BASKETBALL TIMES

Special Report

With four teammates gone to the NBA from national champion Villanova, sharpshooter Phil Booth is back to try to accomplish something that no one else has in almost half a century, going back to the Wooden era.

Booth, for three (titles)

By Jack Styczynski

For those of you who enjoy trivia, pause here and try to answer the following question: Since the days when UCLA was churning out championships on an annual basis, what college basketball players have had a chance to win three national titles? No hints, but you can count them on two hands with fingers to spare.

(And this isn’t a trick question, either, so don’t try naming any Connecticut, Tennessee or even USC women’s players. You’d need more than two hands for that. And some went for four titles.)

Quizzing a couple of colleagues at this year’s Big East media day, they were stumped. There were a few guesses at former Duke and Florida players, but none correct. Villanova coach Jay Wright also asked for a copy of the list.

Before this season, the most recent was Florida guard Walter Hodge, a minor contributor with the Gators’ back-to-back championship teams as a freshman and sophomore in 2006 and 2007. But following a mass exodus after the second title, Florida didn’t even make the NCAA Tournament in his junior and senior seasons, having to settle for the NIT.

A decade earlier, point guard Wayne Turner was a contributor on the 1996 and 1998 Kentucky teams that won it all and returned as a senior in 1999 when the Wildcats fell in a regional final. He also played on the 1997 team that lost in the championship game. One caveat, however: Turner actually did not appear in the 1996 title contest even though he played 35 games that season.

Other than that pair, a quintet of players from the 1991 and 1992 Duke championship teams had either one or two chances at a third. Bobby Hurley was one of those with a lone shot, but the Blue Devils were ousted in the second round of the 1993 tournament. Grant Hill was among those with two chances and came within a single game of pulling off the trifecta, as Duke lost to Arkansas in the 1994 title tilt.

And now there’s Villanova guard Phil Booth, a champion in 2016 and 2018 with one more shot.

Antonio Lang and Marty Clark had a special motivation to win a third title in 1994.

“Part of it for us was really to try to have one more ring that would separate and differentiate us from our teammates from the previous years,” he said. “To kind of one-up (Christian) Laettner and Bobby Hurley and Thomas Hill and those guys … that was one of our driving forces that year.”

It was not the only driving force, however. There were other motivations left over from the 1993 season.

“That was a tough year because I got hurt,” Hill said. “I broke my toe midyear through the ACC season and sat out the second half. Came back for postseason play, but my toe wasn’t right. We never really got a chance to see what we could’ve been and that was frustrating.”

Plus, there was the added motivator of an archrival’s success.

“Coming off of that year, Carolina had just won the championship in ’93. They had a great recruiting class,” he recalled, also noting that Duke had lost its starting backcourt of Hurley and Thomas Hill. “We kind of could sneak under the radar. It was the first time I was there in a while where we didn’t have all these lofty preseason expectations, and I think we really leaned on each other and kind of bonded together as a unit more so than any other team I was on.”

Considering how much experienced talent Villanova lost this summer, a comparable “under-the-radar” bonding 25 years later could actually bode well for Booth. Then again, Hill did fall one win shy of the goal in 1994, and he’s still rankled by it.

“It bothers you particularly because you got to that final game and it was such a close game,” said Hill, remembering Scotty Thurman’s last-minute dagger to beat the shot clock and give Arkansas a lead they never again relinquished. “A guy hit an amazing shot – 3-pointer – to win the game. It bothers you and you think more about that game – that lost opportunity – than the actual championships that we won.”

To give Villanova the best chance to avoid such angst, Hill suggests that Booth expand his role this season in the absence of the now departed Jalen Brunson, Mikal Bridges, Donte DiVincenzo and Omari Spellman.

“You want to offer perspective,” Hill said. “You Phil Booth could win a third title at Villanova.
gotta be a leader. You gotta be the guy that can motivate, inspire, hold people accountable, keep people calm when adversity hits, because it will hit.

“The important thing for him is to step up as a leader, but in his own way and be true to who he is and be authentic. Don’t look at it as pressure, but look at it as a wonderful opportunity.”

Booth might not be a big name like Brunson, Bridges, DiVincenzo and Spellman were last season, or Josh Hart, Kris Jenkins and Ryan Arcidiacono were before that, but he has been no less integral to his team’s success.

As a freshman in 2015, he was one of the few Wildcats playing well in a second round NCAA Tournament game against North Carolina State when Wright left him on the bench down the stretch in favor of an ice-cold Dylan Ennis, and Villanova lost.

“That was my mistake,” Wright said. “I went with an upperclassman who I just kind of stuck with when he (Booth) really was having the better game. Sometimes the players make mistakes. Sometimes the coaches make mistakes. That one was mine.”

Booth won his first championship as a sophomore in 2016, and while fans remember Jenkins as the hero of the title game thanks to his dramatic buzzer beater that toppled North Carolina, nobody had a better night than Booth. He scored a team-high 20 points off the bench, converting six of his seven shots from the field and all six of his free throws.

The next season, he missed all but the first three games with a knee injury and ended up taking a medical redshirt. Again, Villanova was knocked out in the games with a knee injury and ended up taking a medical throws.

Phil Booth was a solid contributor in title games against Michigan (above) and North Carolina.

far-fetched to think Booth could already have three championships, if not four.

“It is what it is,” he said, flatly. Regardless, Booth has another chance, courtesy of that redshirt season. Whether he can lead a less experienced team to a third title remains to be seen, but the Wildcats have talent and are still considered a contender by many. In fact, they might be deeper than either of the recent champions, even if most of the players are freshmen and lightly tested sophomores in need of leadership.

“Phil’s always been a great leader,” said his longest-tenured teammate, Eric Paschall. “He was a sophomore and he had 20 in the national championship. He was still a good person to go to and talk about stuff.”

Said Wright: “Even the year he sat out, he was still a leader. Last year, he was a captain. He’s one of those unique guys that is equally loved and respected. That’s rare. Jalen was extremely respected, so much so. Now they loved him, but the respect level was so high. So that’s where Phil’s really unique and a great leader for us.”

Even Booth himself admitted he’s not a carbon copy of the “laser-focused” Brunson.

“I think I’m a little different,” Booth said. “I’m just a little more open with the relationship with all of my teammates. But we all know when we get on the court, it’s all business and serious.”

That’s as opposed to off the court, when Booth can be a cut-up, hammering it up in celebrations after last season’s tournament victories and even singing old-school soul this summer at the ESPY awards.

“Me and Eric were singing while the other guys on the team were background dancers,” he recalled. “I got a lot of good compliments. People said they liked it, thought it was funny.”

So should Booth have another song-and-dance routine at the ready to celebrate becoming the first player to win three championships since the John Wooden era?

“You can’t really think that far ahead,” he said. “We’re just trying to focus on each day getting better.”

But the always sunny Wright won’t discount Booth’s chances.

“We’ve learned by losing in the second round, we’ve learned by winning championships that once you get to the NCAA Tournament, anything can happen. So if we can get there, he’s got a shot.”

You can follow Jack Styczynski on Twitter @hoopsvista.

Paschall also seeks a third, with an asterisk

Although not technically playing for a third championship, fellow fifth-year senior Eric Paschall was a member of Villanova’s 2016 title team, sitting out the season as a transfer from Fordham.

Last season, he was a starter and major contributor for the latest Wildcat championship squad.

It’s been quite a journey for someone who came to the big time from sleepy Dobbs Ferry in Westchester County just north of New York City, by way of a perpetually struggling mid-major.

Following a breakout game last March against Kansas in the national semifinal and some stellar summer performances, Paschall has even been touted by a few as Villanova’s next NBA prospect. He opened this season with 26 points in a victory over Morgan State – besting his career high on the Main Line – and at Big East media day, he seemed genuinely surprised to be where he is today.

“I knew that I wanted to go to a winning program, but I didn’t expect two national championships,” Paschall said. “It was a journey. It’s a big difference between coming from Westchester to Fordham to here. I’m glad I made the decision.”

Without doubt, there’s also a large difference between just practicing with a championship team and actually playing for one.

“From watching it the whole time and then being a part of it, I feel like the pressure was different,” he said. “I had no pressure the first time. There was more pressure the second time, but I value both of them. Both a heck of an experience to go through.”

A co-captain with Phil Booth this season, Paschall brings a similar leadership style to the team.

“Just being open, making it able for everybody to talk to me,” was how he described it. “Off the court, just hanging out, making sure we’re a close-knit group like last year.”

So could a third championship be on the horizon?

“I don’t know yet; that’s something we’ll see at the end of the year,” Paschall said. “This year we’ve got five new guys, so it’s a lot different, but we’re excited. New team, new journey.”

– Jack Styczynski