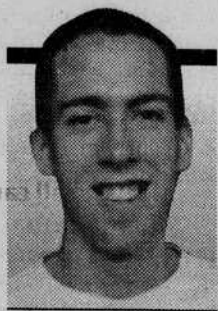


Blazers too reliant on complacency

If I had a penny for every headline I've seen about the Portland Trail Blazers that contains the phrase "back on track" or "out of control," I'd have deeper pockets than Paul Allen himself.



Scott Pesznecker

The Blazers have had worse than an up-and-down season. Rather, it's been more like up, down and out. And if beating the Jazz Monday night in what was one of the most rag-tag games I've seen all season means anything at all, it's simply that Portland may have clawed its way from out to down.

Really though, the only thing anywhere close to being "up" for Portland is their chance of capturing the title this season.

Yes, I know, everything starts over in the playoffs. Yes, I know, the Blazers have been injured. Yes, I know, bla bla bla [insert third excuse here].

But they are completely complacent right now. They are also one of the highest-paid teams in the history of professional sports. And those two things shouldn't be happening simultaneously.

On Wednesday night, with time winding down in Portland's loss to Houston, those unfortunate enough to witness the game's final minutes on television saw the Blazers watching shots fall out of bounds. Not only

were the shots within reach, but at that point, so was the game.

So what's the deal?

It's just funny if you stop and think about it. Last season, the Blazers tore through the lockout-shortened 50-game schedule, finally getting closed out in the Western Conference Finals.

And it wasn't just another year. It was the first full season when the core group of Isaiah Rider, Arvydas Sabonis, Brian Grant, Rasheed Wallace, Damon Stoudamire and Greg Anthony got to play together. Learning to play together usually takes time, but not for that group — if it hadn't been for Sean Elliot's second-game miracle of the conference finals, Portland undoubtedly would have gone all the way.

Yet when the offseason hit, "Trader Bob" Whitsitt wasted no time in getting rid of Rider, who many around the league thought to be a distraction.

Granted, Rider was fired by the Hawks this season. But last season, his only "distraction" was a speeding ticket for racing between stoplights in downtown Portland.

Immature, yes — but who hasn't done it?

The Blazers' reasoning for trading the offensive heartbeat of their team was that an often complacent player like Rider couldn't lead his team to an NBA Championship.

Following that logic, I wonder if Whitsitt is thinking about trading half the team for maybe Tim Duncan? At least then, Portland would have one player who actually cares about winning.

It doesn't stop there, because

complacency isn't the Blazers' only problem.

Portland is one of the most predictable teams in the NBA.

The only thing that is remotely unpredictable about them is who the leading scorer will be in each game. However, it doesn't take a basketball theorist to figure out where Stoudamire is going to dish the ball.

Usually "The Mouse" gives away his strategy when he picks up his dribble at the top of the key, pauses, points to the guy he wants to pass it to, points to the spot on the floor where he wants the guy to stand, pumps the ball a couple of times to make sure the lane is clear, and finally, when he lobs it into the guy on the inside. Oh yeah, the guy's name is usually Rasheed.

That just about sums up Portland's offense.

Every time I watch the Utah Jazz play, I can't help but notice the way they move without the ball. They know how to execute. They can make plays like nobody else can, and that's almost an unbeatable strength. The Jazz's starting five has four players age 35 or older, and they still win because they can execute their offense.

Are you listening, Blazers?

For those who aren't impressed by Utah, why not check out the team that's probably going to win the NBA title for years to come.

The Lakers win because they have Shaquille O'Neal, but he dominates because his team sets him up. They execute. And they do it because of Phil Jackson.

Mike Dunleavy deserves major props for his ability to juggle

playing time between players in an all-star lineup, but if any person on Portland's roster is the problem, it's the coach.

Complacency is a terrible thing. When players don't care, it's almost impossible to win with consistency. I don't think anyone but the players themselves can make themselves want a championship.

Yet it's the coach's job to create the offense, and Dunleavy's offensive strategy is well known — give it to whoever's on fire and let him work.

That's not an offense; that's called street ball. Why pay millions of dollars for an aging group of finesse rat-ballers?

Dunleavy's offense is too predictable. After dominating the first half of the season, the Blazers are losing because their opponents finally caught on.

The pieces are there, and so is the potential. A Portland championship could still happen this season — if they can find it in their hearts to care about winning.

But things being the way they are, the Blazers will only win if the Lakers beat themselves, and I don't think that will happen. Their execution is just too good to allow anyone to beat them four times.

The Blazers have won their last two, but they're still out of control, and they're miles away from being back on track.

And that's my own two cents.

Scott Pesznecker is a sports reporter for the Emerald. His views do not necessarily represent those of the paper. He can be reached at jflak1@aol.com.

All Ways Travel
 Looking for that fun 2 or 3 day getaway? Eugene to Reno from \$129.00+tax ppdo.
 • Roundtrip airfare •
 • 2 or 3 nights lodging •
 • Round trip airport transfers •
 E-mail: awt@uv2travel.com
 1200 High St.
 338-4199
 Student Travel Experts

ALL DAY TUESDAY
SPAGHETTI
ALL YOU CAN EAT EVERY TUES!
 includes Garlic Bread 11:30 am-10 pm
\$3.25
PIZZA PETE'S
 2673 Willamette • 484-0996

RECYCLE

Softball

continued from page 7

"This is a huge game, it always is — it's Civil War," sophomore pitcher Connie McMurren said. "Especially with [the way] the Pac-10 standings [are] right now."

Despite the lack of offense by the Ducks over the weekend, Oregon showed signs of coming out of its collective slump. Freshman Andrea Vidlund hit her first home run Saturday, and Holly Ray knocked a shot to the base of the left-center field wall for her third double of the year.

"They'll be ready, they'll put this weekend behind them and get ready for Tuesday," Gamez said. "I thought we got better from Friday all the way up to [Sunday], and that's something that we want to strive for. We don't want to roll over and die."

However, Gamez needs his whole lineup to produce today if the Ducks are going to turn their fortunes. Junior Triawn Custer is boasting a .400 batting average and hit a couple of balls during the weekend that fell just short of clearing the fence, showing signs that she will rebound. Jill Robinson, a senior from Winton, Calif., will be needed to provide some leadership with her team-high 10 homers and 33 runs batted in. One thing the coach does not fault is his team's aggressiveness at the plate.

"We want to be aggressive and attack the ball. Unfortunately, we were a little undisciplined and chased balls out of the zone," Gamez said. "I'd rather have that than sitting up there taking pitches and called strikes."

McMurren feels the Ducks are

hitting the ball well, just not in the right places.

"We're too good of a hitting team for this to go on," McMurren said. "We've just got to stay confident that we'll hit the ball when we need to."

On the mound Oregon received some of its best pitching performances of the year. McMurren (9-11) was a tough-luck loser when she threw a three-hit, 1-0 defeat in what she called "the best game she's thrown," and Vidlund (12-4) pitched 3 1/3 innings of one-hit ball in relief on Saturday. In spite of her sub-.500 winning percentage, McMurren feels she is pitching at a high level. Her coach agrees.

"She's threw to the majority of the tough opponents, and she's kept us in all of them," Gamez said. "That's the thing we've asked her to do. She's a battler."

McMurren knows a win can come at anytime.

"It's very frustrating, but at the same time I just have to keep it in mind that it's going to happen for only so long," McMurren said. "It's bound to happen sometime."

Performances like those will need to be repeated against the interstate rivals today because there are some bats in the Beavers lineup that showed some life in Sunday's contest. Steph Adams knocked a three-run homer and Jenni Jodoin contributed a double and an RBI during a late-inning rally.

Oregon returns to action tomorrow as the team heads to Portland for a double-header against Portland State. The games were originally scheduled to be played on Tuesday, April 11th, but were postponed because of rain.

NIKE WANTS

YOUR SOLES

The Nike Reuse-A-Shoe program has arrived on campus to collect and recycle your used athletic shoes. Look for Reuse-A-Shoe collection bins around campus now. Then, look for your worn-out shoes to reappear as playgrounds, basketball courts, running tracks, and football and soccer fields in communities nationwide. Now your soles (and the rest of your shoes) can truly live on.



Check out www.nikebiz.com and click on responsibility and then environment for details.

For collection sites on campus, email your Nike student rep at: Katie.Marston@nike.com