

The Portland Trail Blazers are jelling, but will they come unglued in the playoffs?



It is roughly halfway through the season and the Portland Trail Blazers are on top in the West. Most people would have predicted that the Lakers would be where the Blazers are now.

When the Lakers acquired power forward Horace Grant and shooting guard J.R. Rider last summer, they had improved their front line and their bench. With these additions, the championship Lakers filled in their weak spots and looked stronger than they were last season. At least they looked better on paper.

Then the Blazers traded the heart and soul of the team, Brian Grant, and got an overweight, out of shape and aging Shawn Kemp. I remember thinking this could be a good thing if Kemp gets his act together and losses some weight. He could help the Blazers. Yeah, right! Then we traded more of our talented youth for age and experience. We shipped Jermaine O'Neil for Dale Davis. Now this was a trade I liked. Davis is a lot like Grant. He is a blue collar, hard working type of player. He is taller and a better rebounder than Grant, but he is older.

So I looked at the new rosters of both the Lakers and the Blazers to see who had the best chance of winning the title. The Blazers still didn't have anyone that could guard Shaq, nor did they have any-

one that could contain Kobe. So when the Lakers waltzed into the Rose Garden and pounded the Blazers by 10 points on opening night, I wasn't surprised. In fact, I was ready to give the trophy to L.A.

Well, I was wrong! Who could have predicted the mess that the Lakers have on their hands this year? Shaq and Kobe bickered publicly about who is the best player on the team. Rider and Grant have yet to make a difference, and coach Phil Jackson is sitting there looking in his empty bag of Zen Master tricks for something that will get this team to play together. The Lakers are losing to the worst teams in the NBA and squeaking by the good ones.

In Portland, the Blazers are hot. Kemp and Davis are almost non-factors because Rasheed Wallace, Damon Stoudamire and Bonzi Wells have turned their game up another level from last year. But can they keep it going through the playoffs and make it to the finals?

Halfway through the season, some of the Blazers are playing better than expected, while others are struggling. The following is a report card of how I think the Blazers are doing at this point in the season.

Steve Smith - C+

Smitty is doing better now that he is coming off the bench. It's good because I was getting tired of the "Oh he's just fatigued from playing in the Olympics," excuse. The fact is, Smith is a streaky player. When he's on, he can't miss. But when he's off, he can be cold for a while. Hopefully Steve will get his shot back before the playoffs. We need him to win.



Scottie Pippen - A

Pippen's stats may be down and he has been out with an injury, but he does all the things necessary to win that don't show up on the stat sheet. During games, you'll see him working the referees, communicating with players as well as diving for loose balls, playing tough "D" and calling plays. Scottie is the coach on the floor, the glue that holds this team together. Without him, the Blazers would be struggling.



Rasheed Wallace - A+

If Sheed was an all-star last year, then he must be a super-star this year. He's accepted his role as the "go-to" guy down the stretch, a role he seemed to struggle with last year. All facets of his game have

improved and he is arguably the best power forward in the NBA.

Dale Davis - B-

Double D does what he is supposed to do - rebound and defend. I was hoping he would have more of an impact on the team. He has to work on free throws and find a better way to defend Shaq.



Damon Stoudamire - A+

Wow, Damon is finally living up to his nickname, "Mighty Mouse." All of his numbers are up from last year. He is the second leading scorer on the team and manages to average 3.8 rebound and 5.8 assists per game, and remember, he is less than six feet tall.



Arvydas Sabonis - C+

I have always liked Sabonis. The occasional Blazer fan might not recognize what an asset he is to the team. He causes team problems with his size; he rebounds and passes like a point guard and has a great outside shot. However, this year, age and injury are catching up with him. He hasn't made a three-pointer all year and I've noticed more turnovers than usual. We need him to stay healthy when we face big front lines in the playoffs.

Stacey Augmon - B

Augmon is a proven starter on other teams. Known mostly for his suffocating defense, he has shown he can also score this year.

Greg Anthony - B

Greg is performing well when he is called on. Despite coming back from ankle surgery in the off season, he is playing great defense. He has been working hard on recovering and is back to 100%.

Shawn Kemp - F-

When he tries to take the ball to the hoop, he looks like a freight train that just derailed! The Blazers need to do him like they did Derrick Coleman in Charlotte - put him on the injured reserve until he loses 50 lbs.



Bonzi Wells - B

Wells is a much-improved player this year. He's doing everything better than last year. The reason he gave him a minus is because I wish he would play with more emotion.

Coming up...

Thursday Jan 25, 5 p.m.
Blazers vs. Pacers
On NBC

Saturday Jan 27 2:30 p.m.
Blazers vs. Timberwolves
On NBC

Women go one and one at home

ELENA BORYSKA

Staff Writer

The Clackamas women's basketball team got a split out of the two home games they played last week.

Their first game, which was played on Wednesday, was against Umpqua Community College. The game was close until the middle of the fourth quarter. That's when Umpqua pulled away.

"We played pretty well for 35-36 minutes," commented Head Coach Jim Martineau. "We just let it slip away."

The final score of the game was 78-87. Mercedes Juarez scored 27 of Clackamas' 78 points. Amanda Lee

scored 13.

"Umpqua is a good team," said Martineau. "In the end we made a couple of mistakes which cost us the game."

After the tough loss on Wednesday, the Cougars came back on Saturday to play South West Oregon Community College (SWOCC). From the way both teams were playing, it looked like SWOCC was going to go home with an easy win. But Clackamas never gave up. Even when they were down by 16 with 8 1/2 minutes to go in the game, the Cougars still played hard. With the help of some steals and big plays down the stretch, the Cougars were able to turn the game around.

"We didn't play exceptionally well the majority of the game," Coach Martineau said. "But the girls picked it up and made a game of it."

Down by one with only a few seconds left in the game, Kathryn Kettles made a jumper to put Clackamas ahead for good.

"This was a big win for us," Martineau said.

Mercedes Juarez had another good offensive game with 24 points. Kayla Steen contributed with 17 points and nine assists. Kathryn Kettles finished with 14 points, including the game-winning jump shot. With that win, the Cougars are now 3-1 in league play and 14-5 overall.

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