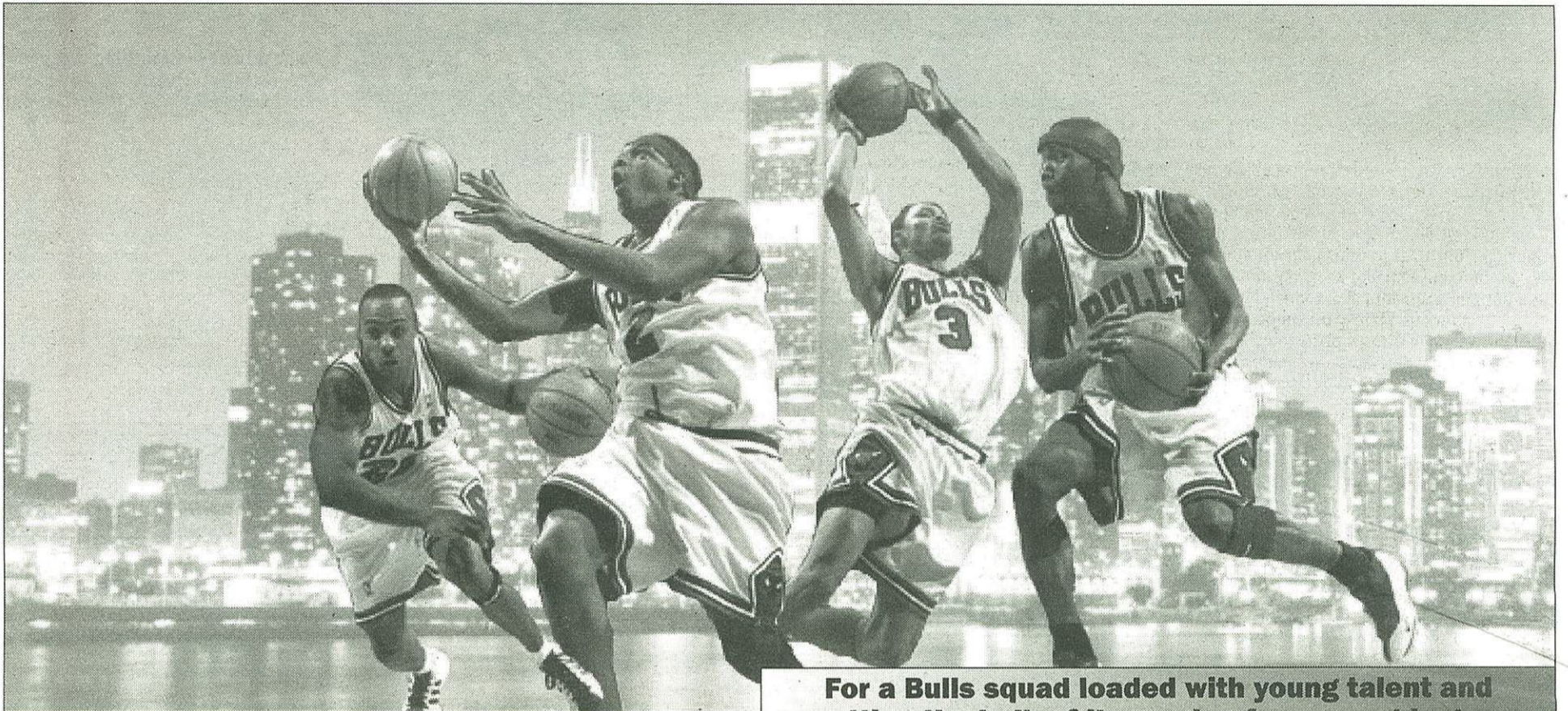


A learning experience



For a Bulls squad loaded with young talent and getting the bulk of its scoring from a rookie, two sophomores and a third-year player, 2002-03 was indeed an educating experience. But the "kids" are learning faster than expected...

by Andy Daglas

Your average 20 year old is probably sitting through a seminar on multiculturalism. Your average 21 year old is coping with his or her first internship or real job, faced with a minimum of responsibilities and expectations. Your average 23 year old is working through graduate school, or an entry-level position in his or her chosen profession.

These are not your average 20 something year olds.

At 20, Tyson Chandler and Eddy Curry learn multiculturalism from the likes of Dirk Nowitzki, Zydrunas Ilgauskas and Yao Ming. At 21, Jay Williams copes with a rocky rookie year at his first job—a job that greeted him with expectations of instant stardom and success. At 23, Jamal Crawford is one of the veterans at his particular office, being asked to take the weight of the business on his shoulders.

Yet, as the Chicago Bulls' season concluded Tuesday with an impressive 115-106 home win over the playoff-bound Philadelphia 76ers, one couldn't help but notice the recent contributions of the so-called "Baby Bulls." Curry posted a career-high 31 points on 14-16 shooting from the field in the game. Crawford led the team with a career-high 33 to go along with eight assists. Williams added 14 points and

seven assists.

After five years and two separate rebuilding projects in the post-dynasty, "Organizations Win Championships" era, the Bulls finally have a core nucleus of players worth rebuilding around. Not only that, they have a group of young players who have the chance to play and develop together, as a team, from the start of their careers.

"It's very important [to grow together]," Williams said. "We have to be together. Most teams today, they have one or two guys that have been there for a while. We don't have that yet."

"We develop together, and as we get older it's going to start turning into wins for the organization," Curry added. "It's going to be a good situation for everybody, the sooner we develop and the sooner we all get on the same page."

In the cases of Curry and Chandler, that development has come much sooner than anyone expected. The controversial draft-day deal that brought Chandler to Chicago for Elton Brand—then the Bulls only established player—followed

by the selection of Thornwood, Ill. native Curry with the team's fourth overall pick upset and confused many.

Fans were left wondering about the direction of a franchise that had essentially laid its entire future on the broad shoulders of two high-schoolers. Questions and criticisms were still surrounding both players as recently as the midway point of this, their second pro season together.

Then the second half started. Chandler went on a tear, notching 11 double-doubles and averaging 11.7 points per game and 9.7 rebounds per game, a figure that nearly doubled his 5.2 rebounds in the first half. Curry scored in double figures in 27 of 32 games, topping 20 points 11 times and finishing with a league-leading .585 field goal percentage.

"I'm happy with my progress," Chandler said. "You go through the struggles and the trials and the tribulations for a reason. It was kind of tough at the beginning of the season...you've got to continue to work hard, make yourself a better player, bring the team along."

"[The key] has been being persistent, not really listening to what everybody's saying," Curry said. "Just keeping focused and playing my game no matter what."

The league has certainly taken notice of the Bulls' Twin Towers. No less a basketball icon than Miami Heat coach Pat Riley even compared Chandler and Curry to Celtics Hall-of-Fame big men Robert Parish and Kevin McHale at one point.

Chandler can't suppress a flattered grin at hearing the quote again, though it's probably the eight hundredth time he's been asked about it.

"That was great," he said. "Anytime you get compared to somebody of that magnitude it's a big, big compliment."

Whether they ever reach the heights of individual and team success those guys did remains to be seen. What is apparent, though, is that the

gamble is paying off for the Bulls. In an undersized Eastern Conference, the 7-1 Chandler and the 6-11 Curry already form one of the best front-court tandems around.

Curry ("Baby Shaq," as he's been called) could be the dominant center in the East as early as next year. This season, he proved his mettle against the league's best, including a tremendously impressive performance against Shaquille O'Neal in March, in which he collected 20 points and six boards while holding the world's best center to a season-low 13 points on 3-of-11 shooting.

"The better we get together, and the more we're on the floor together playing, the better it is for the future of the team," Chandler said. "And we're only going to continue to get better, every game."

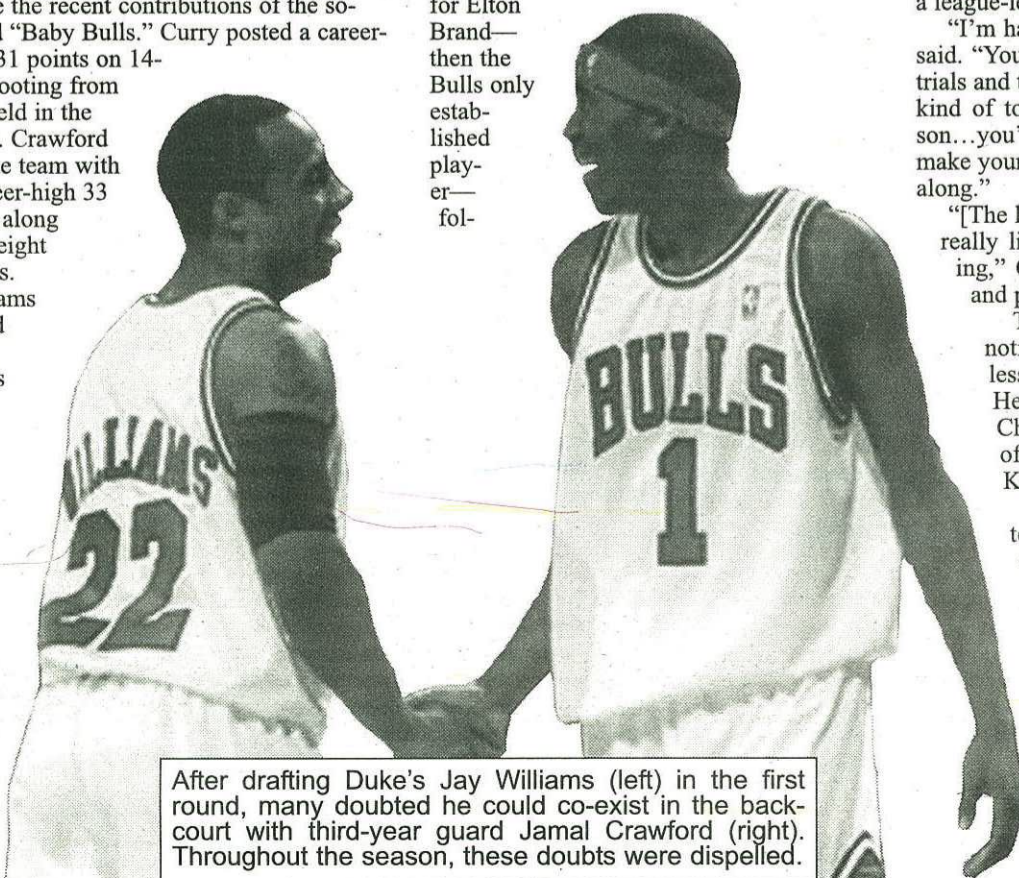
Bulls T.V. analyst and former NBA coach Johnny "Red" Kerr watches every game from the sidelines. He's been impressed by the rapid improvement in the young guys this season.

"When they started the season...I didn't think there was going to be any time for Tyson and Eddy to develop," Kerr said. But something transformed them after the All-Star game. They both have really matured and paid their dues to get in the starting lineup.

"Same with Jamal Crawford. He had a back seat to Jay Williams in the first part of the season [when Williams took over Crawford's starting spot]. He couldn't hit a shot. All of the sudden he's developed and he's getting more confidence and more playing time."

Averaging 18.7 points and 6.9 assists since reclaiming his job as the starting point guard in early March certainly bears that out. His shooting, passing and ball-handling improved dramatically. For the first time since acquiring Jalen Rose midway through the 2001 season, the Bulls finally found a second legitimate scoring threat on the perimeter, a small but athletic combination guard who can split defenses, create his own shot and drain it from the outside.

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After drafting Duke's Jay Williams (left) in the first round, many doubted he could co-exist in the backcourt with third-year guard Jamal Crawford (right). Throughout the season, these doubts were dispelled.

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After much controversy and hearsay of a contentious relationship between him and Williams, Crawford has firmly established himself as the starting point. His play is critical to the Bulls' success, in that it takes the scoring load off Rose (too streaky a shooter to be the sole go-to guy). He also opens up the floor, keeping double teams off Chandler and Curry in the post.

With contract extension talks looming, locking Crawford into their future plans is one of the Bulls' top priorities this offseason. For his part, the three-year veteran is excited about returning to a team on the rise.

"I would love to lead this team," Crawford said. "We have some great guys on the team...[we have to] really work on our games so we can come back and make the playoffs next year."

Crawford began the season backing-up Williams, but the roles had reversed by the end of the year. The number two overall pick in the 2002 draft and the nation's pre-eminent collegiate star during his last year with Duke, Williams came to town riding a wave of high expectations and confidence. But despite flashes of brilliance, peaked by his first career triple-double in a Nov. 9 win over Jason Kidd and the New Jersey Nets, most of Williams' rookie campaign could be described as tumultuous.

"It's been a difficult adjustment period, coming from college where you're used to being dominant, then starting off here with some adversity," Williams said.

If nothing else, the roller coaster year has given Williams a sense of perspective.

"You can never let your highs get too high, and never let your lows get too low," Williams said. "As good as it can be one night, that's as bad as it can be the next."

That lesson was certainly imparted when the highly-touted rookie was relegated to a bench role down the stretch. But rather than drive him to sulking, something that critics have accused him plenty, the move seemed to energize Williams. His shooting and ball control improved leading the second unit, as did his timing on drives and leading fast breaks.

And during the fourth quarter and overtime of an electric comeback win over Milwaukee on April 5, Williams and Crawford shared the backcourt for significant minutes for the first time all year, a move fans had been crying for but coach Bill Cartwright had been reluctant to make. In 17 minutes against one of the best backcourts in the league—the Bucks' Gary Payton and Sam Cassell—the young guards not only held their own but lead the team past a 19-point deficit for its only OT win.

"Jay went into the slump," Kerr said. "I don't know if he hit the wall as a rookie or what. And recently he has come around. So it's good to see the progress in these four guys. They look like, going on next season, they're gonna be good and competitive."

Team captain Rose also likes what he sees out of his youthful teammates.

"The thing that I like is that they're young," Rose said. "And when you're young and as ambitious as they are, and work as hard and want to be as good as they do, eventually they're going to grow into that. You just hope it happens sooner, rather than later."

As talented as they have become, the youngsters still have a ways to go before their games are at a top-caliber NBA level.

Curry and Chandler both need to improve defensively, particularly in their ability to fill the lane against driving and cutting guards. Curry needs to work on his rebounding and box-out skills, which should be a strength for him as arguably the only true center in the East. And Chandler must develop a 10-15 foot jump shot to be an effective weapon offensively.

Crawford's poise improved exponentially since becoming a starter again, but he still has a tendency to take hurried shots and unnecessary runners when he has time to set up a clean jumper. Williams must learn how to use his

quickness to compensate for his size defensively, take bigger guards off their dribble and cut off passing lanes. His shooting is more consistent but he still must learn to create his own shot regularly, especially if he is to spend playing time at shooting guard.

Another year of NBA experience should help improve all of those faculties. So, too, should it hopefully improve upon the team's franchise-worst 3-38 road record, an abysmal mark which included losses by 24 (at Minnesota), 29 (at Memphis) and 51 (at Indiana).

"You know, if we'd won one or two-thirds of our road games we're in the playoffs," Crawford said. "We beat some really good teams at home, and I think that speaks volumes about us."

As dismal as the road record is, the Bulls' 27-14 record at the United Center is one of the biggest signs that this team is on its way. The home mark is better than that of 15 teams, including four Eastern Conference playoff squads. Many of the league's top teams have been dismantled on the west side, including the Lakers, Blazers, Nets, Sixers, Bucks and Pacers.

In those wins, the Bulls have played with the poise, heart, skill and killer instinct of a team that is tired of being known as a "bad team with potential." This year, they met their goal of 30 wins. Next year, they'll have their sights set on the playoffs.