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Thabeet could thrive in right situation

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LOS ANGELES -- UConn big man [Hasheem Thabeet](#) is one of the most polarizing players in the draft.

NBA scouts and executives either love him or hate him as a prospect. The majority are enamored with Thabeet's size, mobility and elite shot-blocking ability. They see a player who could instantly make a difference on the defensive end of the floor and think he should be a top-five pick in the draft. A few even have him ranked as high as No. 2 on their draft boards.

A smaller group thinks he could be a bust, and I have been in that camp for the past two years. As good as Thabeet's defensive abilities are, he looked awkward, mechanical and uncertain on offense at UConn. He also lacked the toughness to be a terrific rebounder and seemed to back down when more physical players, such as Pitt's DeJuan Blair, came after him.

But after spending a day in L.A. getting to know Thabeet and watching him work out, my stance has started to change. What I saw in L.A. this week was a player who has a lot more upside than I thought. Here's why.

Climbing the dunes

Thabeet's day starts at 9 a.m. at Sand Dune Park in Manhattan Beach, Calif. The park is an enormous sand dune that rises several hundred feet on a 60-degree incline. Running up something like that is akin to running in quicksand. For every step you take, you slip back half the distance.

Thabeet's strength trainer, Tom Vachet, a tough-looking former Navy Seal with tattooed arms and a goatee, runs the drill. With stopwatch in hand, Vachet yells go, and Thabeet, all 7 feet and 3 inches of him, starts chugging up the dune.

Sand is flying. Thabeet is panting. And as he reaches his destination, an orange cone positioned about halfway up the hill, he dives for it.

"6.8 seconds!" Vachet yells out. It isn't the fastest score. But an out-of-breath Thabeet is smiling. The fact that he completed it, and will do it 10 more times, is a feat. (I made it two-thirds of the way up the hill and was spent.)

Thabeet continues doing stint after stint until he's clearly exhausted. What's impressive is the way he powers through it. He finishes every set, no matter how tired he is.

On top of that, Vachet tells me he doesn't believe Thabeet has ever lifted weights or done any sort of the core training that Vachet excels in.

"That kid has no quit in him," Vachet says. "That's an intangible few kids really have."

The climb from Africa to the NBA

Thabeet grew up in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and the NBA was never really his dream.

"I was tall since I was a child," Thabeet says. "We had lots of basketball courts around. But they were empty. Everyone wanted to play soccer. That was the sport we loved."

Part of the reason Thabeet loved soccer was that to him, basketball looked like a contact sport. The players were meaner and more physical. He kept telling coaches he just didn't have what it took to play the game.

However, through the prodding of a coach, Thabeet decided to try basketball. According to Thabeet, he made the first free throw he took. Then he made his first dunk. From there he was hooked.

"It gave me confidence that I could do this," Thabeet said. "When I have confidence I can do something, I do it."

Seven years later, Thabeet is auditioning for a role in the NBA. His game has improved dramatically from year to year, first at a prep school in Houston and then for the past three years under the tutelage of Jim Calhoun at UConn.

He's a relative newcomer to the game -- he didn't grow up watching the game, playing Little League or AAU. So, his confidence has been built one day at a time.

"Coach Calhoun just kept telling me that if I keep working hard, I'll get better," Thabeet says. "At first it was hard. He was yelling at me before I even started playing for them."

"One day in the summer, he happened to walk in the gym while I was playing. I was making a mistake. He made a beeline over to me and started to dig in. But now I look back at it and I'm grateful for what he gave me."

Thabeet is warm and engaging. He's honest about his weaknesses and strengths. He recognizes the extraordinary opportunity he has been afforded and vows to follow his mentor, Emeka Okafor of the Charlotte Bobcats, in using his wealth and influence to make a difference back home.

As far as basketball goes, he still wants for confidence at times, but underneath the surface is a quiet, insistent determination to make it happen.

"When they first brought him in," Vachet says, "I wasn't sure. Did the game find him, or was he a kid who found the game? There's a big difference there."

"Every day he gets better. I think he loves the game now. That's why he's going to be special."

The court of dreams



Thabeet is a two-time Big East defensive player of the year.

Watching Thabeet run up sand dunes or listening to him talk about his journey from Africa to the NBA draft are nice. But at the end of the day, the question is: Can he play?

Thabeet's on-the-court work is being run by former NBA assistant coach and current D-League coach Scott Roth, who has worked with Dirk Nowitzki in Dallas and Pau Gasol in Memphis. His specialty is helping big men make the transition to the pros.

Thabeet's workout is fast-paced. He begins with perimeter work -- mostly midrange jumpers coming off screens, pick-and-roll jump shots and some set shots.

Thabeet showed a soft touch on his shot and excellent follow-through. Although he palmed the ball a little too much, he shot with great accuracy from 15 feet in. I was stunned. Swish after swish was not what I was expecting.

He's not Brad Miller or Mehmet Okur, but when you look at his mechanics and confidence in shooting the ball, I don't think there's any question that Thabeet could become a pick-and-pop big man over time.

He also looks as though he's continuing to improve his balance and mobility. Although he's only a few weeks into the process, Thabeet looks less mechanical running the floor and making moves than he did at UConn.

He also showed good form in the post. His footwork still needs improvement, but he scored with both his left and right hand over former NBA big man Sean Rooks.

"He's going to be a very good shooter," Roth says. "He's going to be a pick-and-pop guy who can knock down the 16- or 17-footer. He's going to shock people. I'm not sure how you can walk out of the gym and not be wowed by him with only six years of basketball. He's a fluid player with a huge, huge upside. You don't think he's going to do some of the things he can."

The summit

We've said for several months that Thabeet likely will be a top-five pick. The NBA mantra -- that you can't teach size -- has helped him greatly. But watching him in the gym, it's a little easier to see why he could be a high pick for more reasons than just his height. His combination of size, athleticism and emerging skills is rare -- especially in this draft.

To be the next Dikembe Mutombo, Thabeet still has work to do. He has to get stronger. He needs to keep up his conditioning. He needs more experience. He has to let the game come to him. And he has to improve his decision-making on the court. But most importantly, he needs to go to a team that gives him confidence.

Put him in a bad situation with a coach who's an obsessive faultfinder, and he could fail. Put him in a good situation with a coach and teammates who give him reason to believe, and maybe those Mutombo comparisons aren't as far off as I once believed.

• [Click here for my notes on other workouts: Gonzaga's Austin Daye, UCLA's Darren Collison and Washington's Jon Brockman](#) 

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