

Yahoo! Sports: The Butler did it on and off the court

By: Jeremy Curtis

He wowed fans with his transcendence on the court. He worked his way into their hearts for his goodwill off it.

On this night, he did everything he could to fight back the tears.

He had valid reason to be a prima donna. But instead, he deferred to his teammates, coach and university that helped him become one the most revered college basketball players in recent memory.

There just haven't been many players quite like West Virginia's senior forward, Da'Sean Butler.

It was a brisk March night in 2010, in Morgantown, W.Va. The Mountaineers battled Big East conference rival Georgetown, and rolled past the Hoyas, 81-68. But the bigger story was not the outcome of the game.

It was senior night. It was a curtain call performance. Never again would Butler suit up, be introduced on the gold and blue carpet and play for the Mountaineers inside the WVU Coliseum.

Butler was brilliant that night: 22 points, six rebounds, six assists.

Strong and steadfast, determined and unrelenting, he sank basket after basket, giving the Mountaineer fans their money's worth. After all, the crowd of more than 13,000 gave him a raucous ovation when he was introduced before tip-off.

It only got louder and more emotional when he embraced WVU's fiery coach Bob Huggins at center court. Georgetown wasn't the only challenge Huggins was worried about.

"Da said he wasn't going to let it get to him and he didn't," Huggins said. "I was trying like crazy not to let it get to me because I didn't want to be the reason he became emotional. It was really hard."

Yes, Butler took care of business in his 34 minutes played against Georgetown. He got another ear-piercing ovation when he checked out of the game with 30 seconds to go.

Then, the cheerful mood changed.

"I'm not going to lie," Butler said. "I started crying."

As he spoke, his eyes watered and reddened.

“When I got subbed out, I realized it’s my last time being in here. I started just thinking back to everything. Everything just kind of hit me. I won’t be here anymore in this gym playing. I’m just going to miss everything.”

And WVU supporters will miss it too. They’ll certainly miss the 6-foot-7 All-American from Newark, N.J.

The Mountaineers enjoyed unprecedented success during Butler’s four-year career. As a senior, he delivered six game-winning baskets that are already part of WVU lore. He helped WVU claim 107 wins and three NCAA tournament berths. He triggered WVU’s Elite Eight win over No. 1 seeded Kentucky, propelling the Mountaineers to their first Final Four appearance in 51 years. Mountaineer basketball benchmarks Butler also starred in include WVU’s first and only Big East tournament championship, a Sweet 16 appearance and WVU’s first NIT championship since 1942.

Butler’s 2,095 career points land him third on the all-time scoring list at WVU behind basketball legends Jerry West and “Hot Rod” Hundley.

“He’s one of the best players,” Huggins said, “I think, ever to play here.”

The only thing that could stop Butler came later when he suffered a heartbreaking ACL and MCL injury in a Final Four meeting with Duke.

With nine minutes left and the Mountaineers on the wrong side of a 63-48 score, the air fell out of Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis.

Butler drove down the lane and collided his left knee into Duke’s center, Brian Zoubek. Butler writhed on the court and in the arms of Huggins, who cradled his fallen protégé. Visibly in pain, but unselfishly trying to dismiss it in his mind, Butler wanted nothing more than to get up, get back to the game and help craft a comeback.

He’d spoke of helping Huggins, WVU and the state of West Virginia claim their first ever and still elusive national championship.

It just wasn’t to be.

Instead, Butler needed help off the court and Duke won the game, 78-57. Two nights later, the Blue Devils beat the Butler Bulldogs by two points to win the national championship.

Even though the ending to Da’Sean Butler’s WVU career was a regrettable wrong, it didn’t eclipse his on-court legacy. The basketball accolades, marks and measures accumulated didn’t account for Butler’s persona. He played like a hero, sure, but off the court, Butler was as personable, insightful and friendly as any athlete of his caliber.

Huggins agreed and said, “He’s one of the best people ever to play here.”

Teammate and fellow forward Wellington Smith played four years alongside Butler.

“I’m not going to miss the Da’Sean Butler as a player,” he said on senior night when WVU beat Georgetown. “I’m going to miss him as a person.”

Butler always thoroughly answered questions during media interviews, doing so with honesty – even with the tough questions players sometimes dance around. He often laughed and joked with his teammates, who described him as an exemplary leader. His smile could light up the locker room during one of Huggins’ notorious halftime rants.

An ill elderly woman, who suffered heart attack symptoms while watching a WVU basketball game, was paid a visit by Butler during the Mountaineers’ march to the Final Four. She did not live much longer following the visit, but one can safely assume she was touched by Butler’s character before passing.

After Butler’s senior night finale against Georgetown, he stayed and talked with me long after he was asked to by the sports information staff. He’d chat about basketball with anybody the way friends or brothers do. Finally, we slapped hands and went our separate ways.

All-American? Future NBA draftee of the Miami Heat? A guy who is now in the same company at WVU as West and Hundley?

Butler’s humility would never have showed it.

“I’m just happy everybody thinks that of me,” he said.