

NFL: McCullough may go to 49ers

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which will run through Sunday, includes two-a-day practices to acclimate new players and coaches to the Ravens' system, Mann said.

"I'm just happy to have this opportunity," Johnson said. "It was rough waiting so long during the draft, but now I'm just excited to get out there. I'll be happy to play any role they want me to."

Mann said the Ravens' coaching staff plans to work with Johnson on the fundamentals of the professional game, including running routes and "putting yourself in the right frame of mind" for competition, but he also said Johnson already has a lot of the tools to make an "excellent" pro receiver.

Former Oregon tight end Blake Spence was the second of two Ducks taken this weekend in the NFL draft, and as it turns out, he, too, might have found the perfect home with the Jets in New York.

"We're all very excited for him," Blake's mother, Pat, said from her home in California on

Monday. "This is a great situation for him because his agent lives there and can kind of take Blake under his wing for the first couple of seasons. I guess we'll all be calling him 'Broadway Blake' from now on."

This will also be a good spot for Spence because second-year Jets' head coach Bill Parcells has never had a team with less than three tight ends on the roster. Currently, the Jets have two: Fred Baxter and Kyle Brady, who combined for 49 receptions and more than 500 yards last season.

"[Spence] is a good special teams player," Parcells said in a released statement on Monday. "We only have two tight ends on our roster right now, so obviously his chances of making the team are real good."

Spence could not be reached for comment.

In his first season as a starter, Spence led Oregon tight ends with 38 receptions and 632 yards. But what most impressed the Jets' coaching staff, Parcells said, was

Spence's touchdown production — six in a limited role last season.

Spence was one of two tight ends the Jets selected on Sunday, taking Southern's Lawrence Hart in the seventh round with the 195th overall selection. Both players will attend the Jets' mini-camp Sunday in New York.

One Oregon player who was not drafted this weekend was tailback Saladin McCullough, who led the Pacific-10 Conference in rushing last season with 1,343 yards and a five yards-per-carry average. However, McCullough is rumored to be working out a deal with the San Francisco 49ers and could sign a free-agent deal as early as this week.

Former Oregon fullback, A.J. Jelks, is also rumored to be in negotiations with an NFL team. Jelks, who caught 15 passes last season in a limited role, is reportedly talking to the Philadelphia Eagles and will attend the team's mini-camp Thursday.

Neither the Eagles nor the 49ers could be reached for comment.

Hanzlik fired as Nuggets coach after first season

Bill Hanzlik finished the year 11-71 in his first and final season with the Nuggets

By Don Mitchell
The Associated Press

DENVER — Bill Hanzlik's first season as head coach of the Denver Nuggets was one of the worst in NBA history. There won't be a second.

The Nuggets fired Hanzlik on Monday, one day after completing an 11-71 season, leaving the team rebuilding again and looking for its eighth coach this decade.

For almost the entire season, the Nuggets were a threat to surpass the league's worst record ever — 9-73 by the 1972-73 Philadelphia 76ers.

They managed to avoid that dubious record by two games, and they did it with rookies and journeymen.

Hanzlik, 40, who has two years remaining on the contract he signed before the season, won't be around for the next effort at rebuilding after being dismissed along with assistants T.R. Dunn and Brian Winters.

"The Nuggets franchise must move forward and put this disappointing season behind," said Dan Issel, vice president and general manager. "We will continue to evaluate every level of the organization and focus on returning

the Nuggets to respectability in the NBA."

Issel's hiring on March 25 seemed to seal Hanzlik's fate. Issel replaced Allan Bristow, who had hired Hanzlik, his good friend, but then became the first victim of the horrible season when he was fired in February.

"Bill Hanzlik is a good man," Issel said. "Bill Hanzlik was basically thrown into a no-win situation. Is it fair? Probably not."

Before the season, the Nuggets had devised a master plan in which they jettisoned most of their veterans, made room under the salary cap and acquired draft picks.

In a series of questionable personnel moves that followed the loss of center Dikembe Mutombo in 1996, Mark Jackson, Dale Ellis, Ricky Pierce and Ervin Johnson departed last spring.

Those who remained to start the season included LaPhonso Ellis, Eric Williams, Bryant Stith and Johnny Newman.

The team became something of a league laughing-stock, as well as an afterthought in the sports-crazy city of Denver.

"Playing Denver is like playing a high school team," Chicago's Dennis Rodman said during the season. "This is the worst team in the history of basketball."

Pond: Blazers content with being mediocre

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Perhaps the greatest proof of their inconsistency was that it wasn't all that surprising that the Blazers lost to Denver last Friday night. By that point in the season it was somewhat expected that they'd struggle with the league's bottom feeders.

Likewise, they had a great chance of beating Seattle on Sunday.

They've beaten the best teams in the league in the past, so why couldn't they do it again?

And, hell, they almost pulled it off, playing pretty well after the first quarter until Gary Payton won it for the Sonics down the stretch.

Another one of the most frustrating things about

this team is that they are just mediocre and they seem to be content with that.

It's one thing to just suck. Fine. But just be consistent. Suck every night.

And if you're going to be good, play at a high level of consistency every night out.

No more of this beating Chicago in the United Center one night and then losing to Indiana by 65 points the next time out, as the Blazers did in February.

I, as a long-time fan, am frustrated by that type of inconsistency — frustrated by the most frustrating team in the league.

Alex Pond is the sports editor for the Emerald.

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