

Gibson already pointing to playoffs

Bulls rookie already has veteran's mentality on and off court



Taj Gibson grabs a rebound against the Pacers in the first half. (Chris Sweda, Chicago Tribune / February 24, 2010)

By K.C. Johnson, Tribune reporter

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Taj Gibson routinely is one of the first **Bulls** to arrive at the Berto Center for practice, and his initial move is to check the **NBA** standings.

"I want to experience the playoffs and see how I fare in that atmosphere," Gibson said Thursday. "That's all I'm focused on. (Joakim Noah and Derrick Rose) have told me it's 100 times more competitive every game and it means so much for the development of young players."

Coach **Vinny Del Negro** routinely is one of the first Bulls to arrive at the **United Center** on game days, and once the game starts, his initial move often is to call a play for Gibson.

"I like to get rookies' confidence going right away," Del Negro explained.

Told that Gibson, 24, hardly acts like a rookie, Del Negro smiled. He knows.

It's time to stop and reflect on the steady, heady play Gibson has provided this season. At times, it's almost taken for granted because of its metronomic consistency.

It shouldn't be.

Gibson's averages of 8.5 points and 6.9 rebounds in 25 minutes are one thing — steady, not spectacular. But it's his fundamental play and the above team-first anecdote that speak to his maturity.

Gibson blocks out. He talks and rotates defensively. He sets solid screens. In short, he plays beyond his experience level.

"Taj knows how to play," Del Negro said. "He's always bringing energy and effort."

Not only has Gibson ignored the so-called rookie wall, he has smashed through it. With Noah seeing limited minutes as he battles plantar fasciitis, Gibson has averaged 12.8 points and 11.2 rebounds in the six games since the All-Star break.

Is now the time to mention Gibson has plantar fasciitis — albeit a milder case — in both feet?

"Brad (Miller) told me the rookie wall is all mental and you just have to push through it," Gibson said. "I came in early in the summer right after I got drafted and worked out hard to get ready. Now I'm weightlifting every other day to keep my body from fatiguing. I use the hot and cold tubs.

"I just stay focused and push through."

Gibson makes his consistency sound so easy, which seems fitting given how seamless his transition has been. He leads all rookies in rebounds and blocked shots.

"With Joakim out, I've been trying to pick my scoring up," Gibson said. "I got a second wind since Brad told me that this is the playoff push. You have to bring energy."

Layups: Noah "celebrated" his golden birthday — a concept he acted mystified by — by visiting a team physician for an X-ray and bone scan on his left foot. "I'm hurting, but I want to be as ready as possible come playoff time," Noah said. ... By the way, Noah shares a birthday with former Bulls coach **Tim Floyd** and Chairman **Jerry Reinsdorf**. For those wondering, Reinsdorf celebrated his golden birthday — when a person turns the age of his or her birth date — in 1961. ... **Luol Deng** skipped practice after banging his left knee Wednesday night with **Danny Granger**. "I'll be fine," Deng said.