

Mind games: Marc Gasol mastered mental side of basketball to become NBA star

By Michael Cohen

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Marc Gasol is talking about coffee, and more specifically the espresso addiction he will assure you he does not have. Never mind the double shot he downs at breakfast, and at lunch, and before tipoff on game days — they mean nothing. He's cut coffee from his diet before and he can do it again. In fact, the curbing process has already begun.

"There's nothing your mind can't control," Gasol says. "Habits and things like that are easy to control. It's your mind not allowing for you to miss or do something."

Marc Gasol is talking about coffee. Maybe. It's often hard to tell with Gasol, who is a pro at filling your recorder with plenty of words that, when you go back and listen, often reveal very little. Different night, same Gasol.

It's why the nugget about espresso, buried in the larger context of an interview about his best season as a professional, is so captivating, so rare. Gasol is talking about coffee, except that he's really not.

He is talking about basketball, a sport that forces him to wage war with his instincts for an offense that encourages him to shoot as often as possible. He is talking about life, a boundless topic that transports Gasol's curiosity far beyond the high post at FedExForum. He is talking about one of those metaphysical Miyagi-isms that help make Gasol arguably the best center in the world, because nothing is as simple as putting a ball through a hoop.

There is nothing your mind can't control.

He is talking about so much more than coffee.

The chess board

Marc Gasol is talking about winning, and more specifically the improvements a player makes to facilitate winning. And as yet another reporter asks him yet another question about his physical transformation of 2014, a thinning process catalyzed by the switch to an organic diet, Gasol is at his philosophical best.

On choosing which skills to practice: "You've got to see what the team needs from you. You've got to be usable to the coach, serviceable."

On adapting to roster moves: “Always the game gives you the answer. It’s just whether you know the answer or not.”

On versatility as a player: “I know we always try to label guys and keep them in one spot. My obsession, my thing is always don’t allow that.”

To avoid labels is to harness skills that expand beyond confinement, an arsenal malleable enough to render positional declarations irrelevant (See: James, LeBron.) But unlike James, unlike Blake Griffin, unlike Anthony Davis and so many other NBA players whose bodies appear computer generated, Gasol wasn’t blessed with immortal athleticism. His was a flabby physique made doughy by McDonald’s.

He turned instead to the mental side of basketball, the strategic and savvy-based portion we so often prescribe as “Basketball IQ.” Gasol thrived as his curiosity devoured the minutiae of the game, savoring the opportunity to outwit his opponents with calculated moves and countermoves designed to neutralize athleticism.

There is nothing your mind can’t control. Gasol already told you that.

“The idea that he can outthink people and outmaneuver them on the chess board,” said John Hollinger, vice president of basketball operations for the Grizzlies, “I think that’s the part that fascinates him. And I think that’s the part he’s really good at, too.”

Escaping the shadow

The shaping of Gasol’s basketball mind began in his native Spain as the pudgy kid brother to a player preordained as a star. Where Pau Gasol was the slender savant for FC Barcelona, chosen No. 3 overall in the 2001 NBA Draft, Marc Gasol was the out-of-shape youngster whose basketball career landed somewhere between a pipe dream and Pau’s coattails.

“Coaches always told me I was going to learn to play without quickness,” Gasol said. “I needed to see the game ahead because I was never going to be as quick as other guys.”

It was the first move on the mental chess board, a not-so-gentle prodding that solidified on-court intelligence as the bedrock of Gasol’s game.

In the meantime he chased the other guys, the members of a prosperous age in Spanish basketball that was headlined by Pau and supplemented with the likes of Jose Calderon, Rudy Fernandez and Juan Carlos Navarro. Gasol was the tagalong, the one content with being the 12th man on a 12-man roster at the 2006 FIBA World Championship, the one who developed an aura of deference over demand thanks to the veteran players around him.

“Marc, he was like a shadow,” said Darryl Middleton, a teammate of Gasol’s in Spain. “Nobody really thought about Marc. I think that’s why Barcelona let Marc go.”

With his brother entrenched as a rising star in Memphis, Gasol left FC Barcelona following the FIBA World Championship and joined Akasvayu Girona. There waiting was the 41-year-old Middleton, a former three-time MVP of the Spanish League and a man Gasol credits as one of the fiercest competitors he has ever known.

They were both teammates and enemies in Girona, players who beat each other up — Middleton’s words — morning after morning in practice with tactics ranging from physical to psychological warfare. Gasol, tormented by Middleton’s unblockable fadeaway, could be seen blasting basketballs into the bleachers with his feet. Middleton, aggravated by Gasol’s impeccable footwork, would come to practice the next day and inform Gasol he would not be allowed to touch the ball. “Yeah right, old man,” Gasol spat back.

“We were best friends,” Middleton said in a Skype interview from Russia, where he is an assistant coach. “But sometimes in practice we hated each other. I didn’t talk to him for a couple days, he didn’t talk to me for a couple days. But I know he appreciated everything I did.”

They were the ideal pairing. To Middleton, Gasol was an injection of next-generation talent that kept him motivated on the tail end of a career that spanned four decades. To Gasol, Middleton was the ideal agitator capable of drawing out the selfish fire needed to become the focal point of a team, both in Girona and beyond.

“Marc likes to be Robin, he doesn’t like to be Batman,” said Arriel McDonald, the point guard in Girona. “He just enjoys that. He’s willing to step up in moments and be Batman, but he definitely prefers to be Robin.”

Rebooting the system

There was a moment between the time he left Spain in 2008 and the day on which starters for the 2014-15 NBA All-Star Game were announced that Gasol swapped superhero franchises. He disposed of the red vest, yellow cape and thin black mask ascribed to Robin and entered a metaphorical phone booth once occupied by Clark Kent.

At 30 years of age, Gasol is enjoying the best and most dominant statistical season of his life. He is scoring more than ever before (18.3 points per game), rebounding as steadily as ever (8.1 rebounds per game) and seeing the floor beautifully out of the high post (3.7 assists per game).

But morphing into *this* Gasol, the one who is attempting — and making — the most shots of his career, was not without strife. It meant rewiring the circuits that had, for so many years, told him ball movement was unequivocally the right answer on

offense. It meant taking thousands of jumpers at his house in Spain to turn habit into muscle memory into instinct. It meant, most importantly, becoming “usable” for his team.

“It just depends what the game gives you, you have to go ahead and take it,” Gasol said. “I’ve just never been comfortable taking so many jump shots. But this year, you’ve got to take them. That’s maybe what the team needs.”

There to nudge Gasol was point guard Mike Conley who, in Gasol’s absence last season due to injury, received the same shoot-more instructions from head coach Dave Joerger. Conley discussed with Gasol the importance of taking the fifth shot after you’ve missed the first four. He explained that an open jumper early in the shot clock is often better than passing for the sake of passing. He encouraged Gasol to realize that, sometimes, a difficult attempt from a skilled player is better than a corner 3-pointer hoisted by a non-shooter.

The results Joerger hoped for began to trickle in. Gasol has attempted more shots from the 16- to 24-foot range already this season (186) than he did in 80 games two years ago (178). His percentage of shots taken late in the shot clock — with between 7 and 4 seconds remaining — is down from 17.4 percent last season to 14.7 percent this year. The Grizzlies, after swimming upstream for so much of last year, are having the best season in franchise history.

“For us to be successful and to win at the highest level, in this situation right here with this team right now, we need him to score,” Joerger said. “So that’s the appeal.”

The jump shot is but another piece for Gasol to employ in his ongoing chess match against the NBA, a game within the game that often leaves opponents shaking their heads at shots and moves that seem defenseless. That pirouetting one-legged fadeaway is becoming awfully Nowitzki-like, isn’t it?

More splendid than the moves themselves is the mental mastery behind them, the curtain was lifted slightly by Gasol’s former teammate, Darrell Arthur, who is now with the Denver Nuggets. Arthur often found himself confused about why Gasol never dribbled during one-on-one drills in practice, opting instead for faceup or fadeaway jump shots. He asked Gasol for an explanation.

“He said he would never take dribbles his first couple post moves and make guys show how they would guard him,” Arthur said. “Then he would counter from that.”

Running a team

Marc Gasol is talking about basketball, and more specifically the goings on across various leagues in Europe. Only this time he isn’t talking to a reporter. Instead, his conversational partner is a member of the Grizzlies’ front office: vice president of basketball operations John Hollinger.

“I think for a guy who is now 30 he has a much broader curiosity about what’s going on around him,” Hollinger said. “He’s always asking me questions about guys in Europe and what’s going on in the (Spanish) ACB League. Really, really has his finger on things that are happening around the world.”

Marc Gasol is talking about basketball. Maybe. It’s often hard to tell with Gasol, whose mind ventures three moves ahead on the court and in so many different directions off of it. But he is most likely talking about basketball. Unless, of course, he is talking about the future.

That idea is floated by Hollinger during an interview in late January, a notion that crossed his mind after two years of daily interactions with Gasol and triggered by a reporter’s question about a possible transition to coaching. Perhaps, Hollinger muses, there is another level to Gasol’s persistent inquiries about Europe, a more deeply rooted reason for ensuring he is always up to date.

“He strikes me as being more interested in running a team over in Spain or doing something like that,” Hollinger said. “I just get the impression that’s more where his interests lie.”

A front office job would be a whole different type of chess. But, then again ...

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