

2004 Olympians vow to handle world tournament

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have lingering knee injuries, and Odom pulled out following the recent death of his infant son.

All remain eligible for spots on the 2008 Olympic team.

By the time the Americans left Athens following three losses, their medal was bronze, and their reputations weren't too shiny, either. Boed overseas, unappreciated at home, and frequently criticized by coach Larry Brown, some vowed they wouldn't play international basketball again.

But along the way, Wade changed his mind. So did his current teammates who were there with him.

"I think before the last game ... everyone was probably saying, 'I'm not coming back,'" Wade said. "But once we played and won the bronze medal game and saw how fun it was to play together and win, I know us young guys said we'll be back."

"If one comes back, we all come back and that's what we did. Myself, LeBron, Carmelo, Amare, we all come back together."

None of those four was originally supposed to be in Athens. Wade, James and Anthony had just completed their rookie seasons, Stoudemire his second year, and none was older than 22. But when USA Basketball had to scramble to fill out a roster after a number of withdrawals, it turned to a few players who ultimately weren't ready yet.

"First of all, they were replacement players," USA Basketball managing direc-

tor Jerry Colangelo said. "And they were too young and inexperienced, and they were thrown into an experience where it was just too much. These were young kids thrown into that circumstance."

Accustomed to playing major minutes and winning far more than they lost - Anthony and Wade had played in the U.S. college Final Four and James won a high school championship a little more than a year earlier - they became frustrated when neither happened with the usual frequency in Athens.

It didn't help that they were playing for a coach who has always preferred veterans. Since they joined the team so late - Wade and Anthony were added a month before the Games - Brown never fully grew comfortable with them, and the players had only minimal impact.

But if the quartet had any reservations about suiting up for the team again, they were erased after discussions with Colangelo, who said of their time in Athens: "The bottom line is it was not a positive experience."

"Basically they shared with me their experiences and I took the initiative to reassure them that it was going to be anything but that," Colangelo said. "And so I think they bought into what I was telling them."

There are early signs that the U.S. has a real chance to reclaim its old spot on top of the basketball world. In their lone exhibition game on home soil, the Americans over-

whelmed Puerto Rico 114-69 on Thursday in Las Vegas, using a sensational defensive effort to overcome a slow start.

No player seems to have undergone more of a transformation than Anthony, who led the Americans with 18 points on Thursday.

Only 20 at the Athens Games and barely a year after leading University of Syracuse to a national championship, he stewed and sulked while languishing on the U.S. bench - and didn't even get off in one game.

"I don't really know what was going through everybody's minds at that point in time," he said. "But me, the reason why I was so emotional, I didn't want to lose. I'm so competitive. I want to win."

His inclusion on this roster came as a mild surprise to people who thought USA Basketball, concerned with players' past actions, wouldn't consider going back to him again so soon.

But Anthony has emerged as a leader on this team, with coach Mike Krzyzewski saying that no player has worked harder. Anthony said he also heard encouraging words from his Denver Nuggets coach, George Karl - who is often demanding of his superstars - after he watched practice one night this week.

"He said he was just proud," Anthony said. "Proud of me being out here, being a leader, working hard, making everyone else work hard."

Now along with his two star classmates from the 2003 draft, Anthony should have a major role as the players try

to make up for one of the few bad basketball experiences they've had to endure.

"Since 2003, that's the only thing that really went bad so far in my life, was losing in the Olympics," Wade said. "But with that experience it made me stronger, it made me really realize the things that I

had here and set goals. Now I want to add that to my resume, winning a gold medal."

There's one more thing the young returners need to fix.

While American fans recognize James as one of the NBA's biggest superstars, there are plenty overseas who

might know of him only as the guy who averaged a measly 5.4 points for a team that went just 5-3 in the Olympics.

He plans to leave a more lasting impression this time.

"I don't like to lose," James said. "I've got a lot to prove to a lot of people, the world."

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Standing pat no factor in Cardinals' losing streak

By R.B. Falls from
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ST. LOUIS — St. Louis Cardinals manager Tony La Russa believes his team's second eight-game losing streak, which ended Saturday, had nothing to do with the team's failure to land an impact player by the trade deadline.

La Russa dismissed the notion that players might have been unhappy that they didn't get more help. The Cardinals, who ended the slump with a 4-3 victory over Milwaukee, got second baseman Ronnie Belliard and struggling pitcher Jorge Sosa for the stretch run.

The manager said anybody who criticizes the team for not improving more is just trying to "stir up some friction and trying to point fingers."

La Russa and general manager Walt Jocketty said the team made every effort to make a major deal, with a corner outfielder at the top of their wish list, but the price tag was always too high.

"There wasn't anything that was even close to reasonable," La Russa said. "The Yankees got (Bobby) Abreu, they took on the \$30 million like it's another day at the beach. Who else took that?"

La Russa believes that he has to do the best he can with what he's got. The Cardinals led the NL Central by 2 1-2 games entering Sunday's game against the Brewers but with a 59-50 record after consecutive 100-win seasons.

It's been much more challenging this season, with another eight-game skid in June and a season-long search for a fifth starter, inconsistency from three of the other four starters, and a make-do look in left field and second base before the Belliard trade.

"You can do anything you want to as a fan to compare, but this is our season," La Russa said. "We've just got to get it out and compete and get our numbers and see where we stack up."

Jocketty said there are unreasonable expectations for the trade deadline, saying that Abreu was the only major player on the wish list to change teams. Another prominent player to switch teams was the Brewers' Carlos Lee, who went to the Rangers.

Multiyear contracts and the wild card have made it tougher to trade, with virtually the entire NL in the running for a postseason spot.

"I blame the national media for starting rumors about guys who aren't even available, so people start wondering 'How come our team can't get this guy?'" Jocketty said. "That just doesn't happen."

"We made every effort and exhausted every avenue to help this club down the stretch, and there really weren't that many guys who moved that I think would be so-called difference-makers on the club."

Jocketty is happy with the pickup of Belliard, a 2004 All-Star, for Hector Luna, although he's not happy with remarks by Indians general manager Mark Shapiro that he'd like Belliard back next year.

Ford GT has more get up than 1960s predecessor

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Ford's 2007 Shelby GT500 won't bring the automaker's sales out of the doldrums but it will certainly give it a more approachable halo car.

The current star is the GT, the Ferrari fighter that has automotive journalists salivating. Its future is in question just as the most powerful Mustang hits the street.

This is an update to Carol Shelby's 1968 500KR Fastback, which cost \$4,473, a huge sum at the time. The 2007 version costs at least 10 times that sum, has 140 more horsepower and will easily out-handle its predecessor.

That fact brings a big grin onto Shelby's face. At 83, he was directly involved in every planning stage of this beast - even driving the product on Ford's proving grounds. That's quite impressive considering Shelby is the oldest surviving double organ transplant patient.

Shelby has every reason to grin. Ford is taking the GT500 on a barnstorming tour to get journalists a bit of seat time - and I mean a bit. Fifteen minutes was about the amount of time I spent behind the wheel in mid-July. That was enough to tell me all that Ford claims about the car may be true. The 5.4-liter V8 is supercharged and produces a stout 500 hp. A light tap on the gas presses you deep into the seat. If this is what 500 horses feel like, I like

Steering and braking felt good and acceleration is astounding. The direct-feeling six-speed transmission seemed just right. The interior is tweaked a bit. The seats are more sports-articulated and the gauges look more fitting of a sports car. The tach and speedometer have swapped places and the dash lighting comes factory set in a red, white and blue color scheme.

It will take a much longer evaluation to see if these quick impressions hold, but that's not going to happen for a while. Nearly all of the 2007 production is spoken for and the press ain't getting one.

Still, my brief stint in the GT500 was enough to convince me that spectators will want one, collectors will buy one and Ford will happily sell to anyone.

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