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Just Like Old Times

AAU teammates Josh Smith and Randolph Morris hope to rekindle their winning ways at the NBA level.

by Jon Cooper

HAWKS BLOG



Forgive Josh Smith if he doesn't hold the Celtics completely in contempt.

The Boston Celtics? Sure, he still harbors plenty of resentment towards them. But the Celtics nickname in general, not so much.

PROMOTIONS



After all, it was only 2003 that he proudly wore a Celtics jersey. Only then he was part of the Atlanta Celtics, and part of one of the most dominating front lines in AAU history.

TICKET PLANS



The memory of that team is still near and dear to him, and this year so is one of his Atlanta Celtics teammates, center Randolph Morris, who was signed by the Hawks as a free-agent on July 29.

"It's a good feeling just to be able to play with somebody I played with growing up in AAU basketball," said Smith. "It's a really exciting thing for me."

"I played with him all through AAU," recalled Morris. "He's a pretty good guy, a great player. It's going to be fun to be back on his team."

DANCE TEAM




Smith and Morris, two-thirds of the frontline referred to as "The Three Musketeers," will see the third musketeer, Gold Medal-winning and NBA All-Star center Dwight Howard, four times this season, including the Hawks season-opening 99-85 win over the Magic in Orlando. While they'll be foes for the 48 minutes of those games, they'll quickly become friends again once the game is over and reminisce about some great memories.



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Led by "The Three Musketeers," as well as current Memphis Grizzlies point guard Javaris Crittenton, the Atlanta Celtics dominated the 2003 Adidas Big Time Tournament, setting tournament records for total points (895, in 10 games), field goals made (344), and free throws attempted (344). Smith and Howard were named Outstanding Players of the tournament, while the All-Tournament Team included such notables as Daniel "Boobie" Gibson, Shaun Livingston, Greg Oden, Earl "JR" Smith, and Rodney Stuckey, as well as current Hawks teammates Morris, Marvin Williams and Al Horford.

"It was me, him and Dwight on the same team," said Smith. "I remember the fun we had, we were young, we didn't care about anything, we just went out there and played."

"We always had fun off the court," added Randolph. "That was probably what you could take from the experience. We played well together but we had good chemistry off the court, too."

Following that magical summer, the trio finished their senior seasons in high school in typical star fashion.

Smith transferred from McEachern High School in Powder Springs to Oak Hill Academy, which he led to a 38-0 record and a No. 1 National Ranking, averaging 25.8 points, 7.4 rebounds, 6.0 blocks and 3.0 steals, while shooting 61 percent from the field and 70 percent from the foul line. He was a Naismith Award Finalist, and a McDonald's and PARADE All-American.

Howard led Southwest Atlanta Christian Academy to the Class A state championship after leading them to runner-up status the previous season. He averaged 25.0 points, 18.0 rebounds and 8.0 blocks a game in winning the 2004 Naismith Award, the Gatorade National Player of the Year, McDonald's National High School Player of the Year and Georgia's Mr. Basketball. He was a PARADE All-American and was co-MVP of the 2004 McDonald's High School All-American game.

Morris, meanwhile, starred at Landmark Christian School in Fairburn, where he averaged 25.0 points, 16.0 rebounds and 4.5 blocked shots as a senior.

Smith and Howard went straight to the NBA — Howard being selected with the first pick by the Magic and Smith going 16 picks later to Atlanta — while Morris went to the University of Kentucky, where he helped the Wildcats to back-to-back-to-back NCAA Tournament appearances. In what would be his final college game, Morris scored 22 points and pulled down eight rebounds in a second-round loss to Kansas. Then, after going undrafted in the 2006 Draft, he became the first player in NBA history to go from the NCAA to the NBA in the same week, signing with the New York Knicks.

While Smith was earning renown by winning a slam dunk championship (coincidentally a feat matched by Howard last year) then becoming one of the top defensive players in the NBA, Morris' career stalled, as he played only 23 games (making two starts) in two seasons with New York.

Once he became a free agent this summer, Morris saw the opportunity to play in Atlanta. He jumped on it, participating in summer workouts, where he caught the eye of Hawks' coaches, then being invited to Training Camp and



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making the club. In the process, he was reunited with Smith, who had been a free agent himself, but stayed in Atlanta after the Hawks matched an offer sheet from Memphis, and became a division rival of Howard.

Morris simply appreciates his new lease on life.

"I think it's a good situation. I'm looking forward to trying to take advantage of it," said Morris, who shot five-of-six from the field and two-for-two from the line, while grabbing five boards in 24 minutes of action during the preseason. "I'm very enthused in the fact that I get that second chance. I'm ready for a new beginning."

But he will never forget that Atlanta Celtics team.

"We've moved on a little bit, but we still have that bond there," he said. "That's where we came from. You can't get rid of that."

Jon Cooper is a freelance writer based in Atlanta

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