

BLUE CHIP PICK

**Bulls Teenage Rookie Patrick Williams
Proves Age is Just a Number**

By Anne Stein





Two seasons ago, high school senior Patrick Williams was named Mecklenburg County, North Carolina's player of the year, weeks after leading his West Charlotte High School squad to the 4A Championship game. Last season, the 6'7" forward played his lone year at Florida State while coming off the bench, and was named ACC Sixth Man of the Year.

And this season? The second-youngest player in the NBA -- picked fourth overall in the 2020 Draft -- has started and played nearly every game for the Chicago Bulls. With no NBA Summer League and a shortened pre-season, the 19-year-old has jumped in with the best of them, guarding the likes of LeBron James, Giannis Antetokounmpo, and the player he grew up idolizing: Kawhi Leonard. In just a few short months the youngster's proven himself to be NBA-worthy, all while eagerly soaking in advice from his coaches and teammates.

"All of my teammates have helped me," says the cheerful and polite Williams. "They've all wrapped their arms around me from day one and believed in me, which is huge. That's one of the biggest things for me -- not only to have the coaching staff believe in you, but teammates who believe in you and who want to see you get great."

At 6'7" and 230 pounds, Williams describes himself as a "do everything" player, typical of what today's NBA is looking for: A position-less playmaker. "Being able to switch everything and guard every position, and play your position on the offensive end, it kind of helps each and every team," Williams says. "That's one of my biggest

strengths, being able to do everything."

Bulls Executive Vice President of Basketball Operations Artūras Karnišovas summed it up this way on draft night. "Patrick can handle the ball, defend multiple positions, and he's a very humble kid that wants to get better. To get a player who just turned 19 in August, to be at that level of maturity at this point and a willingness to learn, it's hard to find. The more we studied Patrick, the more we liked him." Added Bulls General Manager Marc Eversley: "Patrick really embodies what the modern NBA player is today. The versatility that he brings on the court really stood out to us."

From the moment Patrick flew to Chicago and stepped foot in the Advocate Center just a few months ago, he made clear it was time to get down to business. "I've been dreaming of all this," he said after signing a brand new contract, "but there's work to be done."

Raised in Charlotte, North Carolina, Williams is the youngest of four, with two older brothers who played basketball and an older sister. His parents, Janie and Eddie, both played basketball at Johnson C. Smith University, a historically Black institution in Charlotte. “They know the game and things about the game that most other parents wouldn’t know,” says Patrick. “They’ve been around it a long time and I’d always take their advice and insight. I still do.”

As teammates and coaches noticed from day one, he is an incredibly hard worker, traits that Patrick credits to mom and dad. Janie Williams’ motto is ‘If you want it, go get it.’ Eddie Williams’ motto: ‘There’s nothing that you can’t do as long as you work for it.’ Patrick watched his mom build her Charlotte-based floral business from the ground up, putting in long hours to make it succeed. “I learned that you never stop working until you get what you want, and then you set a new goal.”

It’s impossible not to notice how incredibly calm and even-keeled Williams is on the floor. Just recently, for example, after sinking a 52-footer at the end of the third quarter during a mid-February Bulls win over Sacramento, he coolly walked off the floor past astonished teammates. When reporters asked afterwards why he didn’t even crack a smile, Patrick’s answer was simple. “It was a three. It was a three-point play. I’ve hit threes before. That’s pretty much about it.”

Unlike many pro athletes, Patrick says he wasn’t always good at the game but in high school, his talent (along with his height, when he grew eight inches), exploded. “I didn’t get confident in my game until 10th





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grade. Before that I was coming off the bench and didn't play a lot. I wasn't always good or always the best on the team. I work hard and I let the work speak for itself."

So with just a year of college under his belt and not much of a pre-season to prepare, what did the second-youngest player in the league think when he first stepped onto the hardwood? Was he NBA ready?

"It took a while to be confident playing the college game because I'd never faced college competition. At this level, I'm still building," says Williams. "I'd never played an NBA game or gone against NBA competition before but after those first few practices and pre-season games I felt more and more confident. When my teammates have my back and tell me that I'll be in this league for a long time, that confidence goes a long way."

On February 5 vs. Orlando -- the first of two back-to-back games against the Magic -- the rookie scored a career-high 20 points, becoming the youngest Bull in team history to score 20 in a game. The next night he followed up with 16 points and 10 rebounds for his first career double-double.

"When he plays like that, I don't think he understands his strength and his physicality at 19, it's ridiculous," said Bulls All-Star Zach LaVine after the game. "He's a monster; he's going to be a monster. When he plays with that type of intention, it really helps our team."

In early January, when Patrick drew the assignment of guarding LeBron James, he notched six points, eight rebounds and four steals. LeBron had his usual outstanding game, with 28 points, seven rebounds and seven assists, but praised the Bulls' rookie afterwards.

"I think he is going to be an exceptional talent," said James. "He has long arms. He has Kawhi (Leonard)-type hands that I noticed out on the floor so I knew I couldn't play with the ball much. You can tell he is just laser-sharp on just trying to get better and better...He has a great in-between game but if you notice his hands, like I said, he has Kawhi-type of hands that is going to benefit him a lot throughout the course of his career. I think Chicago has a good one."

It's clear that Williams is soaking up everything he can about the game, on and



off the court. Each day he picks the brain of assistant coach Maurice (Mo) Cheeks, for example. “He’s been in the league a long time as a player, a coach and an assistant coach,” says Williams. “He’s seen a lot and as a rookie coming into this league I haven’t seen a lot, so I want to pick his brain as much as I can. It’s definitely been helpful.”

He also gets advice from teammates. “Patrick is just a sponge right now,” says Bulls veteran Otto Porter, Jr. “He’s soaking up so much information, and he’s willing to put in the work.” Guard Coby White has been like a big brother to Patrick since high school, when the two played on AAU teams in North Carolina. “When I decided to declare for the draft,” says Williams, “Coby and I talked even more. “He’d been through exactly what I was about to go through so I asked him how to make the transition.”

He’s also close to Bulls two-way player Devon Dotson and his parents. Dotson’s from Charlotte and the two played in high school and on various AAU teams.

But it’s the vets he especially pays attention to. “I talk to Thaddeus Young a lot about on the court things he does defensively. And I talk to him a lot about off the court things like finances and making sure I plan for years down the line, and not just right now. OP (Otto Porter), Garrett, Zach, all the vets give me advice that sometimes I don’t even know I need. I’m super thankful for those guys.”

For instance, Patrick noticed that 12-year NBA veteran Garrett Temple watches a LOT of film -- on the plane, on the bus, whenever he can. “So I asked Garrett how to break it down myself and he gave me some really good tips. I have an iPad and watch the film they send us as many times as I can,





trying to pick up on things. It's really helpful knowing tendencies and learning the game through film."

Of course, there's nothing like learning the game while guarding one of your favorite players. Two days after taking on LeBron James, Williams was again tasked with guarding a superstar: the Los Angeles Clippers' Kawhi Leonard.

Patrick has admired Leonard since high school and has watched hours and hours of Leonard highlights. Bulls broadcasters have even nicknamed Patrick 'The Paw' after a couple of Kawhi Leonard-like monster plays by Williams at the rim.

"Even when he isn't involved in the play, he tells guys where to be," explains Patrick, about why he patterns his game after Kawhi's. "Then defensively, he knows how to use your hands and arms to get deflections and steals....I definitely see the potential to be a player like him, a two-way player that can get stops, guard the best player and also be a reliable offensive talent. I talk a lot about being a two-way player and he's the model of a great two-way player."

Just 11 games into his first NBA season, the rookie managed to score a career-high (at the time) 17 points, while Leonard had a particularly great night, scoring 35. While

Patrick wasn't thrilled with how he performed, he welcomed the experience. "I see guarding players like those as a stepping stone to becoming the player I want to be in this league. And I really thank the coaches and my teammates for letting me do that."

"When my name is called to guard those guys -- Giannis, LeBron, Kawhi -- I take the challenge. I don't look at it as, 'I'm guarding LeBron James or Kawhi Leonard.' I look at it as, 'I'm guarding number 23 from the Lakers. Of course he's the G.O.A.T. of my generation so it was a blessing to go up against him, but the player I want to be in the league is the one who guards the best players every night,

and who can perform offensively, too.”

Surprisingly, the talented rookie doesn't limit himself to the NBA for insights on how to be a better player. Patrick is a huge WNBA fan and this past summer, he sat down (virtually) with Phoenix Mercury superstar Diana Taurasi for a commercial/interview where the two talked hoops.

“The WNBA is the best basketball you'll see as far as playing the game the right way,” Williams says. “Some of the best scorers and shooters I know are women. They can't come into the lane and jump over everybody. They have to use skill and talent and abilities and it shows.”

Meeting the 38-year-old Taurasi and filming a commercial with her was thrilling,

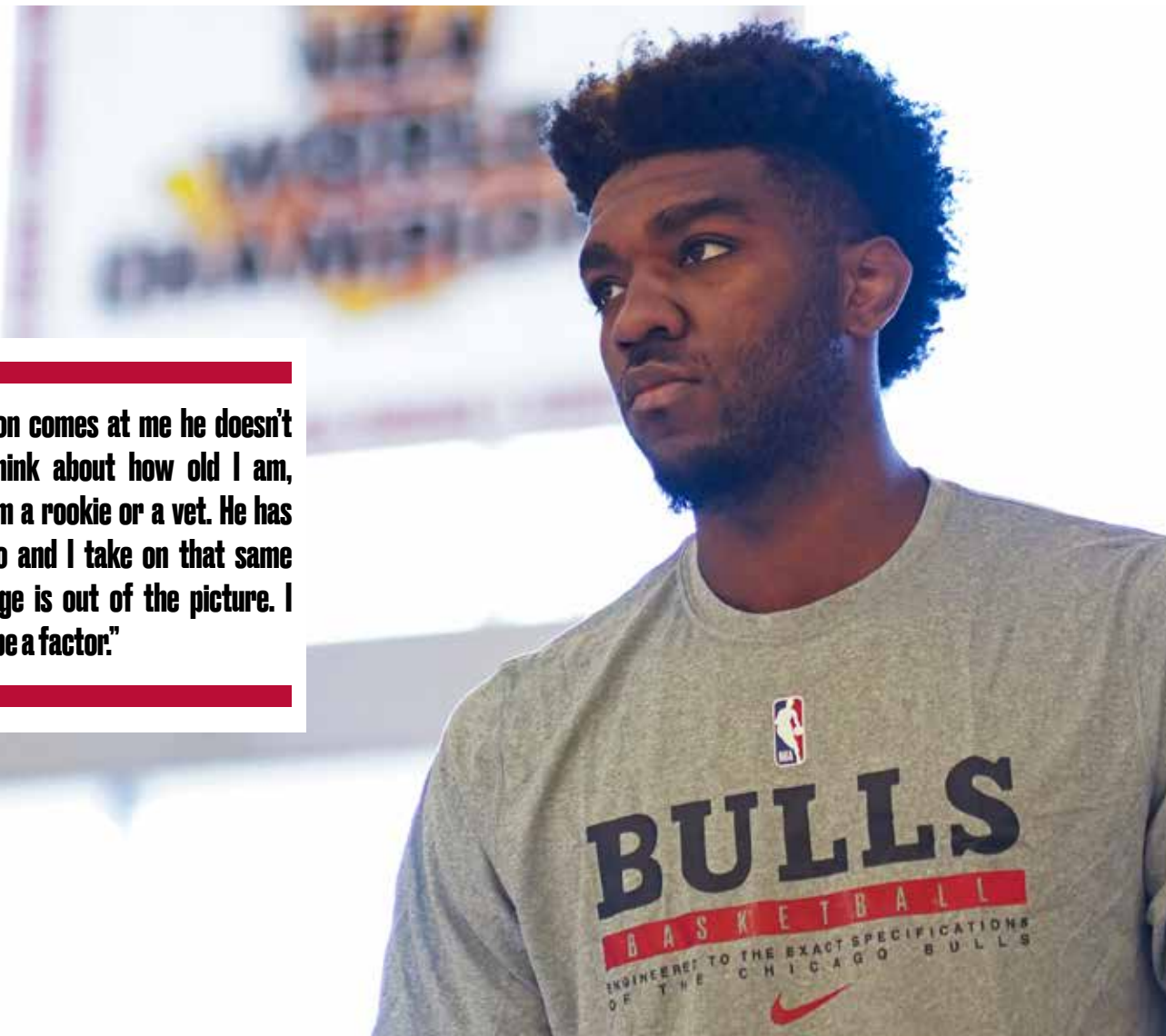
given that he's such a big fan. “She gave me tips on being a pro. Her body is still in tip-top shape and she may have 10 more years to go! That was big for me.” The two talked about slowing the pace of the game, getting enough work in, and being the best you can be for your team. “I was really blessed for her to give me some of the wisdom and advice that took her so long to gain.”

Though he'll almost certainly be the youngest guy on the floor this season in any arena where he plays, Williams says he doesn't think about his age--and he doesn't think other players do, either. “When ‘Bron comes at me he doesn't care or think about how old I am, whether I'm a rookie or a vet. He has a job to do and I take on that same

mindset. Age is out of the picture. I don't let it be a factor.”

While age doesn't mean a thing, the mental side of the game, just like watching film and taking care of his body and making the most of every practice and game, is huge to Williams.

“Everyone in the NBA has the ability and God-given talents and gifts to play. What sets you apart is the mental side of it and making sure you are locked in and focused for each and every practice and film session and game. You have to build good habits, which turn into good performances and wins. That's the ultimate goal: to win.” ■



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