

Blazers hope new additions will propel them to playoffs

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Staff Reporter

Walking into the crowded Portland Trail Blazers media room, there were people from Nike setting up for interviews and photo shoots with the team. I could hear yelling, sneakers squeaking and whistles blowing. I noticed small forward Martell Webster sitting on the court opposite from me with a cast on his foot. After watching the rest of the team scrimmage for about 15 minutes, I asked point guard Steve Blake for an interview.

After Blake answered my questions, I interviewed head coach Nate McMillan. Next up was towering 7' center Greg Oden who was sitting on an exercise ball. He asked me whether he should stand up or stay sitting down. I thought that was pretty nice. Our interview was short, though, because he needed to get back to practice.

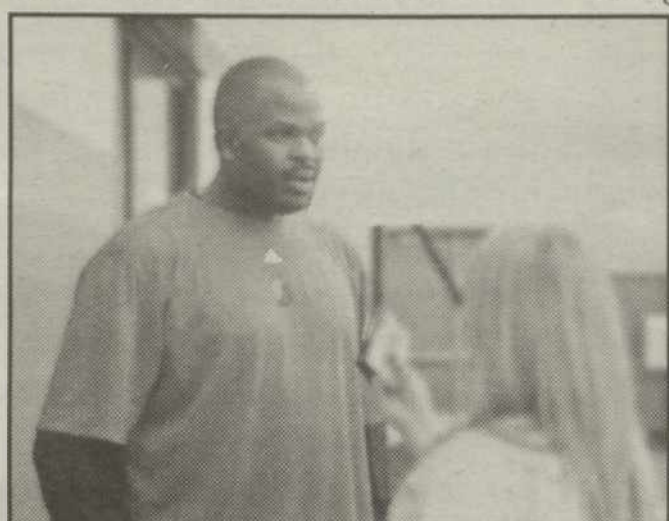
As I left I saw the championship trophy the Blazers won in 1977. It made me feel hopeful that this team will be able to put another trophy in that case.

The fans have been waiting just as long, if not longer for the same thing. People are starting to talk about this team again. We've got the right coach and the right mix

of players. Now we just need to prove it to all the non-believers.

"I'm really excited about the team this year. It's great that they have the players, coaches, and all around confidence that will lead them to a great season, and hopefully a playoff berth," Bryant Bushnell, freshman, said.

It was a long year for Blazers fans after the shocking announcement that number



Ashley Sheron, sophomore, interviews Blazers' Head Coach Nate McMillan, about his expectations for the team. The Blazers have been playing well in preseason and hope to reach the playoffs for the first time since 2002.

Photo by Patricia Sheron

one draft pick, Oden, would be out for his rookie season due to a knee injury.

"I hope there aren't any further knee problems. Right now the knee is feeling great," Oden said.

His teammate, Blake, expects him to be a big presence and a great shot

blocker. "He'll make it tough for guards to make shots in the paint," he said.

"Greg will be able to anchor the defense. He can also defend the basket so we can become a better rebounding team. Offensively, he will be able to establish a low post game and be a low post presence," McMillan said.

Oden started at center against the Sacramento Kings on Oct. 7. He played

20 minutes in his first action as a professional basketball player. He played well hitting five of eight field goals, knocking down three of five free throws, grabbing five rebounds, and making two blocks, scoring 13 points.

While Oden may not be a leading scorer, he definitely makes his presence felt.

"I will be a big body for this team which lets Brandon Roy and LaMarcus Aldridge do their thing," Oden said of his role at center.

In their first road game of the preseason against Sacramento, Blake and Channing Frye returned from their injuries. Over the last three games, Blake and Frye both averaged 9.7 points per game in 26.7 and 23.3 minutes

per game respectively.

Roy and Aldridge did not play in the last game against the Utah Jazz, but both finished the preseason with very good numbers. Roy averaged 16.5 points and 28 minutes per game and Aldridge averaged 14.8 points, while playing 27 minutes per game.

"So far the preseason games have been pretty good. There has been a lot of communication. There are some things to clean up as far as execution on the offense," Blake said.

Since Oden didn't play any games last season he is still eligible for Rookie of the Year.

"I'm working on getting Rookie of the Year. I would love to be on the Rookie Team for the All-Star game," Oden said.

Oden hasn't been the only rookie that has put on a show during preseason. Jerryd Bayless has averaged 9.4 points and 21.3 minutes per game. Also playing well has been rookie Nicolas Batum who is in contention for the starting small forward position due to the injury to Webster. Batum has been averaging 6.6 points and playing 18.7 minutes per game.

One of the flashiest Blazers, Rudy Fernandez, a rookie from Spain, started

in place of Roy against the Golden State Warriors and finished the game with a team high 15 points and six steals. Fernandez also managed seven assists and five rebounds. He has been averaging 12 points while playing 29.4 minutes per game.

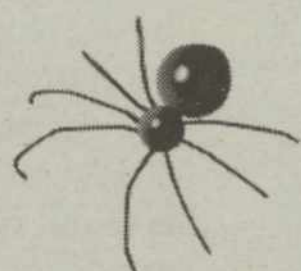
New player Shavlik Randolph didn't get much playing time until the Atlanta game when he scored a team high 19 points and ten rebounds. Randolph has been averaging 9.8 points while playing 23 minutes per game. Blazers' General Manager Kevin Pritchard announced Oct. 23 Randolph would get the final spot on the roster.

The only injuries on the team have been to Webster who is out for eight to ten weeks with a stress fracture in his left foot. Raef LaFrentz had shoulder surgery during the offseason and will be out the rest of the year.

"This team is hard. They have a passion for this game. Those are keys to a team for success," McMillan said. "They all have good qualities. The team's goal is to win enough games to make the playoffs."

Blake agreed, "We just want to improve from last season and make the playoffs. I believe this team has talent."

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