

Caron Butler's childhood dream: Drug-dealing kingpin, not NBA player

By Dan Feldman

Challenge: Find someone who grew up playing basketball and didn't – for at least a moment – dream of playing in the NBA.

Even I – short, slow and uncoordinated – fantasized about a pro career while shooting on a driveway hoop. Practically every basketball-playing kid does – especially someone who actually has the talent to reach the league.

But not Caron Butler.

Butler grew up dealing drugs in Racine, Wisconsin. Despite his tall frame and natural ability, he never even imagined basketball as a career option.

"It was just pastime," Butler said. "The real goal was being out there on the streets and trying to make ends meet and make money."

Butler did that.

He began shooting guns at 9, dealing drugs at 11, bragging about his \$10,000 stash and nice clothes at 13.

Butler looked up to drug dealers like Jimmy "Junebug" Carter, whom described himself as "The Santa Claus of the ghetto." As Butler tells it, Junebug won a BMW in a dice game, shut down a local Foot Locker by buying all the merchandise and kept 10s of thousands of dollars in various houses around the city.

"Be like Mike? Everybody I knew wanted to be like Junebug," Butler wrote in his autobiography, "Tuff Juice: My Journey from the Streets to the NBA."

The book details Butler's rough upbringing, including his 11 months in the Ethan Allen School for Boys after being convicted for having a gun and cocaine in his high school locker at age 15. There are stories of shootouts (both with Butler shooting and being shot at), car chases and friends' deaths.

Interestingly, only a single chapter is devoted to his NBA years – subsections on his time with the Miami Heat, Los Angeles Lakers, Washington Wizards, Dallas Mavericks, Los Angeles Clippers, Milwaukee Bucks, Oklahoma City Thunder, Detroit Pistons and Sacramento Kings whizzing by. The book spends more time on Butler's family members – not his relationships with them, but their own stories.

Butler wants readers to know where he came from.

He nearly didn't have an opportunity to tell his story. After he was released from Ethan Allen and quit dealing, Butler was home when police searched his place and found crack in the garage. Butler said it didn't belong him, but he also knew people hid things in the garage.

"That's just what it was," Butler said. "In the neighborhood, it was a lot of places where people stored stuff and hid items and things."

"You may walk down the street and see a Dorito bag that's balled up. But if you pick it up, there may be something in it. Or you may walk down the alley and see different garages and doors open

and stuff, and you may stumble upon a lot of things that you wasn't supposed to stumble upon. So, I wasn't searching for things. But I was aware of my surroundings."

A new charge could've sent Butler to prison long enough to end his budding basketball career. But an officer on the scene, Rick Geller, believed the drugs weren't Butler's and let him go. Apparently, only later did Geller learn of Butler's ability on the hardwood.

Butler says many people helped him over the years, some out of genuine compassion and others just to latch onto his basketball talent. And he's grateful for both groups. Where would he be without the basketball-minded, with only the authentic do-gooders?

"Worst-case scenario, I probably wouldn't be here on earth," Butler said. "Best-case scenario, I'd probably be incarcerated."

Butler never had the luxury of choosing the source of his support. When he needed \$5,500 to pay for prep school in Maine, he got it from a drug-dealing friend. They remain close. But when Butler reached the NBA, he wrote a check to three other Racine drug-dealers who helped him in bleaker times and broke ties.

How did he know whom to keep in his life and whom to leave behind? After all, the dealer he's still friends with received a 10-year sentence after loaning Butler the tuition money.

"Certain people had reached out and extended themselves for all the right reasons," Butler said. "And certain people had reached out an extended themselves for all the wrong reasons and wasn't trying to better themself in life.

"I had to facilitate myself through those situations, and it was tough. There's no manual for that stuff."

No, there's not. But Butler's book at least offers some insight into his situation – one with elements shared by many.

For Butler, carrying a gun seemed normal. Getting arrested seemed normal. Dealing drugs seemed normal.

In his story, criminals aren't necessarily the bad guys. They're also family and friends.

So, as Butler has gone through a successful 14-year NBA career he never imagined, he's not hiding his past. Active in the community, he uses his experiences to help young people coming up who see drug-dealing as their best option.

"When you come from that environment, when you come from that lifestyle, the only thing they know is what they know. If it happens to be that trade, it's unfortunate," Butler said. "But there's some people out there that have good hearts and good intentions that's trying to better their self and just going about it a little bit in the wrong way. They just need some direction.

"Look what happened in my life with some direction."