

NBA

Nurkic wants Blazers to channel Pistons of days past

By ANNE M. PETERSON
Associated Press

PORTLAND — In the loaded Western Conference where the Warriors rule, center Jusuf Nurkic suggested the Portland Trail Blazers can be the Bad Boys.

Think of the Detroit Pistons of days past.

“All we can do is put all we can together and be Bad Boys,” the 7-footer known as the Bosnian Beast said. “I mean, we are Bad Boys. When you come to Portland you know you’re not going to have wins easy.”

Nurkic came to the Blazers in a trade last February and quickly developed chemistry with his teammates. He averaged 15.2 points, 10.4 rebounds and 1.9 blocks in 20 games with the Blazers, who were 14-5 with him in the starting lineup.

His season was cut short by a non-displaced right leg fibular fracture. Now fully healed, Nurkic is again embracing his role with the Blazers. He dropped 34 pounds this summer in an effort to be quicker and more agile.

Portland finished last season at 41-41 before being eliminated by Golden State in the opening round of the playoffs. But a late-season surge after Nurkic’s arrival was encouraging.

Portland didn’t make a lot of changes in the offseason. The team remains anchored by the backcourt duo of Damian Lillard and CJ McCollum. Lillard finished last season with a career-best average



AP Photo/Steve Yeater

Portland Trail Blazers center Jusuf Nurkic (27) drives past Sacramento Kings defender Willie Cauley-Stein (00) during the first half of an NBA preseason basketball game in Sacramento, Calif., on Monday.

of 27 points per game, along with 4.8 rebounds and 5.9 assists. McCollum finished the season with a career-best 23 points per game.

Nurkic believes the key to the Blazers’ success this season is defense.

“Our defense was trash, to be honest, before,” he said. “We’re going to be better. When I came it was better and we’re going to keep improving that. It’s simple: If you want to win, you need to play defense.”

And he’s correct, last season Portland struggled at times defensively. Although the D improved after Nurkic arrived, the Blazers finished 25th in the league for average points allowed.

Here are some other things to watch for with the Blazers:

PEAK PORTLAND: Lillard revealed that he’s trying out a vegan diet, an effort that’s got him down to about 190 pounds — close to his rookie weight. The idea — much like it was with Nurkic’s weight loss — is to be a little lighter on his feet.

There’s just one problem. Wendy’s. Oh, and Five Guys. Lillard passes both of them on his way home. But the benefits outweighed the drawbacks, he said.

“Not only did I feel lighter moving around the court, but when I got winded and I got tired, it wasn’t the same. I felt stronger. I felt good on the court. It might have its issues as far as recovery once we start really getting into the season, and I’ll address that,” he said. “But it’s truly made a difference.”

LOOKING AT LEONARD: Meyers Leonard knows he didn’t do well last season so he rededicated himself to his craft over the summer, working out in Los Angeles with respected NBA trainer Drew Hanlen. Nukic’s arrival takes some of the pressure off the 7-foot-1 Leonard as he enters his sixth season with the Blazers, but he still must prove he’s a solid reserve.

“At the end of the day he’s going to have to do it on the court,” Blazers President of Basketball Operations

Neil Olshey said. “Because at some point — it is still about development — but it’s about production. I think Meyers knows that and his commitment in the offseason has put him in a position where he’s ready to compete.”

IMPRESSIVE ROOKIES: Both of Portland’s rookies have been drawing praise in the preseason. Portland acquired forwards Zach Collins out of Gonzaga and Caleb Swanigan out of Purdue on draft night.

Swanigan, the former Big Ten Player of the Year last season as a sophomore, was named to the NBA Summer League First Team after averaging 14.9 points and 10.4 rebounds through the first seven games.

LEARNING CURVE: For two seasons in a row, the Blazers have had second-half rallies that helped put them in the postseason. But coach Terry Stotts acknowledges that perhaps Portland missed out on the lesson the first time. “I think from my perspective last year is that we forgot how hard it is to do what we did in the second half of the season,” he said.

JERSEY PATCH: This is the first season the league will allow teams to display sponsor patches on the left shoulder of their uniforms. For example, the Cleveland Cavaliers will feature a Goodyear logo on their uniforms. But the Blazers have yet to strike an agreement. Team President and CEO Chris McGowan said Portland was very close to a deal but it fell through at the last minute.

FOOTBALL: Burns grew tired of volleyball, Kiele stopped playing soccer

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in what she could. “My mom has always pushed me to play sports,” she said. “And if I took a sport off she was like, ‘No, you’re playing.’”

That’s what led her to football.

She had basketball down and was one of the leaders on the softball team, but it was the fall sports season that threw the confident varsity star for a loop. She had tried volleyball but didn’t take a liking to it, and in her final year at Irrigon she knew she had to make a change.

Burns had played football before, during her eighth grade year at Armand Larive Middle School in Hermiston. She starts on Irrigon’s junior varsity team and has made appearances with the varsity squad, which are often later in the game.

Burns said football has brought something out in her that no other sport had.

“You have to be mentally into it because you’re always getting hit and sometimes you just want to take a break, but you can’t,” she said. “It’s just all mental, you have to be able to withstand the hits or hit somebody.”

When Burns made the decision to join the football squad before the start of her senior year, the possibility of being hit was what concerned her parents, coaches and extended family. Now that she is more than halfway through the season and has stayed healthy, their concerns have turned into excitement.

Hunter Kiele was practically an honorary member of the Pendleton Buckaroos football team before she was officially on the roster. Now, halfway through the season, head coach Erik Davis boasts that she is the best extra point kicker on the team, as Kiele is 6-for-8 on the season.

She had been spending the past two summers weightlifting with the boys, but it was never her intention to join the squad. She played soccer in the fall followed with basketball in the winter — her junior year athletic schedule was already set. But a bad experience with soccer left her looking for something else to fill her fall slate.

So, when a coach from the Bucks asked her “Hey can you kick a football?” her immediate response was: “I don’t know, I kick a soccer ball.”

Eventually, Kiele swapped cleats and went for



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Irrigon quarterback Jada Burns throws grounders during special teams practice recently at Irrigon High School.

the pigskin instead of the ball she was used to.

The transition wasn’t the easiest, and it took Kiele awhile to find her footing. After trial and error, she realized her kicks were more successful when she started closer to the ball.

Like Burns, the most difficult part of the game was the mental grip needed.

In Kiele’s case, it required her to be ready take the field

on a moments notice and put points on the board.

“I’m only in the game for what, five seconds, and I have to be on the whole time and I have to be ready whenever just to go in,” she said.

Kiele’s varsity experience in other sports gave her some confidence for handling high pressure moments. But what she wasn’t ready for was how she would feel running onto Pendleton’s Round-Up

Grounds for the first time.

“I have done it all [before with different teams], but out on the Round-Up Grounds, that was the coolest thing,” she said. “I have always been watching the games from the stands but getting to be a part of it was so cool. The environment, how everything works, and how we treat each other and everything it’s just so cool.”

The kicker has fit right

in with her Buckaroo teammates and has drawn praise from everybody, from the coaches to the captains.

“We were a little bit surprised she actually came out for the team, but we’re glad she came out,” senior captain Shaw Jerome said. “She’s always positive and always bring a smile to everyone’s face when she shows up to the field. She has a great attitude towards everything even if she doesn’t make the field goal she still walks off the field with her head up and she just works hard every day.”

The culture and camaraderie from both schools has made tackling this new sport easier for both girls. As their regular seasons wind down, their decision to join their respective football teams has impacted the lives of other young girls who one day hope to do the same.

“A lot of little girls have come up to me and just kind of latched onto me and I think it’s really cool that I can be a role model for them,” Kiele said. “That’s one of my favorites part about it, is (being) that.”

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