

Blazers find their spark plus

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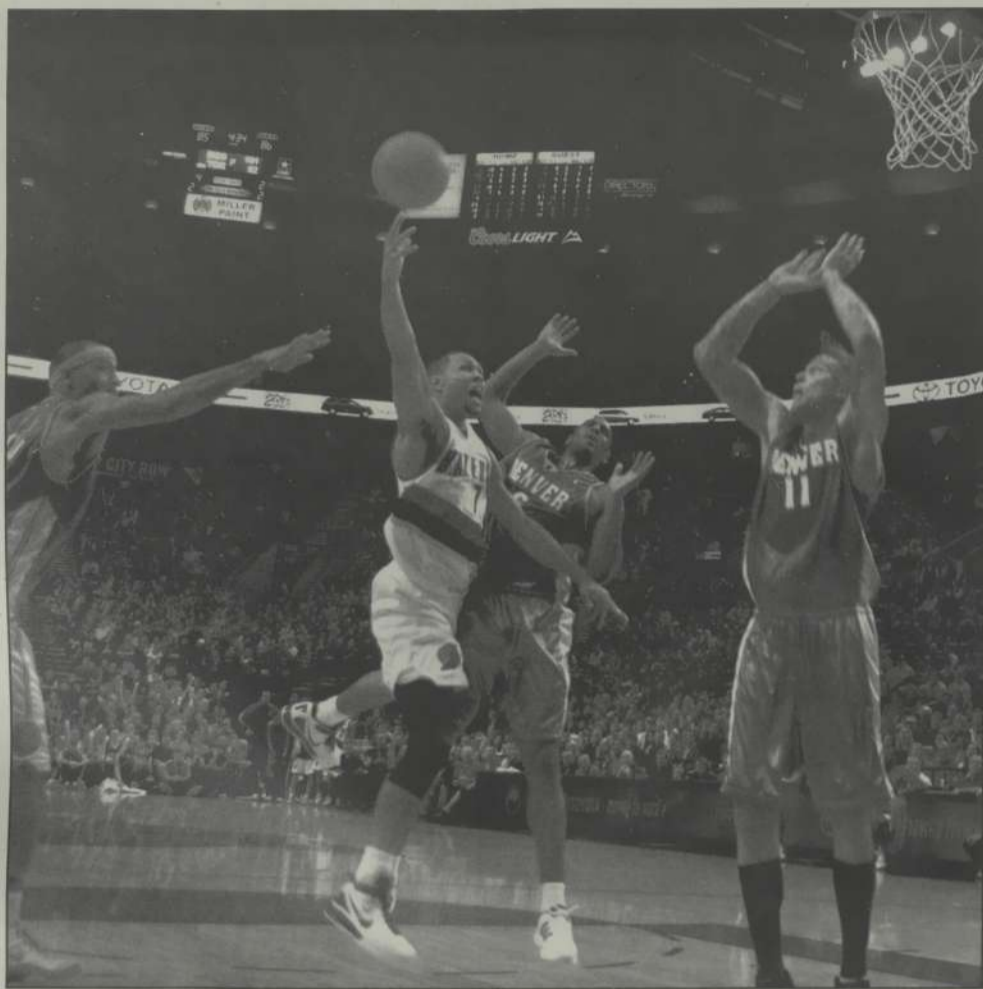
The Blazers currently sit at 4-3, coming out of an early slump in their first games which had fans and critics confused about what had happened to the high expectations that came with the season.

After the Blazers were out-run and outplayed the first five games, coach Nate McMillan decided to tinker with the starting lineup. He took small forward Martell Webster out and ran a three guard lineup of free agent pickups Andre Miller, Steve Blake and of course, Brandon Roy.

In the two weeks before, the team seemed lost in their new digs. The offense was stagnant and it wasn't a team effort in scoring or defense. Roy had 42 points and LaMarcus Aldridge had 27 points, but it was all for naught in a 111-107 loss to the same Houston Rockets team that they had handled well on opening night at the Rose Garden.

Even so, they were going into Oklahoma City the very next night to play a young, up and coming team that was ready to play. However, luckily for the Blazers, Oklahoma City star Kevin Durant had an incredibly off night, shooting 3-21, and the Blazers ran out of the city with an 83-74 victory over a team that had very high confidence.

Just when you thought it would turn around, the Atlanta Hawks came to Portland and exposed holes all over our defense and offense. Hot shooting by the Hawks and more fastbreak points than you can shake a stick at led to the demise of the Blazers,



Blazers guard Brandon Roy drives to the basket for a layup over the Nuggets Chris 'Birdman' Andersen, Aaron Affalo and Kenyon Martin on Oct. 18. Roy averages 21.9 points per game.

who suffered their second loss at home, a feat not accomplished last season until the middle of December.

The team had three days to think about what had transpired in the first five games. It was a shocking start to a promising

season. It was then that McMillan decided to jump-start the offense with the three guard lineup.

Friday night against the San Antonio Spurs was the Blazers' first run at a team with this new starting crew. They responded by dazzling fans with a 29-14 first quarter in which the team finally got out, spaced the floor and ran the fastbreak the way they should have all along. The quarter was capped by a buzzer-beating slam dunk by Martell Webster off of a Rudy Fernandez miss. The way the quarter went had us in raves about what was finally going on.

It was then we figured out what was wrong in the beginning. All last year, the team ran through Roy at point. While he is not a point guard by position, he plays the role that LeBron James once played in Cleveland and Hedo Turkoglu in Orlando. A calming presence to start the offense. Roy's been with the team since 2006, he knows what coach McMillan wants. When Blake is on the floor, it also provides a sense of knowledge. Blake and Roy on the court together last year was wonderful harmony. However, this season it didn't start out as well as it was supposed to.

The problem with Blake is his athleticism and size. He has been frequently beaten by the other 29 guards in the league since the time he came onto the court. Yes, he's gotten considerably better, but his ceiling was being reached. That's when Andre Miller was signed. Like the old saying goes, if you can't beat 'em, join 'em. The Blazers had constantly been beaten by teams led by Miller.

While Miller was going to be a long term leader for the team, he didn't have the keys

to the Blazers offense of his lack of knowledge. Therefore, Blake was running the point, with playing with the second told to play uptempo ball. Miller was played with ers sparingly, but the seemed lost.

Then, Friday night, the offense. He didn't need tions from coach, became turned on his thinking stopped thinking. Things flowing for the cagey he played outstanding on Spurs guards Tony Parker, George Hill, and while he could not be seen in score, it was clear through fact of fastbreak points was a 12-2 advantage. Blazers, exactly what McMillan was looking for.

Late in the game, the of the Blazers bus fell. Spurs started shooting better. Portland did not play it as in the first half. They got within three. However, the Blazers freeflowing clicking, Blake found himself with a clutch three point the ball was put back into hands late to seal a 96-84. It was a huge win for a team seemed confused and three days before.

The basic plan for the is first to throw the ball post early in the game, Greg Oden and Aldridge from there. The plan late game however, seemed different than last season. Not completely clear on what with the basketball, beating it into the hoop. Last and in the three seasons Roy was the focal point last six minutes of the game worked, as Roy was fourth league for points in the quarter.

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The key for the Blazers season? Execution. Defense. Free-flowing offense. With the new three guard lineup of Miller, Blake and Roy, it can happen.

Miller's presence Sunday against the Minnesota Timberwolves was exactly the team needed. In the first the Blazers took advantage inexperienced Wolves and began a shootout that long been needed for the Blazers. In a 116-93 win, the Blazers basically whatever they want and Miller had 21 points on the offense in a way which once again, exactly what McMillan wanted.

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