

Beavers are young, but talking of defense

By MIKE MARINO
Of the Emerald

With a team of but one senior to counter seven freshmen, you'd think Ralph Miller would be talking youth.

But the fourth winningest coach in college basketball today has a completely different thought this winter. "It's tough when you have so many young people," Miller said. "But this year we're going to concentrate on being consistent and tough on defense."

Miller recruited the number one and two scorers in Oregon high school basketball from last season. And that's good. But he also lost his starting center to a reoccurring foot injury, and that is definitely bad. Add to that the fact that most of the freshmen like to shoot the ball — quite a lot — and you have a team running and gunning.

Except under Miller.

"Young teams are generally inconsistent," Miller said, "and you can't try and outscore anybody else if you're inconsistent."

Much of the optimism early in the season was surrounding the eventual return from injury of 6-11 Steve Johnson, the Beaver's surprise center of a year ago. He was to return after missing four or five games, which he did. But soon thereafter he hurt himself again, and it was goodbye for the season and hello to a redshirt year.

We don't have anybody that is as capable at the position as he was," Miller said. But they do have a freshman kid named Bill

McShane from Houston, Texas, who more than anything learned rather quickly.

But being a freshman, he's not ready to man things alone. So sophomore Steve Smith — only 6-6 — has stepped in, and OSU looks like they did a few years back when they lost a guy named Lonnie Shelton. It must work, they're 2-0 in the Pac-8.

Complementing Smith or McShane on the front line will be senior Rickey Lee. Lee, who Oregon's John Murray might consider one of the league's better punchers after a scuffle between them in Portland last season, won't be looking to shoot too much this season what with his history of low shooting percentages.

But Lee has proven his worth in keeping order under the basket, and should be a leader as well as an enforcer.

Strangely enough, the other leadership is coming from one of the highly-touted freshmen, Mark Radford from Portland. The 6-3 swingman from Grant High not only is averaging in consistent double figures scoring-wise, but is playing remarkably good defense for a first-year player.

"He's an exception to the rule," Miller grinned. "He can play away from the ball, and can pass, too, since he played on a team oriented program in high school."

Other freshmen who are panning out right away are 6-5 Lake

Oswego grad Jeff Stoutt, who despite his size is playing a rather strong game of forward, and Parkrose guard Ray Blume. "At this point," Miller grinned, "I think both are playing right to the point they're capable of."

OSU landed some other prime recruits this season, namely Andy McClouskey of Lebanon, James Childs of Bakersfield, and BoBo

Campbell of San Jose.

Even with the new young talent, Miller still will be hard-pressed to replace the likes of Rocky Smith and George Tucker. Or to win the conference.

"Right now I'm negative in the mind that if we don't improve, we're in real trouble," Miller stressed. "But I think we're making inroads now, though."

They lost their first three games by big margins on the Atlantic coast to powerful North Carolina (twice) and Wake Forest. But then they've come along to barely finish second to Colorado State in the Far West Classic (they lost in overtime 49-44), and won their first two conference games.

Maybe Ralph Miller does have something up his sleeve.

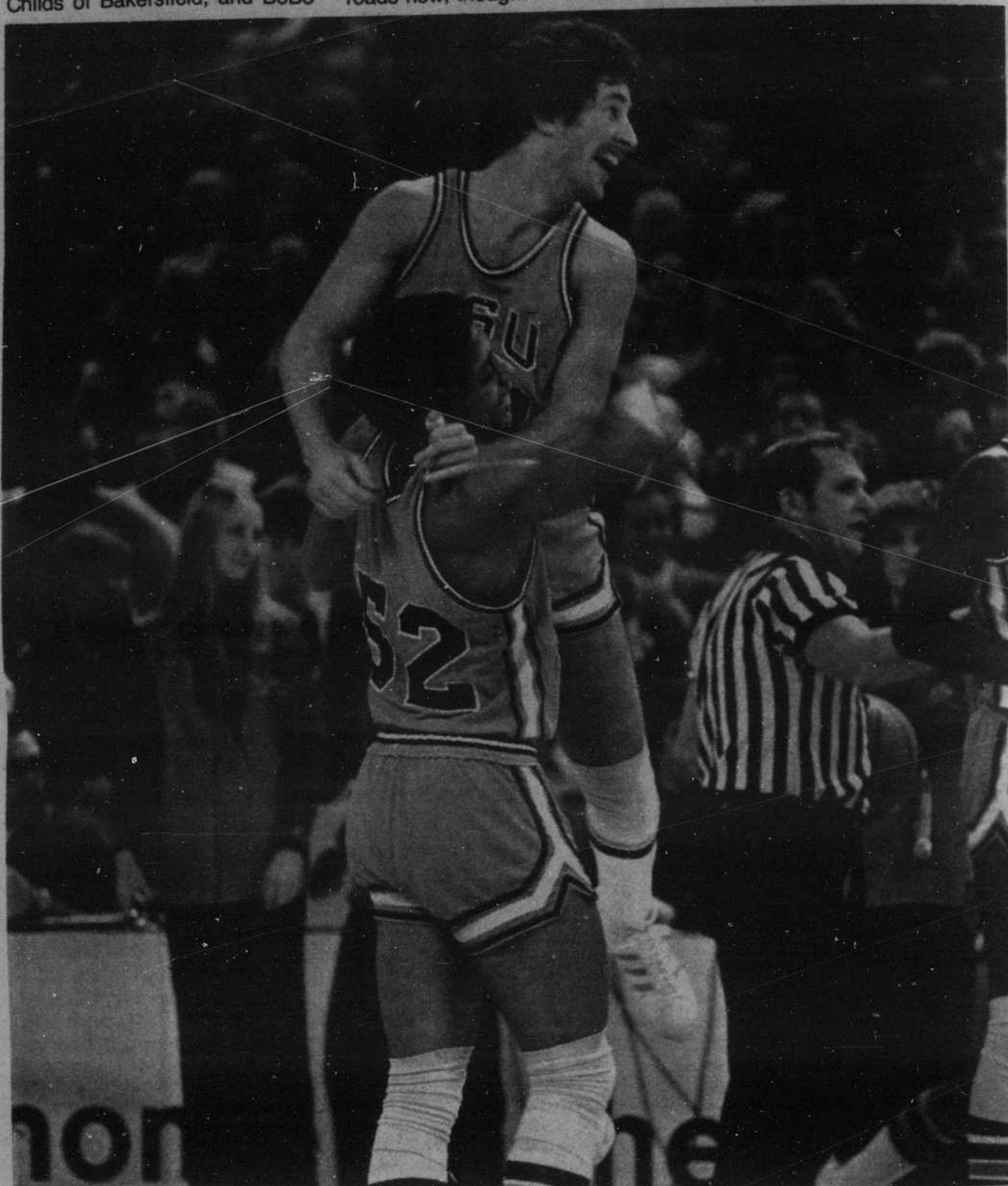


Photo by Neil Gruenfelder

OSU's Dwayne Allen (52) had a happy friend in teammate Brian Hilliard after the Beavers defeated Villanova in the semi-final of the Far West Classic. Both will be instrumental in the Beaver's Pac-8 fortunes this season.

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