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SPRING 2016



Tayshaun Prince:
Wildcat legend, NBA Veteran

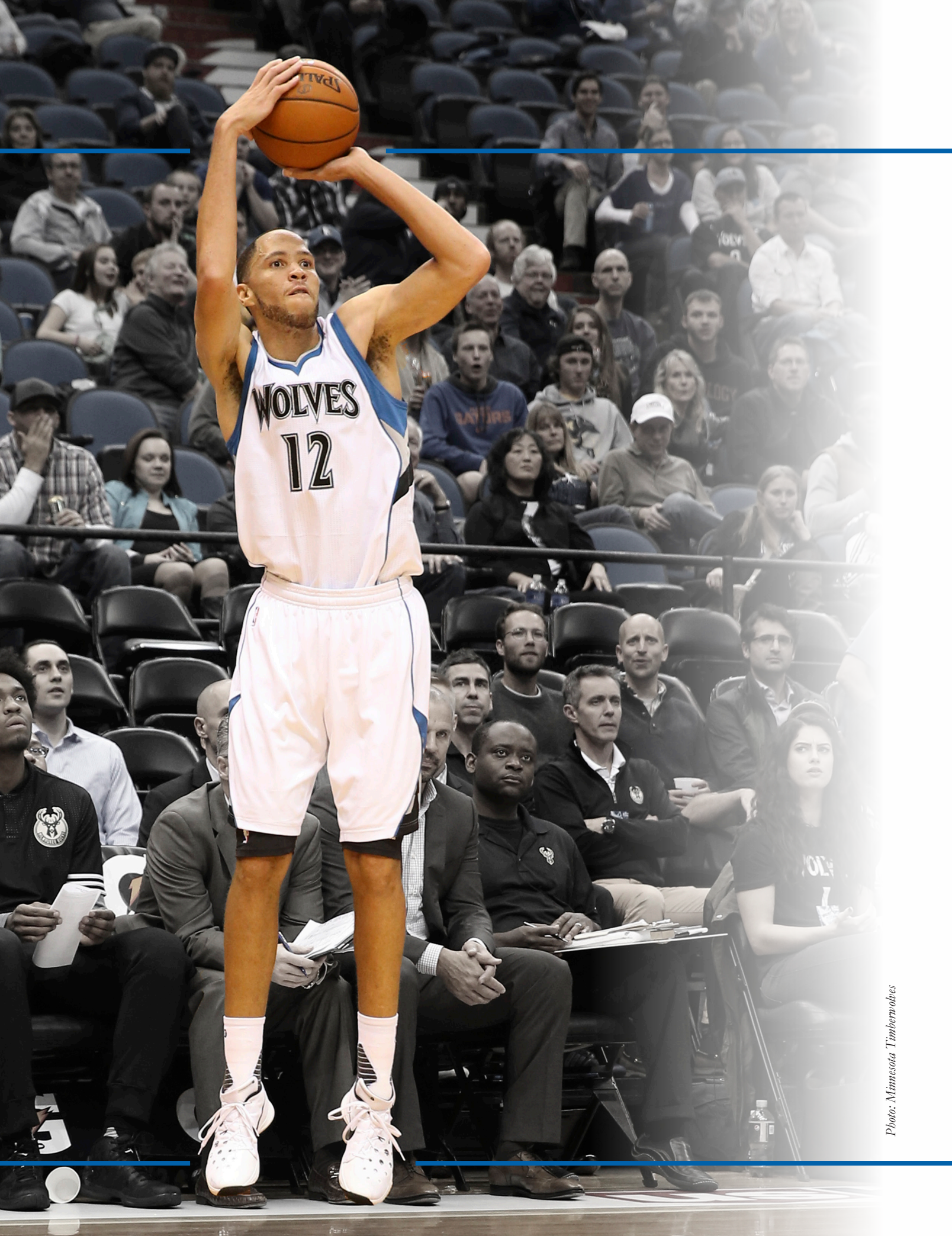


Photo: Minnesota Timberwolves

WILDCAT LEGEND REFLECTS ON NBA LONGEVITY

PRINCE

By Robin Roenker

You don't get to be a 13-year NBA veteran, much less the owner of both an NBA championship ring and an Olympic Gold Medal, without raw, unquestionable talent. And while Tayshaun Prince's talent is undeniable — his celebrated court awareness and 7-foot-2 wingspan make him play much taller than his lanky, 6-foot-9 build — there's something else, too, behind his long, enviable basketball career.

Call it humility. Call it intellect. Call it integrity. Call it determination or love of the game — or all of the above. The package that Tayshaun Prince brings to the court is something special.

"As a kid I just set the bar to get to the NBA," Prince, 35, said by phone after a practice with his team, the Minnesota Timberwolves, earlier this season. "I didn't have the goal of, 'I want to do this or that.' I just wanted to get to the NBA. And when I got here, my main focus was just trying to be the best teammate I could be — whatever my role and whatever my opportunity was, to try to do it to the best of my ability," said Prince, a native of Compton, California, who graduated from the University of Kentucky College of Arts & Sciences in 2002 with a bachelor's degree in sociology.

As a forward for Tubby Smith's Kentucky Wildcats from 1998-2002, Prince had a stellar career, snagging the title of SEC Player of the Year and SEC Tournament MVP in 2001, among numerous other accolades. Die-hard UK fans don't need to be reminded of Prince's epic game against the University of North Carolina in December 2001, in which he owned the scoreboard's opening minutes, sinking five consecutive 3-point shots.

"There's not a selfish bone in Tayshaun Prince's body, but when he's pressed to get the job done and it's on his shoulders, then he can deliver," Tubby Smith told the New York Times in 2004, two seasons into Prince's blossoming NBA career.

After his junior year at UK, Prince had considered entering the 2001 NBA draft, but ultimately withdrew his name, returning instead to finish his fourth season at UK and complete his sociology degree. In the 2002 NBA draft,

Prince was selected in the first round as the 23rd overall pick by the Detroit Pistons, where he played for 11 years. After shorter, subsequent stints with the Memphis Grizzlies and Boston Celtics plus a brief return to the Pistons last year, Prince joined the roster of the Minnesota Timberwolves — where fellow UK alum Karl-Anthony Towns also plays — in the 2015 season.

"There were two main reasons I decided to go back to school for my senior year," said Prince. "One of them was that my sister and my brother had both graduated from college, so I wanted to have that experience and also, for my parents' perspective, to be able to have all three of their children graduate from college. That was one reason. But the second reason I went back was the UK fans. They made me feel so comfortable and so at home. They were the other main reason I decided to go back."

Memories of his undergraduate basketball days wearing UK blue and white loom large in the career highlights reel within Prince's mind.

"My whole four years at UK was something special in itself, dating back to when I went to Midnight Madness and was able to experience the Kentucky fan base and see what it was all about. I felt something special in my heart and knew that Kentucky would be the place for me," he said.

Despite his signature low-key, composed nature both on and off the court, Prince is a competitor through and through, so nothing would have thrilled him more than winning an NCAA championship during his time at UK. Even without that title, his time at Kentucky is something he treasures.

"Obviously, everywhere you play, at every level, you want to win a championship. At Kentucky I didn't win a championship, but I can say that playing there was one of the fondest memories of my basketball career, not just because of everything on the basketball court, but also off the basketball court, as well. The way people treated me like I was one of their own. That was something really special," Prince said. "I will never be able to describe to people how special my four years at UK were to me."

Since leaving UK, Prince has made a career guarding against some of the biggest names in the NBA. His celebrated play against the Pacers' Reggie Miller in the 2004 NBA Eastern Conference Finals has been called one of the greatest blocks in NBA history. (See for yourself on YouTube.) And his much-lauded defense against the Lakers' Kobe Bryant in the 2004 NBA Finals was instrumental — some say the key factor — in the Pistons' NBA championship win that year.

"I've never played against somebody that long before," Bryant told reporters at the time, a nod to Prince's legendary, telescopic arm reach.

"It was a strange feeling, looking across and thinking that you're playing against the Lakers and guarding Kobe in the finals, especially for a young guy from LA. I had always rooted for him and respected his game before I got to the NBA, but you have to get over that quickly. You can show respect for him and at the same time take the challenge and realize you have a big responsibility there," Prince wrote in a June 2004 first-person article for *The Sporting News* after the Pistons' championship win.

In 2008, with Kobe Bryant, LeBron James, Jason Kidd and other league all-stars, Prince had the honor of playing on the USA Olympic Men's Basketball Team, which took home the Gold Medal after five straight wins in the Beijing Olympics.

The rarity of having not one but two such crowning achievements — an NBA championship ring and an Olympic Gold Medal — as highlights of a professional career isn't lost on Prince.

"The opportunity to be on a championship team and a Gold Medal team — not too many players have that opportunity. I think there are only around 43 players in the history of the game to be able to accomplish that feat," said Prince. "That in itself speaks volumes, and I'm very appreciative of that."

Having spent so much of his career in Detroit, Prince was covered several times in the *Detroit Free Press* by the paper's sports columnist Mitch Albom, author of several best-selling books, including "Tuesdays with Morrie."

In 2009, Albom wrote: "I sometimes have this vision of Tayshaun Prince as a long, lean robot, a super cyborg sent from the future. He is already cut at sharp angles, neck to shoulder, shoulder to elbow, as if metal were welded just beneath the flesh. He rarely shows emotion. He doesn't sweat easily."

Now in his mid-30s, Prince is a decorated elder statesman of the NBA and a father. He and his wife of 10 years, Farah Prince, whom he met while at UK, have a four-year-old son, Tahj.

In 2007, Albom shared that Prince had let Farah choose the movie they saw on their first date in Lexington: It was the 1999 Disney animated version of "Tarzan."

"Which only proves that Tayshaun Prince does what he has to do — whether guarding the other team's biggest star, hitting key pointers or seeing a cartoon movie to win the right girl," Albom wrote.

Recognized as both a steady presence and a clutch player who knows how to execute on the court, Prince has earned high praise from his coaches and team execs throughout his NBA career.

Though Prince is in the midst of his second decade in the NBA, when the average length of an NBA career is just under five years, his 2015 stats in the early season with the Timberwolves prove he still has ample court prowess.

Last November, he played a season-high 38 minutes for the Timberwolves in a nail-biting overtime victory against the Bulls, and he had appeared in all of the Timberwolves' early season games, with an average of 19.5 minutes a game.

"It's just so hard to take [Prince] out of the game," Sam Mitchell, the Timberwolves' coach, told the *Minneapolis StarTribune* in November. "Defensively, he just knows where to be. He's talking and communicating. He's teaching our young guys the value of communication, and it's just hard to take him out."

For Prince, part of staying fresh is remembering why he's on the court in the first place.

"You have to embrace it. If you don't embrace it, you're not going to have fun. Any basketball player has got to enjoy the game of basketball," he told the *Boston Herald* in January 2015, during his time with the Celtics. "Whether it's 15 minutes a night or 25 minutes a night, I know I'm not a 40-minute guy anymore. But whatever the situation is, I'm going to impact the game in some form or fashion. I might not score a lot — obviously that's not something I do at this point in my career — but I will do some positive things on both ends of the floor."

TAYSHAUN PRINCE

LEAVING AN IMPACT

During the off-season, Prince is devoted to spending as much time as possible with his family at their home in Florida, he said. Since his wife's parents still reside in Versailles, he finds himself back in the Bluegrass State to visit fairly often.

"The toughest thing about in-season is not spending time with your family like you'd like to, just due to the busy schedules. So in the off-season my main hobby is just to do whatever my family wants to do," Prince said, coincidentally, just a few hours before his wife and son were scheduled to visit him in Minnesota. "It's a hard commitment for them to not be able to have me around for a seven- or eight-month period of time each year, so when I'm off, I like to just hang with the family, watch movies and relax together."

Prince is also passionate about community service. While with the Pistons, he established Tay's Town, a skybox within the Pistons' NBA home, The Palace, where children dealing with cancer can watch games from the vantage point of a unique, kid-friendly suite. Also, each summer he helps sponsor several youth basketball camps in Kentucky.

"Growing up as a kid in California, and not really having the opportunity to go to basketball camps, and just thinking back to all the things I had to struggle with, it makes me want to help kids out who are in similar situations," Prince said.

It was a goal of eventually working with youth, he said, that prompted him to select sociology as his college major while at UK.

"These kids look up to us (NBA players), and so what we say does mean a lot," Prince said, acknowledging and accepting the privilege, and responsibility, of being a positive role model to youth across the country.



Photo: Nathaniel S. Butler, NBAE

Prince was a member of the USA Olympic Men's Basketball Team that took home a Gold Medal in 2008.

"I just want to have the chance to leave a positive imprint. Obviously, my career is starting to wind down, but if I'm able to give these kids something special, something that can continue as they grow older, something that can encourage them if they want to play basketball or any other sport — or whatever their drive may be — then hopefully I've helped out in that sense."

As impressive as these off-the-court contributions are, anyone who knows Tayshaun Prince knows he's still got plenty left to give on the court, as well.

"I never was a guy inclined to try to score as many points as I can. I just wanted to go out and do whatever my teammates and my coaching staff needed me to do," Prince said. "Over the years, I've just tried to do whatever was needed to the best of my ability, so that therefore my teammates will trust me every time I step out there on that floor with them.

"And they know I have their backs."