



Following his own path

Once dispirited after being overlooked by the NBA, Terrell McIntyre has grown into a satisfying career overseas

By Dan Wiederer

Staff writer

Terrell McIntyre's still got it. That look in his eye, that confident smile, that drive to be great and then get even better. From the right wing, he crouches, darts toward the free throw line and abruptly halts, rising to bury a silky pull-up jumper.

Blink once and McIntyre is suddenly in the left corner firing 3-pointers, one after another after another like it's his job on an assembly line.

It's extremely exhausting just watching this fast-paced two-hour workout inside a sweltering UNC-Charlotte gymnasium. Yet McIntyre never slows — even at the tail end of a morning that included a 3.5-mile run, 15 minutes of treadmill sprints and a 45-minute weight-room session.

For McIntyre, this is simply a Tuesday in August and another opportunity to make sure he can continue living his dream.

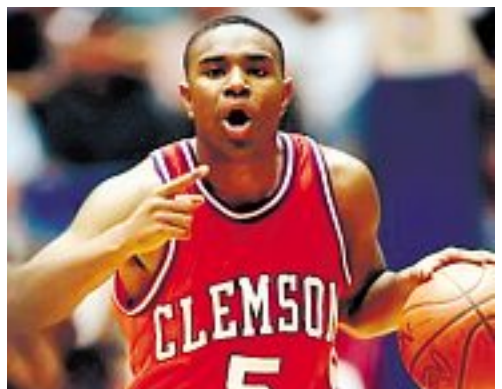
So he attacks each drive with vigor, shoots each 3 with a surgeon's focus.

"There's a lot left to prove," he says. "I've got a lot of basketball left in me."

If you measure basketball success strictly by NBA All-Star appearances or NBA championship trophies or even handshakes with NBA commissioner David Stern, then McIntyre's basketball career has been a flop.

As he approaches his 32nd birthday and the 11th winter since his college career at Clemson ended, McIntyre has played in exactly as many NBA games as Barack Obama.

But if you think this is a sad tale of an undersized journeyman losing his way and toiling in obscurity overseas, then you'll miss the inspiration of the Terrell McIntyre journey: how he has learned to attain happiness and stability and greatness right where he is, becoming the best point guard in Europe, the MVP and a three-time champion in the Italian League.



EURO TRIP: Terrell McIntyre's basketball path has taken him from Clemson to Fayetteville and then overseas to Italy.

McIntyre

From Page 1C

"Life is good right now, man," McIntyre says. "Life is really good."

■ ■ ■

At the end of this August morning, McIntyre retires to the finished basement of his stylish 6,000-square foot home near Charlotte, the one in the cul de sac, just off The Divide golf course. He sinks into his plush leather couch and throws on MTV.

"For today," he says, "my work is done."

And then he points to the shelving unit against the wall. It houses his Italian League MVP trophies and his first team All-Euroleague plaques and his award for being named Italian SuperCup MVP.

McIntyre, it seems, has reached the mountaintop. Or darn close to it.

But to appreciate this view, it's best to start in the valley. It began with that hollow June night in 1999, that unforgettable NBA Draft despair — Duke's Elton Brand selected first by the Chicago Bulls, Virginia Tech's Eddie Lucas taken 58th by the Utah Jazz, and Terrell McIntyre's name called nowhere in between.

At 5-foot-9 and 180 pounds, McIntyre knew his size would be a red flag as NBA teams analyzed his scouting report. But at 5-foot-9 and 180 pounds, he had also led the ACC in scoring as a senior.

Not the Horizon League. Not the Southland Conference. The ACC.

Only one other time has a player led the ACC in scoring and not been drafted. That was Clemson's Butch Zatezalo in 1970.

Sure, McIntyre knew he wasn't likely to be a first-round selection. But he was certain there weren't 58 players more ready for an NBA role than he was.

Except on June 30, 1999, his dream never came true.

For McIntyre, the wallop of disappointment dizzied him.

"This makes no sense," he thought. "Why? How?"

■ ■ ■

McIntyre had a backup plan, a signed contract to play in France. But that was hardly what he wanted. This was like taking a kid to the counter at Baskin Robbins, then asking him to leave with a cup of asparagus.

McIntyre was crushed.

It wasn't that he was some sort of spoiled prima donna who'd never been through tough times. As a kid, he had been the man of his house, responsible for taking care of his younger brother, Teon, while his mother, Cheryl, worked the third shift at Burlington Industries and J.P. Stevens. And as a Hoke County High School senior and Clemson freshman, he fought through the despair that came after his stepfather, Darcey Cunningham, was killed in a freak forklift accident at work.

Still, with as much toughness as he had built up through all that, it was the NBA failure that finally put him on the canvas.

Before the draft night snubbing, basketball had never flustered McIntyre. It was the one thing that always gave him confidence and energy.

Now he was supposed to go to France? To play in some fourth-tier league?

"It's almost like a booby prize if treated that way," then-Clemson coach Larry Shyatt said.

This wasn't an opportunity. It was a slap in the face.

"You go to Europe feeling like you're better than Europe," McIntyre says. "I felt like my game was better. I kept thinking that I should be in the NBA. I couldn't shake that."

McIntyre shakes his head now at those first few years of his professional



Contributed photo

McIntyre goes up for a layup last year in Italy.

career. Before his rookie season in France, he tore a tendon in his foot and required two months of rehabilitation. Yet somehow he welcomed the injury.

"I was cool being hurt," he says. "Because it meant I got to come back home for a while."

Even when he got healthy and returned to action, his heart wasn't pumping the way it always had. His lifelong excitement for the game was being overpowered by his bitter disappointment.

McIntyre's second season in Germany was no better, ending prematurely when his team in Braunschweig went bankrupt and folded.

So much for the road less traveled.

McIntyre still had visions of working his way into the NBA. But this new pessimism was playing lockdown defense.

"Not being in the NBA crushed me," he said. "I'd love to tell you that immediately made me work harder and made me more driven. But honestly, it took me an extremely long time to get past."

As a mother, Cheryl McIntyre Cunningham sensed that hurt. Terrell never said anything to her about it. And she didn't want to say much to him either.

"But there was that look on his face whenever he had to leave to go to the airport," Cheryl says. "I just felt it."

■ ■ ■

With the NBA Developmental League launching in 2001 and bringing a team to Fayetteville, McIntyre saw a new path to attack.

In 2002-03, his second season with the Patriots, he averaged 12.3 points and finished in the top five of the D-League in 3-pointers made, free throw percentage, assists and steals while also helping Fayetteville to the league championship series.

But still, no NBA team offered him a roster spot.

Too small, they said again.

Limited upside.

So many other business decisions to figure in as well.

It's not like McIntyre had simply been overlooked because he was playing in some unknown league in a faraway land. He had just spent two years playing in a league directly affiliated with the NBA. His skills had certainly been seen and his game studied by the NBA's movers and shakers. And he had not quite made the cut.

Only this time, the rejection somehow provided an injection of perspective and motivation.

So when McIntyre headed back to Europe, this time to play in Italy, his outlook had a much sharper focus. Maybe basketball overseas wasn't a punishment but a big break.

Playing for Carife Ferrera in the Italian Second Division, McIntyre watched players like

Anthony Parker and Sarunas Jaskikevicius and Carlos Delfino excel in the more prestigious EuroLeague. They all made big bucks and later punched their tickets to the NBA.

McIntyre realized he was on the doorstep of a golden opportunity. And he started setting new goals. He wanted to be one of the best players in Europe. He wanted to win championships.

"For too long, all I thought about, all I talked about was 'Why am I not in the NBA?' And, 'How did that guy go before me?' I was living in 1999 instead of in 2001 or 2002 or 2003 or 2004."

"Finally I told myself, 'Everybody has their own path.' When I stopped trying to jump in everybody else's lane and stayed in my lane, things started to work out."

■ ■ ■

Suddenly basketball had that invigorating kick again. McIntyre parlayed a solid season with Capo d'Orlando in Italy in 2004-05 into an invitation to play for Reggio Emilia and then Montepaschi Siena in the Italian League First Division.

Right attitude, right timing, right team chemistry and the next thing he knew he was dominating again.

Over the past three seasons, McIntyre has helped Montepaschi Siena win 118 of its 127 Italian League games, cementing the team's place in EuroLeague. Last winter, the dynamic point guard averaged 17.7 points and 4.4 assists on that bigger stage.

He's still got that undeniable quickness and bounce, that savvy and determination. And he's quickly grown into one of the most popular players in Italy, if not all of Europe.

Last year, Cheryl and Teon went over for a visit to watch a few games. On their way home, in the airport in Rome, Teon was wearing a bunch of Terrell's Montepaschi Siena warmup gear. And before he knew it, Teon was being mistaken for his older brother, swarmed by fans and asked to take pictures and sign autographs.

Teon loved the attention so much that he never felt obligated to clear things up. And Cheryl only laughed as she sat nearby and watched.

"It occurred to me, Terrell is like Kobe Bryant over there," she says. "My son. He's like their LeBron James."

■ ■ ■

Ten years after his NBA dreams were shattered, McIntyre still has scars and confusion, still wonders how it is that 10 years have passed and yet he still hasn't played a minute in the NBA.

But those questions don't consume him the way they once did.

Putting, McIntyre learned long ago, is all too paralyzing. He realizes now that life is not always about getting what you

want but rather wanting what you've got.

"And these last few years I've been happy, man," he says. "I feel better about that than anything else."

McIntyre has been married for five years now. In 2007, his wife, Christy, gave birth to their first child, a girl named Siena.

He has worked hard to take care of his mother, who worked so much harder to provide for him.

"I'm very pleased that Terrell isn't ashamed to share his disappointments and say 'This is what I did wrong,'" Cheryl says. "Terrell went through heartache and he went through that bitter disappointment and he stood tall and said, 'I'm going to make it anyway.'"

In June, another up-and-coming point guard from Hoke County with NBA dreams came to Charlotte for a chat. And McIntyre reminded Eric Maynor of his story, told him to always remain open-minded and flexible, to understand the business side of basketball and to appreciate each and every opportunity he was given.

"When you hear those things from somebody who's been through the rough times and has seen the business and understands the athletic parts of it all, I think that kind of turned Eric's light on even brighter," says George Maynor, Eric's dad.

On June 25, Maynor was selected in the first round of the NBA draft by the Utah Jazz and is now hoping to apply some of the guidance he absorbed from McIntyre.

"You have to remember patience and wait for things to develop," George Maynor says. "If you rush everything, you're going to make a mess of it."

■ ■ ■

Terrell McIntyre is a star in Europe. He has made business trips to Turkey and Russia and Greece, to Latvia and Serbia and Poland.

"Coming from Raeford, North Carolina, I didn't even know where Poland was," he jokes. "So to see the world and meet so many different people, has been amazing. Basketball has truly taken me places I'd never dreamed of."

And yet still, every time he comes back to North Carolina, he gets the same question.

Why in the world are you not playing in the NBA?

That used to cut like a knife. Now it sort of tickles McIntyre.

"All I can say is 'I'm OK,'" he says. "Trust me. I'm good, man. I'm happy where I'm at."

Sure, this isn't the script McIntyre would have written as a college senior. But so what?

He's living the life.

Maybe, just maybe, he'll one day get the opportunity to play that first NBA game. But it would have to be the right opportunity.

A handful of NBA teams have inquired about his services. But their offers are usually way too small for a proven point guard with a salary north of seven figures.

"I don't need that NBA sticker for one year just to say I played there," McIntyre says. "I know that I can play in the NBA. But my dream of being a successful professional basketball player is complete without the NBA."

He takes a drink of water and rubs his shoulder where the phrase "Can I live?" is tattooed inside a sketch of a claw.

For McIntyre, it's a reminder to live his life without the worry of how others will judge it.

He asks himself daily, "Can I live?"

So can he?

McIntyre smiles and winks. The answer is obvious.

Staff writer Dan Wiederer can be reached at wiederer@fayobserver.com or 486-3536.