force.
- Wall has shown flashes of excellence and will likely finish second in Rookie of the Year voting, but won't unseat Rajon Rondo or Derrick Rose as point guard for the East.
- Jennings is probably on the outside looking in as well. The second year player's points per game are up to 18.5, but his assist output has declined. Plus he's shooting just 39 percent from the field.
- For three straight years Jackson averaged over 20 points per game, but he's down to 18.2 after 22 contests this season. In addition, the Bobcats have struggled mightily after making the playoffs last season.

In the Western Conference candidates to break into the All-Star mix were Monta Ellis, LaMarcus Aldridge, Luis Scola, Russell Westbrook, Al Jefferson and Rudy Gay.

- Ellis once again finds himself in the top 10 in scoring. Barring injury Ellis should be in serious contention for a spot on the All-Star squad this season.
- Despite all of the injuries surrounding the squad, the Portland Trail Blazers still find a way to stay on the positive side of .500. Aldridge's point production is down slightly and his field goal percentage has taken a bigger hit. Don't believe he'll get an invite this season.
- Scola is averaging 20 points and 9 rebounds per night. He has shouldered a big offensive burden with Yao Ming limited due to injury. He should be in the mix.
- Westbrook has emerged as a legitimate MVP candidate early this season. Will Jason Kidd and Chauncey Billups be able to hold off the youngster for one more year?
- The Jazz are leading the Northwest division, but Jefferson's play has been outshined somewhat by power forward Paul Millsap early on.
- Rudy Gay, like most Team USA participants, has raised his level of play this season shooting a career-high from the field and three-point line.

More candidates emerging are Indiana Pacers center Roy Hibbert who is on pace for a career year after losing weight in the offseason. The weight loss has the former Georgetown University star looking a lot more fluid in the post and he's been able to stay on the court longer because he's committing less fouls.

Houston Rockets guard Kevin Martin is putting up huge offensive totals (23 ppg), but if the Rockets get a representative it'll be Scola. Minnesota Timberwolves forward Kevin Love has been a monster on the boards. The third year player is leading the NBA in rebounding (15.6) while also scoring over 20 per contest (20.5). The T'Wolves win/loss record will place a dark cloud over Love's All-Star candidacy.

Want to talk Zaza and the latest Hawks news or my All-Star Leap List, be sure to [send in your questions for my weekly chat](#) held Thursday at 8pm EST.

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