



Many parallels link Bell, Bowen

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Suns guard Raja Bell and Spurs swingman Bruce Bowen share first team All-Defensive honors this season. They also share a passion for improvement.

Bell and Bowen, defensive aces in this Western Conference semifinals series, worked out together last summer in South Florida. Each morning they met with former college coach Don Kelbick, sweating through ball handling and shooting drills.

"Hey, I just sent Bruce an e-mail, congratulating him on advancing to the second round and for making the All-Defensive team," Kelbick said by telephone last week. "He and Raja are both great guys. They deserve to be recognized."

They share similar backgrounds. Neither was drafted out of college. Bell was overlooked at Florida International, where he transferred from Boston University.

Bowen was overlooked at Cal State Fullerton, where he earned a scholarship through deception.

It happened like this: Fullerton assistant coach Donnie Daniels checked his messages one day and heard the voice of a high school coach raving about a skinny kid with a nice shooting touch. Someone named Bowen.

"And he's very interested in your program," the message ended.

Daniels laughs.

"I didn't find out until a few years later that Bruce had actually made that call himself," he said. "He was just acting like a coach. Of course, I always thought, 'If you're going to lie, why choose Fullerton?' Most people would've called someplace like UCLA."

After college, Bell went to the CBA; Bowen went to France. Both got their NBA starts through 10-day contracts. Both soon realized that defense was the key to survival.

"They're really similar in this regard: They appreciate everything everybody does for them," Kelbick said. "They don't have an NBA stink on them. They remember where they came from. There's not an issue with work ethic. They both are like, 'I don't care what I do. I don't care if I shoot. I don't care if I score. I'll do the dirty work. Whatever it takes to win.' "

Kelbick met individually with Bowen at 6 a.m. last summer. Bowen lived 20 minutes from the community gym; Kelbick lived three blocks. And yet Bowen beat the coach to every session.

Bell got a late start because of the calf injury he suffered during last season's Western Conference finals. Once he was ready, he supplied Kelbick with a list of areas in which he wanted to improve.

- Scoring in the post.
- Hitting the midrange jumper.
- Creating options off screens.

"He probably got up 500 to 600 shots a day," Kelbick said.

Bell averaged 14.7 points this season, matching his career high. Since he arrived in Phoenix, he has blossomed into one of the league's best shooters, a pleasant surprise for his coach.

"I didn't know he could shoot, to be honest, not this well," said Mike D'Antoni, recalling the day the Suns signed Bell two years ago. "Then you also appreciate all the little things that you really don't (understand) until you experience."

Bell just calls himself an opportunist. He will irritate on defense; he will take what is available on offense. He will work to improve.

Just like Bowen.

"I'm a huge Bruce Bowen fan," Bell said. "I've always admired what he's been able to do, having to fight and scrap just to get into the league. I always enjoy a story like that."

Probably because it hits so close to home.

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