



Larry Wright, No. 23, prepares to drive on Portland's Jim Paxson in the Blazers' 109-99 victory over the Washington Bullets. (Photo: Jimmy Robinson)

Larry Wright: The rocky road to stardom

by Ulysses Tucker, Jr.

From a grass basketball court with a makeshift backboard attached to a telephone pole in Monroe, Louisiana, lightning quick Larry Wright of the National Basketball Association's Washington Bullets has come a long way.

"I'll never forget where I came from," said Wright. "When I go home, it can get kind of depressing sometimes."

"I see the fella's that I played ball with all my life, most of them better than I ever was. But most of them never even finished high school. Some of them don't even have jobs."

Wright started his basketball career in the fifth grade. He was a skinning kid then, just as he is now -- 6-foot-2 and 170 pounds. Larry was one of nine kids -- seven brothers and two sisters.

As a youngster, he always played against older competition. In the sixth grade, Larry and his friends always challenged the seventh and eighth graders of the local schools. In the backyard, it was one on one punishment from an older brother.

Wright's heroes as a youngster were the great Bill Russell, "The Big O", and Jerry West. "I never thought about the money," he says now. "When I was a kid, all I wanted to

do was to play on television after watching those guys."

Wright entered Richwood High School under his guardian angel Hershell West, who was the basketball coach. "Actually," Wright said, "I dropped out of school. I was frustrated by a lot of things. I saw how hard my mother was working and thought I might be able to help."

"Then I got hooked up with the wrong individuals. There I was, hanging out on the corners with the olders guys. The funny thing is that's where I wanted to be."

Wright continued, "I'd probably still be there if West hadn't screwed my head on the right way. He told me that basketball could do some good things for me, and that the worst thing that could happen is that I'd get a college degree."

That next semester Larry received all As and Bs. School never came easy. "If I see something hard for me to learn, I accept that as a challenge. I've never been taught to lose, not on a basketball court and not in school, either."

Wright went on to become a stand-out player at Richwood High. His team won the state championship when he was a junior. He was a member of one of the fastest backcourts in the state's history. Sammy White, former rookie of the year

with the Minnesota Vikings, was the other half.

Because of earlier academic problems at Richwood High, Wright was not eligible to play during his senior year. Again Coach West came to the youngster's rescue.

West, a former basketball star at Grambling, called an old teammate by the name of Bob Piper, who as the head basketball coach at Western High School in Washington, D.C. to see if he could play up there. He could, so Wright moved to the nation's capital and Piper listed himself as the uncle on the transfer papers.

Wright became an instant hit in the city by leading his team to the city championships and he earned All-Metropolitan honors. With the help of Willis Reed, Bob Piper, and Coach West, Wright decided to accept a scholarship back in his home state where he would attend Grambling.

After leading Grambling to three successful seasons and becoming one of the top scorers in the school's history, Wright made up his mind to leave school as a "hardship case."

The Washington Bullets drafted him in the first round in 1976, but he plans to finish up his degree requirements in the future. In three years Wright has scored 1,931 points for an 8.5 average, and has dished out over 790 points going into the 1979-1980 season.

Wright's best NBA game came against Indiana in October of 1977 when he fired in 42 points. During the same year, Washington won the NBA crown over Seattle.

"That was one of the highlights of my young career," he said, "and then we turned around the next year and were back again. But Seattle got us this time, who knows what will



Sports Talk

by Ron Sykes
Sports editor

Don't feel sorry for Tampa Bay, but show a little joy for the Rams. After appearing and being eliminated four times in five years the Rams have finally made it to the top by defeating a young Tampa team 9-0 for the NFC championship.

Tampa's inexperience showed in their second year quarterback Doug Williams. Williams had a terrible time, completing only two passes before leaving late in the third quarter with an arm injury, diagnosed as a pulled muscle. Vince Ferragamo, the young Ram Quarterback who was starting because of injury to Pat Haden, had a strong performance completing five straight passes during one stretch setting up the Rams' third and final field goal. Williams, on the other side, did appear a little shaky, and that should be expected. At times Doug seemed to be trying to throw the ball through his receivers instead of to them. He's possessed with a Springfield rifle for an arm and perhaps therein lies part of his problem. When he learns, and he will, to take some off of his passes -- then he will begin to enjoy better stats.

It wasn't the controversial touchdown called against Houston that caused the Oilers to lose Sunday's AFC championship to Pittsburgh. It was simply too much team that led to the Oilers' demise. Pittsburgh is

happen this year."

More than he could do the next night when his team lost to the Blazers 109-99 in a come-from-behind victory in which Wright played less than ten minutes and scored one bucket.

"Since we got Jimmy Clemmons, we've been going to a more set up offense," he said. "I'm more suited for a running game. Look at Kevin Porter. He's the running type also, but he hasn't been getting much playing time either. So, we have to be patient and wait until it's our time to perform," he said.

What's your advice to young athletes?

"Don't put all your apples in one basket. That's what I'd tell them because that's what people told me," he said. "And you know something? They were all right. If you get an education, you'll lead a full, happy life."

"I know what the odds are. I know how lucky I am because there's a lot of guys better than I am not playing basketball in this league."

"My dream came true, but I was one in a few thousand -- maybe even more than that. The kids better know that, because a lot of them are going to be disappointed if they don't deal with reality," he said seriously.

simply awesome. Oh sure, you've heard that before, but what other phrase could describe them better? From end to end and tackle to tackle they're tough. And if anyone thinks the Rams, who depend heavily on their ground game, will defeat Pittsburgh... whose defense gives up ground to enemy runners about as often as Ayatollah Khomeini gives interviews with U.S. officials.

Wide receivers? There's none in professional football that can match the gifted Lynn Swann and John Stallworth, the tandem who glides and slides making circus catches for Terry Bradshaw and the Pittsburgh Steelers. Some have put the knock on Tampa's Doug Williams for throwing too high at times. Well now, wouldn't the story be different if he had receivers like Swann and Stallworth? You bet.

Now if the Steelers defense could limit Houston's premier running back Earl Campbell to just 15 yds. rushing. Then what can Wendell Tyler expect to do against so vaunted a defense as that of Pittsburgh? Ferragamo will be in for a long, long afternoon in Pasadena.

Who's the best collegiate guard on the West Coast? Darwin Cook, says Pilot Coach Jack Avina. Ralph Miller would quickly name his own Ray Blume, who has seemingly surpassed teammate Mark Radford. So really it depends mainly on who you ask. Cook can do it all... pass,

shoot and play the all-important "D." Blume has certainly emerged. Radford was ahead during the Freshman year and for some strange reason has seemingly put his offensive talents on hold. Mark seems content to play a defensive role in Miller's system of role playing. Of the three best guards on the Coast it is believed that Radford would make the strongest pro prospect. Ask Boston's Dave Cowens.

OSU downed both UCLA and USC last weekend. So now maybe the bay area coaches will believe that the conference champion will perhaps this season hail from the frigid north. The seventh-ranked Beavers will head for sunny Arizona this weekend and should emerge unscathed.

And is Jack Ramsey finally realizing that the man from tiny Wisconsin-Parkside, Abdul Jeelani, can play this game of basketball?

It is my belief that Abdul should be used pretty much in the same manner as Seattle's Fred Brown. On offense Abdul can light 'em up. And does play more than adequate defense. I repeat.

75,000 fans greeting their team after a loss? Definitely shows that Houston does have fan support. Good fans. Everyone loves a winner... takes a good fan to show up as a loser. Hip, hip for Houston. Still can't believe Campbell was held to just 17 yards in 15 carries.

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