

FOREVER YOUNG

How the NBA's most exciting rookie is turning heads—and turning around the Hawks

Text by KEITH GORDON



Atlanta Hawks point guard Trae Young has long been the center of attention. From his time in high school as a top-25 recruit to taking the college basketball world by storm during his one season at Oklahoma and arriving in Atlanta as the hoped-for savior of the Hawks, Young has carried a lot of responsibility on his shoulders in the brightest of spotlights.

Now partway through his rookie season, Young has given the city of Atlanta something it hasn't had in its NBA franchise in some time: hope. We spoke to the unstoppable rookie about his ascension to the top of the basketball world and how he views his role as the centerpiece of the Hawks' rebuilding project.

You were highly ranked coming out of high school, but quickly became the absolute must-watch player in college last year. What was that process like, and how did you get used to that level of fame and exposure so quickly?

The process in college was crazier than I ever expected. The NBA was always a lifelong dream, but everything just happened so fast

it felt like it was overnight. When players like LeBron James and Stephen Curry started mentioning my name in their interviews, my whole life changed. I'll never forget how my Instagram went from 300K to almost 1 million in a matter of weeks. I don't think I ever got used to it. It's still moving very fast.

How helpful or difficult was the second half of last year, when defenses started focusing so much on stopping you? Has that helped you succeed this season, as NBA teams are doing the same thing?

My one year in college was definitely a roller coaster. I started out the season on fire and did things no one had seen for years. Although I knew what I was capable of, it definitely took the country by surprise. After teams started doing different things to try and slow me down, at first it was a difficult adjustment. But I truly believe that I did all I could to stay positive and tried to help the team win games. Those experiences have definitely helped me in the NBA. Because now it is nothing new, and I've learned to lean on and trust my teammates more. That experience in college really helped my growth.

Can you describe draft night? What were your emotions?

Draft night took me through a ton of emotions. Gratitude, relief, and sadness were all felt on that night. Just grateful for the opportunity to get my name called after all the hard years of work and long nights in the gym with my dad. Relief, just knowing that at least one team believed in me enough to draft me and give me the chance to play in the NBA. And sadness, knowing that I couldn't share this with all my loved ones that have passed away over the years. I know they would've been proud of me.

What was your initial reaction to going to Atlanta and the Hawks? And how have the realities of the team and the city matched up with those expectations?

My initial reaction was the "state of the unknown." I was surprised that they traded for me, because they already had a point guard and I had heard that they weren't going to draft one. But when I finally visited after draft night and met everyone in the organization, I was elated. I knew this was the right place for me. And I knew they would give me plenty of opportunities to

However tough it was at Oklahoma to be singled out by the opposition's defense, the experience helped Young in the NBA by getting him to trust and depend on his teammates



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succeed. Plus, knowing how young the team was and how we could grow together. This is easily the best city for me. I love the music and entertainment culture, and I believe that culture will help this organization get to the top.

Your father was a professional basketball player. How has his experience and guidance helped you during the last few years?

I’ve said it many times before: There is no way I would be here today without my parents, and especially my dad. He has always been that shoulder I could lean on, and he’s always given me enough space to figure things out on my own as well. His knowl-

edge of playing, and his relationships with former NBA players, helped mold me as a kid, and it still does today. He still tells me today to never get too high or too low because this process will have its ups and downs.

Unlike some rookies, like Jayson Tatum and Donovan Mitchell who went to playoff teams last year, you are the centerpiece of a rebuilding Hawks roster. How do you view the process of building a contender from the beginning?

I just look at the process as a new challenge for me. I’ve always been a winner, and I want to keep it that way. I know we are rebuilding, but I want everyone to keep the mindset of being positive and being a winner. We are young, so it’s tough to win games, but we have to take it one game at a time.

Speaking of your talents, we seem to be at a moment when your game—three-point shooting, floor spacing, high scoring, ball movement—is perfectly suited for a league where teams like the Warriors and the Rockets have shown how valuable those

traits are. Do you feel fortunate to be arriving in the league when your game is so well suited to where the style of play has gone in recent years?

I am definitely blessed to be able to come to the league at this point in time. I owe so much to players like Steve Nash, Tony Parker, Chris Paul, Allen Iverson, Steph Curry, and even Chris Jackson, among others. Those guys have given me the chance to play at this level at my size and height. Just knowing that I can be a scorer and a distributor without being 6’8”, and having a chance to really make my mark in the NBA, is something I’ll always be appreciative of. I don’t know how I could ever repay them.

How do you see the future for you and the Hawks? How quickly can you and the franchise turn things around for a team that struggled for a while before you were drafted?

My goal is to ultimately be to the Hawks what Russell Westbrook and Kevin Durant were to the Thunder. Or what Stephen Curry is to the Warriors. I was able to see Russ and KD from day one when they got drafted to OKC, so I know what’s possible and I realize it may take a little time. But I’ve definitely seen the blueprint up close and personal.

When you signed your pro deal, was there anything you bought yourself? Anything you’d like to splurge on now that you can afford it?

Everyone probably knows about my Audi R8. That was my first big purchase. I’m big on watches and designer shoes, but other than that I haven’t spent too much. Other than that, traveling would be my next favorite hobby. I want to travel the world and experience different cultures when I’m done playing.

What off-court hobbies or passions do you have?

I’m a big music guy. That’s why I love Atlanta so much, other than basketball, of course. The music culture here is the best. I’m a big R&B fan, but I’ll never forget to throw in some hip-hop. Any concert that I have time to attend, I’m not gonna miss.

Is there anything else you wish the public knew about you or better understood?

There are a lot of layers to me. I think over time people will learn to better understand me. The most important thing people should know at this moment is that I’m hoping to be in Atlanta my whole career, and I want to help build a championship team, while at the same time immersing myself in the culture and history of this great city and state.