

## ***Like Magic***

**by Jonathan Abrams**

They kept one of Frank Livingston's keys. The drill instructors told him to fasten the other around his neck with a piece of twine. Tight, they said, with no slack. They ordered him to open his locker box without loosening the key chain around his neck. He wiggled and writhed on the ground, angled his neck close enough so that his face could kiss metal, and managed to unlock his belongings. "You just had to do it," Livingston recently recalled over the phone. "I bet I can do it quicker today with the key around my neck than you could with the key around your hand."

More than 60 years ago, boot camp in the Marine Corps featured plenty of challenges like this. Like the time tear gas was tossed into his bunk just minutes after he learned how to properly operate a gas mask. The motto became the mind-set: Nothing's impossible in the Corps.

"They didn't allow us to ever give an excuse for anything," Livingston said. "You thought, This is crazy. But you know what? You wind up doing it. No excuses. If you don't go through life making excuses, you save yourself, your friends, and parents a lot of trouble."

That same mentality helped Livingston as a father and a grandfather. And it aided him when he was diagnosed with colon cancer in 1995. He still worried that he would never see his grandson, Shaun, become the man he was supposed to be. He was already a prodigy, walking at 7 months and lugging books everywhere he went by 3. He would be a doctor, or maybe a lawyer, Livingston figured. Grandfather and grandson had formed a special bond, and from Frank's lap, Shaun learned about integrity and resolve. It's what carried Shaun Livingston when it happened.

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Is this the beginning or the end?

It's easy to see now, with the Clippers standing tall as one of the league's best teams. They showcase superstars Chris Paul and Blake Griffin, and a deep roster. But think back a few years earlier, to a time when another Clippers roster teased the NBA with fleeting respectability.

Shaun Livingston, 20 years old and just two years removed from high school in Illinois, was all knees, elbows, and potential. That potential – vision, athleticism, tenacity – was never more evident than in the 2006 playoffs. The sixth-seeded Clippers had won their first playoff series in 30 years, cruising past the Carmelo Anthony-led third-seeded Denver Nuggets. Tied 2-2 in a series against the offensive juggernaut Phoenix Suns, the Clippers held the momentum, but not the home-court advantage. Elton Brand played like an MVP and Sam Cassell like the savvy veteran point guard he was. Livingston, his apprentice, was the 6-foot-7 playmaker destined to revolutionize the point guard position. He resembled Magic Johnson, the way he peeked over smaller guards and bounced around in his defensive assignments, holding his own against Steve Nash, Leandro Barbosa, and Raja Bell. "A beckoning player in this league, for sure," Nash recalled recently.

Brand, Cassell, Chris Kaman, and Corey Maggette formed the backbone of that Clippers team. But the future lay with Livingston. "Shaun would have definitely been the next All-Star coming up," Brand said.

The Clippers drafted Livingston with the fourth overall pick in the 2004 draft, the highest a high school guard has ever been (and will ever be) chosen. “First time [being in Los Angeles] was the press conference,” Livingston said. “[I had the] Afro with the suit. I was a big kid. I still thought I was in [his hometown] Peoria.” Analysts compared him to Magic. “I felt I probably wasn’t NBA-ready then,” Livingston admitted. “That right there is a regret of mine. When I got into the league, guys didn’t expect me to be as quick and fast as I was. I think it was myself holding myself back.”

Livingston, despite his quiet demeanor and a shaky jumper, was a natural in one regard: He saw the entire court. He thought of others first, how to make them better, and sacrificed his own game to better theirs. He was the perfect teammate on a team laden with veterans.

“Our staff, we thought that he might be the best player on our team [by now],” said Mike Dunleavy, then-coach of the Clippers. “He’s a great defensive player. He’s got a great IQ, his shooting was improving every day, and he was getting a little more of a post game. His whole game was coming around.”

The ever-brash Cassell broke into the league more than a decade before Livingston and played extrovert to Livingston's introvert. They once shared the court in a game against Utah. Livingston took the ball out of bounds and nearly drew a five-second violation before signaling for a timeout.

“I ripped into him,” said Cassell, now an assistant with Washington. “He didn’t speak to me for a couple of days because of the tone. I verbally went at him. I told him, ‘I’m not going to be wide open with eight seconds left in a game. You’ve got to get the ball to me.’ He took it personally. He didn’t speak to me, but I didn’t care. I’ve seen the change right there in him: getting guys in the right position, running the offense, not having to rely on me to bring the ball up when guys are on him. I just saw him start to take off from there.”

Livingston played well entering the 2006 playoffs. He notched 16 points and six assists in Game 4 of the first-round playoff series against Denver. “I felt like I was really just picking the game up and picking and choosing my spots on the court, knowing who was hot,” Livingston said.

The Clippers had Phoenix on the ropes in overtime of the second round’s Game 5, but with 1.1 seconds left, Raja Bell tied the game with a 3-pointer, and Phoenix prevailed in the second overtime. The Clippers claimed Game 6, but a rested Nash bullied the Clippers for 29 points in a decisive Game 7 victory.

For once, though, the Clippers’ season did not end in bewilderment or disbelief. They had the future. They had promise. They had Shaun Livingston.

“There were not a whole lot of great moments for that basketball team during that era,” said Ralph Lawler, who has broadcast nearly every Clippers game since the franchise arrived in California in 1978. “Having Shaun join the team gave you a reason to be excited to come to the gym each night. You could see him grow. You could see him work on his shot. You could see him getting stronger and you thought this guy had a chance to really be special and be the type of player you could really build a franchise around.”

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Shaun Livingston prayed during the national anthem, a message of thanks and a testament to his conviction. He played confidently in the opening moments against the Charlotte Bobcats on February 26, 2007. Just days earlier he'd recorded one of his finest NBA games, racking up a career-high 14 assists against the Golden State Warriors.

Livingston played so fast, sometimes Brand wouldn't have enough time to cross half court before the point guard had risen to score. That February night was no different.

But Livingston will torture himself over the next sequence for years. And many will regard it as the most horrific scene they have ever seen at an NBA game. Was there anything he could have done to prevent it? The answer, of course, is no. The mind, though, is always in search of an answer, some reasoning, even if there is none.

At one point in the first quarter, Livingston scooped a loose ball off Cuttino Mobley's deflection and sprinted toward the basket. His long gait carried him there in eight strides. But his momentum took him farther than he wanted and his left foot planted awkwardly. The force of the landing sent his knee in different directions. It looked like someone had thrown a deck of cards into the air.

Livingston screamed in agony. Play continued and the rest of the Clippers transitioned back on defense. Livingston had felt this type of blinding pain before, when he dislocated his right kneecap and missed the bulk of his rookie season. Play stopped and an eerie silence loomed over Staples Center. Brand wasn't close enough to see the injury, but figured it was serious when he heard the crowd. Cassell, who had a better view, thought Livingston's promising career had just ended. Dunleavy, from the Clippers bench, immediately knew it was one of the worst basketball injuries he had ever witnessed.

Jasen Powell, the Clippers trainer, raced to Livingston before play stopped. Dr. Steven Shimoyama quickly followed. Livingston's knee looked like a pretzel, Shimoyama thought to himself. He could tell that Livingston had sustained a severe knee dislocation and wanted to lessen the agonizing suffering immediately. He prepared to pop the knee back into place, knowing the potential problems if it did not lock back in on the first attempt. Each subsequent attempt would have a lower rate of success than the last. The dislocation impaired the circulation to Livingston's foot; gangrene could set in if Shimoyama failed. Worse, failure could necessitate amputation. Shimoyama flexed Livingston's knee and hip to loosen up the hamstring so he would not fight muscle contractions as he tried to put the knee back into place. He placed an elbow on Livingston's knee to increase his pull.

After a few seconds, the knee popped back into place.

Art Jones, a longtime family friend who had moved to Los Angeles with Livingston, turned away as he saw Livingston streak toward the other side of the court. By the time he'd turned back to see Livingston slumped on the ground, he figured he'd simply aggravated a nagging thigh bruise. Then his phone started to buzz. Clippers officials wanted Jones to meet them near the court. As he walked closer and noticed the grim faces of the courtside observers, Jones realized, this was no thigh bruise.

Livingston was taken into the bowels of Staples Center, where he was given X-rays. Jones caught up and remembers being asked to leave the room. He heard Livingston scream and started to

pray. An ambulance waited at the loading dock. A stretcher carried Livingston, while Shimoyama ran alongside and continued to apply pressure on Livingston's knee to keep it stabilized. Jones and JoHan Wang, an associate athletic trainer, waited beside him. Jones asked Wang if the injury was as bad as it appeared. "It's bad," he replied.

Livingston didn't think so. It was just a dislocation, he thought. He knew the rehabilitation would involve hard work, but he'd done it before and made it back. He could do it again.

Livingston sought affirmation on the ambulance ride to Inglewood's Centinela Hospital Medical Center. He asked Wang if he had just dislocated the knee. Yeah, it was a dislocation, Wang told him. Wang left it at that, without explaining the severity – he didn't want the shock and stress of the situation to overwhelm Livingston. They talked about other things on the ambulance ride and maintained a relatively light mood. Looking back on that moment, the tone of Wang's voice worried Livingston.

He realized the gravity of his injury when he arrived at the hospital. A female doctor, Jones said, entered the room. She told Livingston he may be facing amputation. She'd yet to examine him, but after viewing Livingston's awkward landing on television – announcers warned squeamish viewers to turn away before showing replays – she prepared him for the worst. Wang, Jones said, told him that the doctor displayed unprofessionalism in saying this, whether she believed it or not. Wang asked the doctor to speak with him outside the room because she didn't want to administer a Doppler ultrasound to assess the circulation to his knee. Livingston eventually left the room for the test. Jones prayed, and while he did, a television in the room showed the replay of Livingston's injury. It was the first and only time Jones has seen it. He nearly broke down as he waited for Livingston.

The ultrasound returned normal. Livingston's leg would not be amputated, but his career was still in peril. His knee, in shambles, would become a case study for sports-injury professionals. He sustained tears of his anterior cruciate ligament, the posterior cruciate ligament, lateral meniscus, and retinaculum, the tissue that surrounds the kneecap. He tore his medial collateral ligament and dislocated his tibia-femoral joint and patella. "Watching Shaun Livingston blow out his left knee Monday night was the most heartbreaking scene since Bambi's mother got shot in the meadow," J.A. Adande wrote later that week in the *Los Angeles Times*.

He faced months of rehabilitation just to walk again – forget basketball, a game as demanding on the knees as any. But Livingston had a plan: avoid negativity. The Lord says protect your eyes, Livingston thought. He passed his cell phone to Jones. He didn't want to hear from anyone.

"What if your grandfather calls?" Jones asked.

Livingston allowed one exception.

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Shaun Livingston transferred high schools from Richwoods High to Peoria Central before his junior season. He'd sprouted a few inches and his team had become a traveling rock show by then – for 40 minutes a night, he whizzed passes to teammates who'd slam it home. "You always had to be prepared when Shaun was on the court because you never know when it's going to come or how it was going to get there," said Daniel Ruffin, one of his high school teammates. Peoria Central

captured state championships in both of Livingston's seasons. His coach Chuck Buescher loved how Livingston just wanted to blend in, despite his gaining star power. The team hired security guards and Livingston routinely signed autographs for 20 minutes after every game. Livingston often invited a teammate with him because he felt sheepish about sitting there by himself. "It just built up," Buescher said. "I've never seen anything like it and I coached for 40 years."

Livingston toured Duke, North Carolina, Arizona, and Illinois before settling on the Blue Devils. He kept his choice secret for a while, but he hoped that Mike Krzyzewski would integrate him into the offense the same way he had Jay Williams, another talented point guard whose career was later derailed by a horrific injury.

"The main thing about Shaun was his ability to pass the ball," Krzyzewski wrote in an e-mail. "With his height, he was able to see some things that a normal point guard wouldn't see. Even with his height, he was able to penetrate and make plays. He's a beautiful player. Passing is one of the main things in our game that takes it to a whole other level. Shaun could do that as well as anybody."

Though he'd made his decision, the NBA beckoned. Livingston finished his senior season at the height of the NBA's prep-to-pro generation. Still, no point guards had ever been selected early in the draft. The NBA preferred big men when projecting long-term. Livingston inquired with the NBA about his draft potential. He figured he should at least explore the option. He learned that he ranked as a lottery pick should he declare for the draft. His stock skyrocketed following a workout in front of scouts and executives performed in Chicago by Tim Grover, best known as Michael Jordan's and Kobe Bryant's trainer and the author of the forthcoming *Relentless: From Good to Great to Unstoppable*.

"In an hour, he made about two shots," Grover said. "He was so nervous, but then we started to go through some ball-handling stuff and some passing stuff and he just mesmerized everybody. He had all the stuff that you couldn't teach. You can teach someone how to shoot a basketball. But you can't teach them how to see the court, how to pass the ball."

Livingston declared for the NBA draft, but that meant he had to make a difficult call to Krzyzewski. Livingston told him that he never would have committed to Duke if he thought he would not attend. Krzyzewski countered that Livingston, in a year or two at Duke, could blossom into the NBA's first pick.

"I felt like if I'm playing the odds and really making a business decision for myself – the number-four pick, I had a guarantee [on the] number-six pick – I mean, how high can I really go?" Livingston said. "I mean, I can go three, I can go two, but what are the chances of possibly going to Duke a year, two years, three years, stock falling, injuries, anything can happen as opposed to me learning on the fly and having the ability to go right then and there."

Frank Livingston publicly disclosed his preference that Shaun attend Duke. Frank developed a quick, sturdy relationship with Krzyzewski, believing that the coach's background of discipline at West Point would benefit Shaun.

"I knew it wasn't what I wanted," Frank Livingston said. "It was what he wanted."

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Doctors instructed Art Jones to oversee Livingston's pain medication – and only allow him the prescribed amount, no matter how much he begged. Luckily, it never came to that. Cassell said he visited Livingston the day after the injury. "He was down and out," Cassell said. "Under a lot of medicine, sad. He didn't know what the outcome [was going to be]."

Sleeping was the biggest problem. "I sleep on my side," Livingston said. "I had to sleep with at least four pillows. That was probably the roughest part. Because for two weeks, [you] ice your knee to keep it from swelling up, then go to Alabama to get the surgery done, two weeks after the injury. Then those two weeks after the surgery, staples in your knee, you can't sleep. You are on all this medication."

Livingston flew to Birmingham to visit two of the foremost experts on knee injuries: Dr. James Andrews and Dr. William Clancy performed the reconstruction. Livingston's range of motion was similar to a 90-year-old the day after the surgery. Doctors flexed his knee that day. One placed a hand on Livingston's thigh. Another lifted the leg forcibly. "It was almost like watching somebody trying to bend steel," Jones said.

Livingston rehabilitated in Alabama for two weeks before returning to Los Angeles. His life became about milestones, ones that would have seemed meager to almost anyone, let alone an NBA player, only a month or two earlier. Walk, then run. "Getting his range back in the beginning of the early stages," said Dr. Judy Seto, now the Lakers' head physical therapist, who worked daily with Livingston. "And just getting him off crutches, getting his kneecap to move again. And then getting his legs to work again, his legs to fire again, to turn on the muscles again, to walk, just do his normal activity. Once that is more normalized, [you then] get him back on a bike, an elliptical, in a pool, so you can actually start to move the leg a little better to get you ready for running."

Brand ruptured his Achilles in the summer of 2007, and like that, the Clippers renaissance ended meekly. Brand missed nearly all of the 2007-08 season and rehabilitated alongside Livingston. "It hurts, it takes hours and hours a day," Brand said. "He's just a young kid. He's just used to playing ball all day. He's not used to putting in an hour just to stretch and rehab and lift and do those kinds of things."

Back then, the Clippers practiced at a public athletic club. The infrastructure was far different from the state-of-the-art facility the franchise now showcases. The training staff did the very best they could with Livingston and others, but they lacked the equipment of other organizations, Livingston said. "We've got practice and we finish practice and we got 60-year-old naked guys in the hot tub," Livingston recalled.

Livingston always knew he would return in some capacity. So did his grandfather. "People ask me that question and I say I expected it," Frank Livingston said. "I expected him to do well. I don't expect us to fail. I expect us to do well."

"You'd be surprised what you can do. It makes you a better person if you don't offer excuses. Nobody wants to hear excuses. I talk to people and they say they were going to do something and didn't do it. Then they ask, 'Don't you want to know why?' No, I don't want to know why. You didn't do it, so what difference does it make?"

Livingston didn't return to the Clippers when the team declined to extend a qualifying offer and allowed him to become a free agent. Livingston needed a fresh start after Brand joined Philadelphia in the summer of 2008.

"They cared about him, and once a team puts stock in you, even when you're injured, they want to see you rehab," Brand said. "They want to see you do well. Once you start moving around, it's not the same. You're more of a commodity, more of a number. But they really cared about him. I wish he could have found a way to stay there and spend his career there."

Livingston resurfaced with the Miami Heat at the start of the 2008-09 season. He still remembers the silent nods he received from the bench of the San Antonio Spurs as he checked into his first preseason game. The hours, days, and months relearning how to walk, run, and jump had paid off. But to what extent? "Regardless of what anyone says, I know how hard I worked," Livingston said. "I know where I was, how far away I was. I know now because I am back playing, but I was nowhere near being ready."

His Heat tenure proved short. Miami essentially waived him in trading him to Memphis for additional salary cap room. Memphis immediately cut him. Livingston needed more rehabilitation before another NBA return and joined the D-League's Tulsa 66ers, the Oklahoma City Thunder's affiliate.

The Thunder tried Livingston as a backup to Russell Westbrook. "He had that devastating injury and he did not give up," said Scott Brooks, Oklahoma City's coach. "A lot of athletes would have said, 'OK, this is it. It just wasn't meant to be.' But he battled back and he's a solid guard in this league."

But he didn't stick in OKC, either. Livingston's journey to find a home continued. He joined Washington in the 2009-10 season, where coach Flip Saunders adjusted his offense to utilize Livingston. "He came in and played so well," Saunders said. "We were undermanned at the end of the year, but he really started to play pretty well and we started beating some quality teams. Unfortunately for us, where we were at with the salary cap and everything else, he played well enough that Charlotte offered him a pretty significant deal that we really couldn't match at the time and he ended up moving on."

Charlotte traded Livingston to Milwaukee in a three-team deal involving Stephen Jackson that allowed Charlotte to obtain Bismack Biyombo and Corey Maggette. Then Milwaukee traded him to Houston this summer in a deal aimed at landing Samuel Dalembert. The Rockets waived Livingston and he rejoined the Wizards. Washington waived him in December and he joined the Cavaliers. He has crisscrossed the NBA. There appears to always be a place for Livingston, a coach who is tantalized with the thought of unleashing a 6-foot-7 point guard. Though he's played well in Cleveland backing up Kyrie Irving, Shaun Livingston is still in search of a permanent NBA home.

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Doctors instructed Frank Livingston to return for a colonoscopy every year after his initial cancer diagnosis. "You know what?" a doctor asked him after a while. "We've been doing this for 14 years." After nearly a decade and a half of treatment, Livingston persevered. He was cancer-free.

“What Shaun has given me, I can’t complain about,” Livingston said. “I think I’m the luckiest guy in the world. Not because I survived cancer, but because I got to see Shaun grow up.”

His grandson’s journey, his struggle, is not over. Shaun is in the NBA, yes. The road back proved hugely difficult, a true test of that resolve. He learned to walk again. He learned to run again. He learned to jump again. He learned to play again. But is it enough?

“Maybe he’s not good enough,” Buescher said. “His injuries, it has taken stuff away. But if I was a good team, if I had Kobe Bryant or I had Carmelo Anthony, why wouldn’t I want him to pass them the ball in a good place? Because he would.”

Livingston describes his current role in the NBA as “still a journeyman trying to really find a team that fits.” Would he be satisfied if his professional career ended today – his name likely linked to Danny Manning, Michael Olowokandi, Danny Ferry, and other high-profile Clippers draft picks who whether through injury or indifference never panned out? “I’m hardest on myself,” he replied. “I’m my biggest critic. I ended up hurting myself a lot by doing that. I can’t say yes. You always want more. But at the same time, I don’t think I would have any regrets. If it happens, it’s just one of those things that every player has, just fading to black.”

So if returning to the NBA and regaining status among the hierarchy of the greatest athletes in the world is the absolute bottom of Shaun Livingston’s expectations, how high is the ceiling?

“There is just no way he should be playing basketball after that injury and the incredible reconstruction that was done to build back all parts of that knee,” Lawler said. “The fact that he’s walking without a limp, playing the game at the highest possible level – whether he’s no more than a journeyman, is still remarkable. What he could have been, we’ll never know.”

Livingston knows he’s not the same player and never will be. He knows he never possessed the violent athleticism of a Westbrook or a Derrick Rose. He flashes that burst every once in a while, but it never lasts long. The battle is in sustaining it for as long as possible, to trust it more often, and to occasionally go for the spectacular play instead of the steady one. “After that injury, he’s trying to survive instead of thrive,” Grover said. “That’s the best way I can describe it.”

But who can blame Livingston if the thought is eternally planted in the back of his mind? In a game full of landings and liftoffs, cuts and stops, another seemingly innocuous plant could put his career, and possibly his life, in peril.

“It’s almost like a boxer past his prime,” Livingston said. “But to me, it happened when I was 21, instead of 35. That’s frustrating. But this is something that I love to do. And when you love what you do, you’ll make sure that you do it. There are really no excuses.”

Grant Hill offered Livingston some advice, the same guidance offered to him by Krzyzewski. Hill established himself as a dynamic scorer before sustaining a catastrophic ankle injury. He refashioned his game and, at 40, is the second-oldest player in the league and a valuable member of the Clippers. “The main thing is, it’s more mental than anything,” Hill said. “He’s come back and he’s shown that he can be healthy and play. It’s tough because there was a certain level that he was accustomed to and he may or may not be able to do those things that he did before. So [he has to] really just take joy from what he can do and continue to just work and not be frustrated with where



he is, but also not be satisfied. When you come back from an injury, a difficult injury like that, it's hard."

The lesson, Livingston found, is to not set limits. "Don't sell yourself short," Livingston said. "Go out there and really try to make the most out of this opportunity while you're playing. Trying to be the best that I can possibly be. I know it sounds cliché. You think about our careers specifically, and is it just good enough to come back and play as opposed to really coming back and trying to be a force, trying to make an impact and win basketball games?"

Some question whether it was ever in Livingston's basketball DNA to play more aggressively. He often deferred to others before the injury. The characteristic makes him an ideal teammate and, at times, limits his game.

"I've always thought this about Shaun even before he got hurt: that he wasn't assertive enough, that his numbers weren't as good as they should be," said Bobby Darling, Livingston's first high school coach at Richwoods. "He didn't take enough shots. He didn't get enough rebounds. He didn't dive on the floor. I would not be surprised when I saw the box scores: He would play 23 minutes and take three shots and have three or four rebounds. I would think that's a lot of time to only take three shots and grab four rebounds. But I think some of that is just the way Shaun plays the game. He's just very unselfish. To me, if you could put studs all around Shaun, then he would be great."

Art Jones still encourages Livingston every day but reminds him that basketball is what he does, not who he is.

"I tell him, 'Look, bro, understand that you get paid to throw an orange ball into a circle, that's exactly what you are doing,'" Jones said. "Basketball is not a career like being a doctor or a lawyer. So while you're doing that, give it your all. But don't ever think that if you have a bad night, you're a failure. There's too much for you to get down here, to be this blessed and not to thrive. Make sure you're being as aggressive as you can and you're out there no-holds-barred, because according to everybody else, you ain't even supposed to be walking."

Livingston knows all this. The battle is in his mind. The struggle is allowing his mind to trust his body. There is no room for hesitation in the NBA.

"How will you ever know if you don't approach it with the same mind-set that you had before the injury happened?" Livingston said. "It's tough. I'm still 27. I still feel like my prime is 28, 29. There is still potential left out there. But the league isn't getting any older. It's getting younger. I don't want to hold myself back. I do want to try and accomplish more. I do feel like I can accomplish more. I can do better. I can get better production on the court. But it is really going out there and doing it at this stage."

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Kyrie Irving is running circles around the Atlanta Hawks. He's a blur around the basket, picking and choosing his moments to attack full-throttle. He is potential realized. He is walking the route once mapped out for Livingston. Irving attended Duke and will soon play in his first All-Star Game at the age of 20.

“Having somebody like that who has been in the league for as long as he has, he knows the game so well,” Irving said of Livingston. “Even when he first came into the league, you could obviously see that he knows the game. I’m still a fan of his. I was watching him when I was growing up.”

These days, Livingston comes off the bench to spell Irving. They occasionally play together, but mostly he plays with the second unit. Byron Scott likes Livingston’s calming presence on a young team. Even if Livingston wanted to showcase his full talents – the no-look passes, the And1 dribbling skills – the minutes are often not there. Livingston is no longer the future. Irving is the present. Livingston is just trying to regain some of his past. “I’m not that guy anymore,” Livingston said. “I’m not that 19-, 20-year-old kid they are going to roll the ball out to and say, ‘Here. Play for us. You are our guy.’ That falls on Kyrie now. The dynamics have changed.”

Livingston has never watched a replay of his injury. He says he never will. He is still protecting what his eyes see. “It helps with anything, temptation, just looking around, anything,” Livingston said. “Looking at the injury would do nothing for me. I don’t want to dwell. I want to look forward.”

When asked if he can look forward without fully acknowledging the past, he restates his faith. “I know what you’re saying,” Livingston replied. “It’s almost like you can’t solve a problem if you don’t address it. I think that’s where my faith kicked in. Everything happens for a reason. It’s not always in our control. It’s not always our path. Maybe there’s things I could have done to prevent it, but who knows? If I would have made that decision to go to Duke and the injury happens to me there, then why didn’t I make the decision to go to the NBA? There’s always little things that can affect you. But if you have a foundation and faith, then you can come to grips with it. Yeah, it did happen to me. It was an unfortunate incident. But where can you go from there? You can’t go back and reverse it.”

During the Cavs-Hawks contest, Irving plays the maestro, guiding Cleveland to its second-largest margin of victory to date. But did you see it? If you blinked you might have missed it. In the fourth quarter, Livingston is a blur as he streaks to the basket for an explosive dunk. Watching that burst, you can’t help but think what might have been. And, if he’s lucky, what may still be.