

Blazer rookies exemplify camp

Valentine, Lamp — one struggles; another coasts

By DONALD COULTER
Of the Emerald

VANCOUVER, Wash. — The Portland Trailblazers' pre-season camp can be best described as a tale of two rookies: one who is making it look easy and another who is struggling.

Darnell Valentine (6-1 guard, Kansas) and Jeff Lamp (6-6 forward, Virginia) represent perhaps the finest pair of newcomers the Blazers have ever had. Valentine, a defensive whiz from the Big Eight, and Lamp, who led the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) in scoring twice, come to the pros with raves from the pro scouts and high expectations from Blazer fans and management.

But a successful transition into the NBA is not insured by highly touted college backgrounds. The uncelebrated NBA careers of Butch Lee and Rickie Green — or even La-Rue Martin — attest to that. And so does Jeff Lamp.

"It's been tough," Lamp said about stepping from the limelight of the Final Four last season into the pros this year. "It's been a very big transition. I'm still in the process of trying to feel comfortable."

At the same time, the move to the NBA doesn't seem to faze Darnell Valentine.

"It's been an easy adjustment," he said. "My style of play is very consistent with the NBA. I like the role of being the coach on the floor when I'm out there and I enjoy the wide open style of the league."

The dichotomy of their adjustments to the NBA is no more apparent than on the practice floor. Valentine moves through drills with a self-assured manner and jokes easily with his new teammates and coaches. Lamp's struggle to cope with a new position — he will move from guard in college to a small forward for the Blazers — is mirrored in the frustration on his face.

"Darnell will make an immediate impact," general manager Stu Inman said at the Blazer's training site in Vancouver last week. "But Jeff has the offensive skills — shooting, passing — and he should come around in time. Jeff has a guard mentality — he sees the floor very well. His problem right now is with defense."

Lamp is the first to agree with that statement. "In college I was

almost always defending guards smaller than me. In the NBA the forwards I have to guard are at least as big or bigger than me."

Having to concentrate on defense has taken away from Lamp's scoring in the early going. He combined for only eight points in the Blazer's first two exhibition games, after averaging 18.8 per contest in four years at Virginia.

Meanwhile, Valentine has been a sparkplug, and one of the few bright spots for the Blazers in those two games. He scored 23 points and dished out seven assists in 45 minutes of playing time, coming off the bench in both games to revive a muddled offense.

"I can only play one way," said Valentine, whose muscular legs would put even burly speed

tion's big men."

Indeed, it seems that rebounding deficiencies are what separate the Blazers from being a championship-caliber team. It's no secret that Boston and Philadelphia have dominated the NBA over the last two years because of their front-court power. General manager Inman received a lot of criticism in June after the NBA draft, when he picked two guards — one of the Blazers' strengths — rather than a center.

"When our turn came up (draft picks 15 and 16 in the first round) Alton Lister (Arizona State center) was available," Inman said. "But our scouts weren't high on him. We went for the best athletes, regardless of position."

Still, Inman admits that one of his worries going into the season opener (vs. Phoenix on Oct. 30) is "unsettled center play." Kevin Kunnert, coming off two injury-riddled seasons, will share time at the center position with Mychal Thompson (17 points per game last season). At only 6-10, and not an exceptionally good rebounder, Thompson would be a forward on most NBA teams.

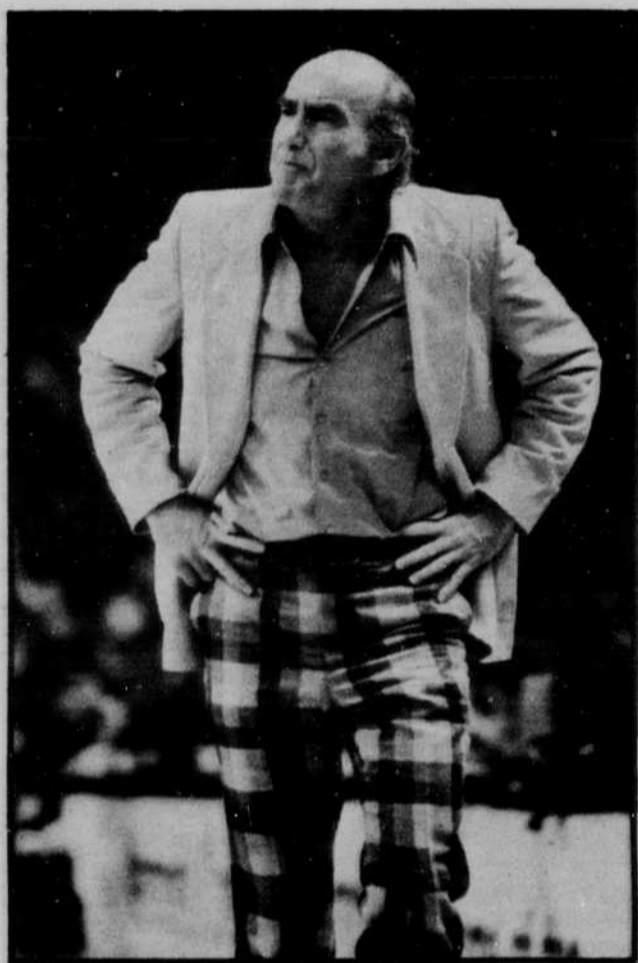
Petur Gudmundsson, a 7-2 rookie, will come off the bench to help out in the middle.

Despite the loss of Bob Gross for six weeks — he recently had surgery on his right ankle — the Blazers have a lot of talent at forward. Lamp will play behind Calvin Natt (13.4 points) at small forward. The power-forward spot will be filled by nine-year veteran Kermit Washington (11.4 points and the team's top rebounder last year

with 9.3 per game).

Last season, the backcourt was the team's strongest point. Jim Paxson (17.1 points) led the team in scoring, Kelvin Ransey (15.2 points, 6.9 assists) provided the leadership, and Billy Ray Bates (13.8 points) supplied the quick offense off the bench. With the addition of Valentine, the situation is even more crowded.

With less than two weeks before the season opener, Ramsey seems to have made up his mind to go with Ransey and Bates in the starting lineup, with 1980-81 starter Paxson and Valentine held in reserve. It's an accepted fact that Paxson and Valentine could be starters on most clubs in the league.



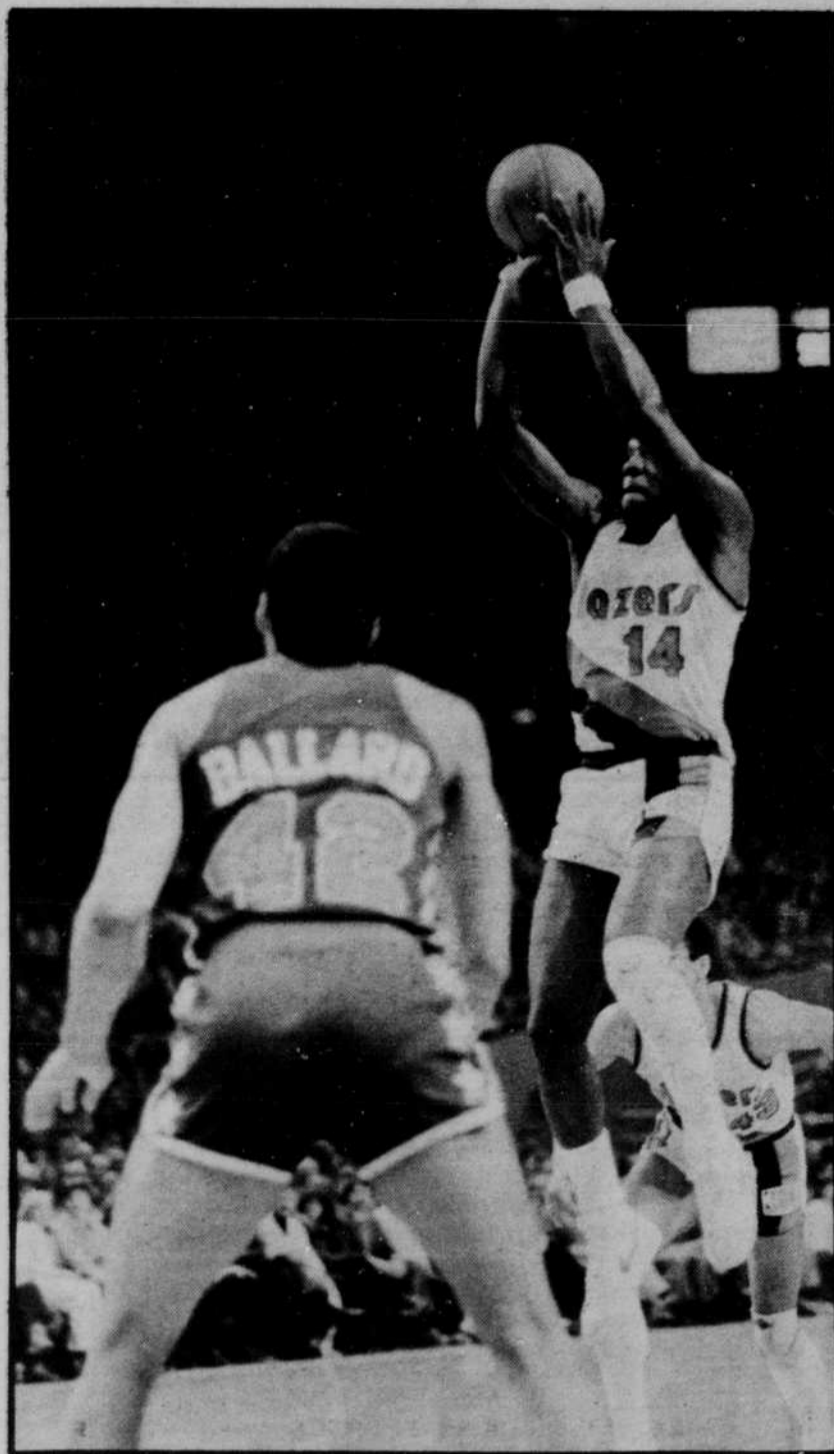
Blazer coach Jack Ramsey says he wants to improve on his team's rebounding.

skater Eric Heiden to shame, "and that is to play with a lot of intensity and desire."

Valentine's desire and rapid ability to learn a new system is impressing a lot of people, including Blazer head coach Jack Ramsey. "Darnell Valentine has been outstanding," Ramsey said when asked about the team's progress thus far in training camp.

"As a team we've had good intensity in practice," he continued. "We've been able to put a good part of our game plan in motion. But we haven't had the same intensity or togetherness in the exhibition games."

"My major concern right now is rebounding. We have to do a good job against the competi-



Photos by Steve Dykes

Kelvin Ransey, who averaged 15.2 points and 6.9 assists per game, is expected to start at guard for the Blazers.

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