

Lever learning new role

With 7:06 to play in the Portland Trail Blazers 91-86 National Basketball Association exhibition win over the Golden State Warriors Friday at McArthur Court, Portland coach Jack Ramsay called time out.

As the Blazer players took their places on the bench, Ramsay turned his attention toward the newest of the faces in front of him and patiently relayed a message of instruction. Before the team retook the floor, assistant coach Jim Lynam added words of encouragement for the rookie.

Then it was time for 6-3 Lafayette 'Fat' Lever, who signed with the Blazers a week ago, to return to the hardwood for more on-the-job training.

Three and a half minutes later, Lever found himself along the right baseline and forced up one of his six misfires on the evening. At the next break in the action, Darnell Valentine, the second-year player who appears to have the starting nod, returned to the floor and Lever

took a seat next to Ramsay for more tutoring.

With the regular season opener just two weeks away, Lever, the Blazers' number one draft choice out of Arizona State, still has a lot of learning to do.

"It would be a huge, huge problem had he not been with us this summer," said Lynam, referring to 'Fat's' participation at the summer pro league in Los Angeles. Lever practiced with the team in Los Angeles, but did not participate in the games. "Also, he is a very quick learner," Lynam added.

That is important with any rookie, but it may be more so for Lever. Fresh out of ASU, the Blazers will be asking him to back up Valentine at the point guard with the exodus of Kelvin Ransey to Dallas. That means he must be able to quarterback the offense he is now learning in short order.

"I like it right now," Lever said of his position with the Blazers. "I accept all the help I can get

from the coaches and my teammates."

Lever, who was wearing a Blazer uniform for only the second time, showed flashes of what the Blazers drafted him for while handing out three assists and scoring four points. Midway through the second quarter he burst up the floor and lofted a perfect lead pass to Wayne Cooper on the left wing for a slam dunk which gave the Blazers a 34-30 lead.

With the Blazers looking to run at every opportunity this season, the quickness of Lever and Valentine coming out of the backcourt is a key ingredient.

"For now, I'm pleased with getting the ball out," said Ramsay, adding that the execution at the end of the fast break will come in time.

Execution is what Lever is concentrating on these days. Early in the game he spent much of his time roaming the outside at the offensive end, and an equal amount of time checking with the bench for instruction.

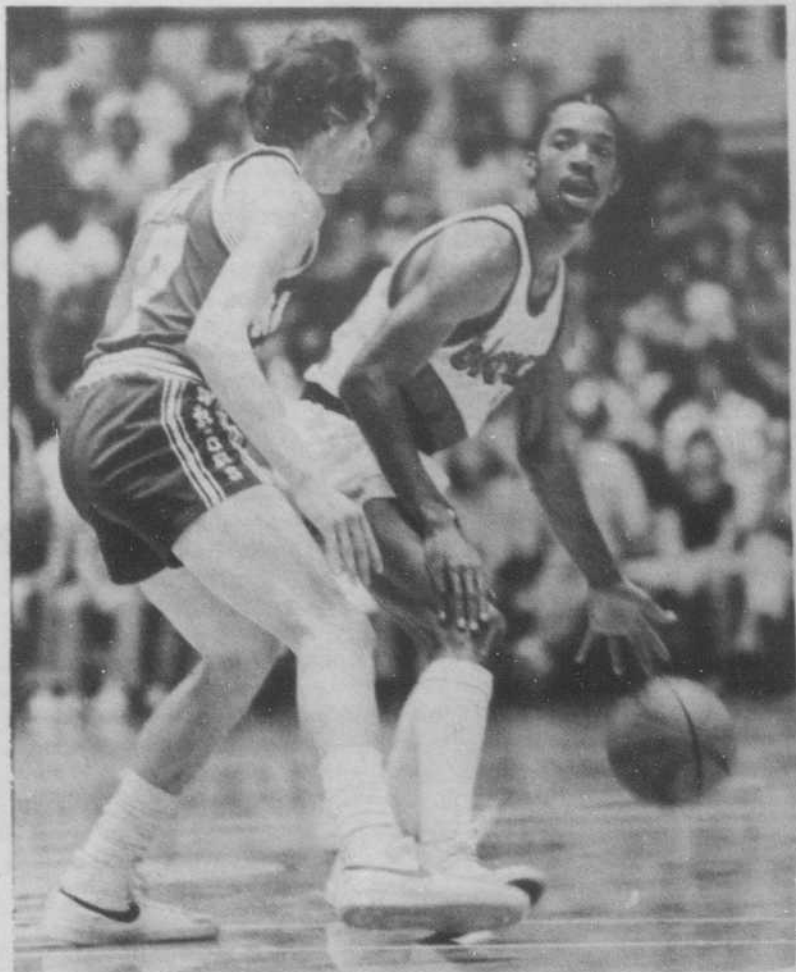
"I think it is because I'm not sure," Lever said of his lack of assertiveness on offense. "Sometimes, if you try to do too much it gets you into trouble."

With Ransey gone, Lever will get plenty of opportunities to cause trouble for opposing guards this season as understudy to Valentine. But, he said he doesn't feel any added pressure in replacing Ransey.

"I don't think that adds pressure," the rookie said. "I can't worry about being like Kelvin Ransey. The only pressure is the pressure I put on myself."

Ramsay is satisfied with his guard situation at this point. In addition to Lever's new face, there are changes at off guard with Billy Ray Bates being released. Jeff Lamp, the second year man from Virginia, will backup Jim Paxson at the off guard, along with Linton Townes, a rookie sharpshooter from James Madison.

The coach is pleased to have Lever on board. "He gives us good support behind Valentine. He has good quickness, a good



Rookie Lafayette 'Fat' Lever undergoes on-the-job-training after his holdout.

sense for the game and he is a good passer. He picks up the game quickly," Ramsay said.

So does Valentine, who will go from part-time point guard to main man this season. He is looking to play 30 to 38 minutes a game, and he is looking forward to getting out on the break.

"We're getting the ball up court a little bit better. We had a lot of good opportunities," Valentine said of the Blazers' effort Friday, which included the usual pre-season sloppiness. "I think things are going to open up a lot more for us this year," he said of the break.

Valentine said he is comfortable in filling Ransey's shoes as quarterback of the Blazer attack. "Very much so. Do I look it?" he said with a smile.

He does.

He is also looking forward to having Lever around. "We have a lot of similarities. Fat's going to be a great addition to our team."

Lynam agrees that Valentine and Lever will provide the team with similar abilities at the point guard position. "Both are quick, good penetrators, with good ball handling abilities and play good defense."

"I'm a big Kelvin Ransey fan," said Lynam. "And, to be honest with you, trading Ransey was a bit of a risk," he added noting Valentine saw only limited action last season. "But, I think Darnell is showing that he has the ability to do a good job for us this year."

The Ransey trade can also be judged at the post position where Cooper, who the Blazers got from Dallas in the Ransay trade was impressive in spelling Mychal Thompson against the Warriors. In 21 minutes Cooper contributed 17 points and eight rebounds to the Blazers cause.

Story by Paul Danzer
Photos by Kevin Clark



Second-year guard Darnell Valentine will move into starting spot at point guard for the Blazers this season.

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