



Hoop dreams: Falcon star envisions flight in NBA

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8/23/2010 - **DUKE FIELD, Fla.** -- For one Air Force Reservist, the dream of flight isn't pulling Gs in a fighter, but leaping toward the basket over the hardwood court of an NBA arena.

So far, the dream has been barely out of reach for Capt. Antoine Hood, but he continues to pursuit of being a professional basketball player.

"I'm currently being pursued by a few organizations," said the current deputy commander of the 919th Mission Support Flight at Duke Field. "I'm now willing and able to play in the NBA this upcoming season."

The captain's journey toward the NBA began in Texas where he grew up shooting hoops with his brother. He was never seen without a basketball throughout elementary school in Dallas until it was taken away from him at age 13, when he was diagnosed with lymphoma in 1995.

"Laying in a hospital bed and seeing a new kid beside you every other day because they were dying really puts things in perspective."

Chemotherapy, radiation and other tests rid the cancer from his body and ensured it hadn't spread. The captain's faith and prayer got him through the ordeal.

"It was by the grace of God, I was healed and am still here today," the captain said.

The eight months away from the game had slowed him down and noticeably affected his game.

"During a pickup game, a kid told me I'd lost all my skills," he said. "That lit a serious fire inside me to work even harder to be the best I could be and not squander my God-given talent."

Over the next four years, Captain Hood practiced hard and played on the junior and varsity high school teams.

In senior year, the hard work paid off. He was the starting point guard for one of the top 10 schools in Texas and ranked 72nd best player in the state. At an Amateur Athletic Union tournament, a scout from the Air Force Academy spotted him and offered him a full scholarship.

"The Academy offered everything my parents deemed important from academics to leadership," said the second of three brothers.

Captain Hood became the first person in his family to join the Air Force and began his career in blue at the Academy preparatory school in 2001.

He traveled "up to the hill" the next year to join the Falcons, a perennial cellar-dweller in the Mountain West Conference.

"I was determined to come up there and make a mark on the program," he said.

That is exactly what he did. In only his second start, he scored 30 points against Colorado State University - the most ever by an Academy freshman during a conference game. The team only won four more games than the previous year, but it was the most wins the Academy had since 1960. After the vast improvement, the 2003-2004 season brought high expectations.



Capt. Antoine Hood, 919th Special Operations Wing, had a celebrated college basketball career at the Air Force Academy from 2002-2006, but has yet to realize his dream of playing in the NBA. With his active-duty commitment now complete, the reservist says he's ready to take the next step and make that dream a reality. (U.S. Air Force photo/ Tech. Sgt. Samuel King Jr.)

"From the first day I set foot on the Academy grounds, I said we'd make the NCAA tournament and win the conference," said the captain.

To everyone's surprise, the team did just that. The Falcons were undefeated at home, won 22 games, won the conference and played the University of North Carolina in the first round of the NCAA tournament. Captain Hood had a great season as well, breaking the record for shooting percentage in conference games with 55.9 percent and had 15 points and four rebounds during the UNC game.

"Antoine was a privilege to both play with and coach and I have seen very few people grow as much as he did in such a short time," said AJ Kuhle, Academy team military assistant from 2005-2007 and assistant coach at the University of Denver. "As a player, he always pushed himself and those around him to reach for the highest degree of excellence. He demanded and worked towards perfection each day on and off the court."

Captain Hood faced a difficult decision at the end of his sophomore season. Division One schools made offers, but the captain turned them down, choosing instead to finish his commitment at the Academy.

The captain continued with his team and received the coveted Bob Spear Award (highest basketball honor at Air Force) in both his junior and senior year. In his senior year, the team captain averaged 14.9 points per game to become the eighth all-time leading scorer for the Academy.

As a senior, he achieved the leadership position as cadet-colonel; and as the lone senior on the 2006 team, he felt added pressure to lead on the court as well. The captain would sneak back to the gym after lights-out to get in a few more jump shots to stay on his game.

"In my 35 years of coaching and 17 in the NBA, Antoine Hood ranks as one of the greatest competitors I've ever been around in the game," said Jeff Bzedlik, Academy head coach during the captain's senior year and current head coach for Wake Forest University. "His will to win takes a backseat to no one."

After his senior season, the captain was ready to enter the NBA draft with rumors that he could go in the first round. In the past, a rule allowed Airmen with special talents to serve two years active duty and be released to complete their service commitment in the Reserves. However, the rule was no longer in place at the time of Captain Hood's draft opportunity and without a reputable agent, he went undrafted.

After graduation, he began coaching at the Academy's prep school while trying to get picked up by the NBA. The captain came close to living his dream twice, when he received a one-year contract offer from the Denver Nuggets and then the San Antonio Spurs. Due to his active-duty commitment, however, he was unable to make that dream a reality. He said his frustration was overwhelming during this time, but he was able to regain his composure once he arrived to Maxwell AFB to fulfill his commitment.

"I fully understood everything the Air Force Academy has given me and I owed it not only to my brothers and sisters who served, but also to the tax payers and myself to fulfill my commitment as a man following the Air Force's core values of integrity, service, and excellence," said the 27-year-old.

After completing his commitment, he transitioned to the Reserves. Currently, he splits time as a traditional reservist at Duke Field and the chief of warfighter systems at Air Force Special Operations Command headquarters at Hurlburt Field.

"Now, being a Reservist, I can pursue and be pursued by the NBA and overseas franchises," said the captain. "I recently played in the Czech Republic for a month and a half last season."

He also won Athlete of the Year while playing for the All Armed Forces team in 2009.

"The Air Force and basketball both present challenges that sometimes require quick but sure reactions in high pressure situations," said Captain Hood. "To succeed at either, you must have a consistent drive to improve on all levels, because when you accomplish the mission, everyone wins."

The captain continues those NBA drills in preparation for the day when he may get to fly. That day could be soon, as the NBA season is only three months away.

"I'm a firm believer that everything happens for a reason," Captain Hood said. "I hope my journey inspires others to continue to reach for their dreams whether it's into the air or wherever life leads."