

THE HARD WAY

Melting snow is dripping onto the basketball court from a hole in the roof. Empty wooden seats outnumber fans in the upper deck. The hip-hop dancing of nerd entertainer Myron Noodleman gets bigger cheers than the two teams on the basketball court. Welcome to a cold January night in Indiana, as the Fort Wayne Fury battle the Rockford (Ill.) Lightning. Welcome to the NBA's minor league, the Continental Basketball Association.

The Fury's Moochie Norris, a CBA star with NBA dreams, is at the free-throw line. With just seconds left in the tie game, the 6-foot-1 point guard has got one shot at winning. But the ball hits inside the rim and bounces out. Close, but not close enough. It's the same with 25-year-old Norris—too good for the minors, not good enough for the big time. “But if I give up on my dream,” he says, “there’s no use in me playing at all.”

The nine-team CBA has 90 players like Norris, all hungry for the phone call that went to players like John Starks, Mario Elie and Chris Childs: “We want you to come play in the NBA.”

Norris, as the CBA's hottest player, is agonizingly close to achieving the NBA goal that his father instilled in him at the age of 6. After climbing out of his rough Washington, D.C., neighborhood, he bounced around to a few colleges, playing well enough to be drafted by the Milwaukee Bucks as the 33rd pick overall in the 1996 NBA Draft. “I was speechless,” Norris says. But just before the season started, they cut him.

Then the CBA called, a league he'd never heard of before. “I saw it as a second chance to prove myself. It's not the

NBA, but it's professional basketball,” he says. The CBA's week-to-week contracts, however, average \$1,700 and travel is sometimes done by bus. The average NBA weekly paycheck is slightly more, \$140,000, with plenty of private luxury jets to go around. “Friends and coaches from my neighborhood were like, ‘You're gonna make it to the NBA. Just work hard. Don't ever stop,’” Norris says.

Norris played for the CBA's Florida Beachdogs, then the Fury, usually in front of a few thousand fans and two or three NBA scouts. In the past two years, he even played in pro leagues in France and Chile during the CBA off-season. “Every time I take the court, I want to try to get better,” he says.

Fort Wayne Fury coach Keith Smart thinks Norris' work ethic will pay off. “It's a matter of some NBA team saying, ‘We're gonna give him a shot,’” Smart says. “Because he can outplay a lot of the backup players that are there.”

That's all Norris wants. “I don't expect to get called up to the NBA and be a star,” he says. “If I could just get there, the rest will handle itself.”

One week after the Rockford game, the Seattle SuperSonics give him The Call. He tries out and barely makes their roster. In the NBA's opening weekend on an electric February night before a sellout crowd of 17,000, Norris comes off the bench in the fourth quarter, Sonics down by 10. He coolly launches four straight three-pointers. Each shot goes in. “I just needed a chance,” he says. “My dream came true.” Welcome to the NBA.

—by Chris Tauber

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