FISH EXCLUSIVE: ATLANTA HAWKS' SIGNEE JOSH SMITH

Contributed by Mike Fisher
Sat, Aug 9, 2008, 03:48 PM

Josh Smith was in a jovial mood, poking fun at everybody and everything from Dwight Howard to P-Diddy to weird foreign cuisine. But he turned serious as he conceded that he felt somewhat “insulted’’ by the free-agency process that delayed his eventual return to Atlanta. At the same time, he is “relieved that patience turned out to be a virtue,’’ the budding NBA star told DallasBasketball.com and DallasBlog in his first extended face-to-face interview since Friday night’s move by the club to match the five-year, $58 million offer the Grizzlies made to him.

“It is a good sign that once there was an offer, it happened quick,’’ said Smith, in Dallas on Saturday, speaking to us about 12 hours after the team’s decision. “But the process ... you feel maybe a little insulted, because you want your team to want you. I feel like I’ve given so much to the organization, and I wanted them to show me that they want me. Chicago did it for Luol Deng, Charlotte with Emeka Okafor. ... They showed they are loyal to their athletes. I wanted to feel wanted.’’

Smith’s new deal in his hometown of Atlanta is $13 million more than the only offer that had been made by the Hawks, a five-year, $45 million proposal turned down by Smith in October. Does this count as “wanted’’? It is interesting that Josh referenced Deng ($71 million) and Okafor ($72 million), given that their deals dwarf his.

“I don’t think we were (playing hardball),’’ he said of his negotiations, adding that because of teammate Josh Childress’ decision to bolt Atlanta for Europe, “we really had to do something, something that was fair.’’

In the end, Atlanta probably gets a bargain. Smith is a shot-blocking master (second in the league in two straight seasons) and does so as a swingman who also averaged 17.2 points, 8.2 rebounds, 3.4 assists and 2.8 blocks for a Hawks club that was a surprise playoff team.

Smith, 22, is in Dallas as part of adidas Nations, the global grassroots basketball program conducting workouts for high-school all-star teams from Africa, Asia, Canada, Europe, Latin America and the US. His signing makes him the latest Man of the Summer, and his presence was a highlight of the day at the Integrated Athletic Development facility in Carrollton where the teams practice.

Maybe it’s the good will that he’s a part of here, or maybe it’s the new contract, but as we spok to him, the 6-9, 240-pound standout was in an ebullient mood.

Smith on his nickname: “They’re trying to put that ‘ATLien’ on me. But I don’t want to be changing nicknames. So I’m going to stick with ‘J-Smoove.’ I don’t want to be like P-Diddy, going back and forth, three or four nicknames. ... too confusing!’’

Smith on other young standouts in the league: “The idea is to grow up fast. You know, we’re kids. Dwight Howard and I, we went to preschool together! We were born three days apart. ... so I’m more mature. ... He’s still just a kid.’’

On coaching the kids in this adidas camp: “I’m having fun coaching, but I’m no head coach. I tried calling some plays when we were in Brazil. I called two. That’s it. From now on, I’m going to leave that to the experts.’’

On the experience traveling the world as a volunteer: “This is an education, a different sort of education. I’m able to visit different places, different whole continents. We’ve been in Africa, China and Brazil. And we’re not just teaching them – they’re teaching us. They always like to expose us to their culture, what they do, what they eat. ... They want you to try it. And I like new things. I want to be able to someday tell my kids that their daddy saw the world!’’