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Newest Mavericks Relish Opportunity to Win in Dallas

by Ken Turetzky

It's a sizable group of players and assistant coaches arranged in a semicircle around the three-point line on the practice court at American Airlines Center, listening to Assistant Coach Del Harris explain the basics of the Mavericks' zone defense.

For four of the guys, this is mostly new stuff. Raef LaFrentz, Nick Van Exel, Avery Johnson and Tariq Abdul-Wahad arrived in a late-season deal with the Denver Nuggets that the Mavs hope will propel them deep into this season's NBA Playoffs.

Nelson, the head coach and general manager who engineered the trade, closes the day's session with a warning: "We're going to have a test tomorrow. There will be 10 questions. And it won't be Phil Jackson's test; it's going to be about basketball. It'll cost you 10 dollars for each missed question, so bring some cash."

The swipe at the Zen philosophy of Los Angeles Lakers coach Jackson -- every team's nemesis in the drive to unseat the two-time defending champions -- illustrates Nellie's own dry humor, as well as the urgency of his mission to weave a new group of players into the system with just weeks to go before postseason play begins.

Johnson, now in his 14th NBA season, played for Nelson during 1993-94 at Golden State, and won a championship with the San Antonio Spurs in 1998-99. He's now played for all three Texas teams, including a brief stay with the Houston Rockets in 1991-92. Here, he's already a key backup at point guard behind Steve Nash and Van Exel. Just as important, Johnson immediately settled into an elder statesman role that allows him to sit back and dispense wisdom, often beginning with a hearty, "Well, fellas...."

"At this stage of my career, I have a lot to really be thankful for. There are not many guys who came out in 1988 who are still in the league and who are still vibrant and playing," Johnson says. "Can you believe (Mavs teammate) Danny Manning was the first pick in our draft?"

"But with all of the success that I've had in the league, man, I wouldn't have it any other way. Veterans who have been there, their experience really weighs heavy come playoff time. So I'm just gonna stay ready."

LaFrentz is the big man in the deal, a 6-foot-11 center-forward who ranks second in the league in blocked shots while shooting almost 40 percent from three-point range. He's a perimeter player who also attacks the offensive boards for follow-up dunks.

"There will be given situations where I'll have a post-up opportunity, but for the most part, they want me as a shooter. There are times when I can cut through the lane and possibly get a tip-in. I can definitely do that," LaFrentz says.

LaFrentz highlighted his skills on defense when he collected five blocks in Dallas' first meeting with his former team, a 116-110 overtime victory at Denver. He added another five-block performance in a recent victory over Portland. "That's a role I'll look forward to filling, guarding the low-post presence," he says.

How does he get his blocked shots? "I get 'em all different ways. I'll get 'em guarding my man, or help-side on dunk attempts. A lot of players want to challenge me, and that's how you'll see me get a lot of my blocked shots."

Dallas got a taste of Van Exel's explosive offensive skills earlier this season when he scored 27 points in the second half of a game at American Airlines Center, nearly rallying the Nuggets to victory. After a slow start with the



LaFrentz thunders in for a two-handed throwdown.
Glenn James/NBAE/Getty Images



Nick Van Exel looks to make a play against his former team.
 Glenn James/NBAE/Getty Images

Mavs, Van Exel has unleashed a versatile, inside-outside game. Defenses can only guess whether he'll knock down a three-pointer or drive to the basket for a left-handed runner or assist pass to an open teammate on the perimeter.

About Nash, Van Exel says, "We complement each other. When we're both out on the court, that makes our fast break better. We both penetrate and can find the open shooters. We know that Dirk (Nowitzki) can post up, we know that Mike (Finley) can post up. So if we want to go to the post, I'm sure those two guys can definitely draw double-teams."

That situation creates opportunities for three-point shooters. "It's just pass the ball to the guy who has the open shot. The offense creates a lot of drive-and-kick, a lot of penetrations. When you've got guys who know how to play basketball, it's easy to fit in with them. And these guys know how to play basketball."

Fans will note that Van Exel, a career 80 percent free throw shooter, takes his shots from three feet behind the line. About the style change, which he says he made "a couple of years ago," his explanation is brief: "It's a lot more comfortable."

Abdul-Wahad may be the sleeper in the deal, if only because as a native of Maisons-Alfort, France, he's the sixth foreign-born member on the Mavericks roster.

"The NBA is pretty much international now. It has really become a world game. And it's very fun to see that," Abdul-Wahad says. "A lot of the American people don't realize how famous the NBA is overseas, in Asia and Germany, France, Italy and Spain, because they actually have players in the league."

The Mavs recently placed Abdul-Wahad on injured reserve to rehabilitate a left knee that required arthroscopic surgery earlier this season. But he's a tough, aggressive defender who hopes to make an important contribution in Dallas. "Defense is a game of the mind, for people who like to do it. It's not given to everybody. So, that's the fun part of it.

"There are different aspects to defense," he says. "You have to be a good help defender. You have defenders who can't guard their man but can get in the passing lanes and can get steals. But defense is actually not just about getting steals. It's about staying with your man, knowing the assignment, helping the team defense and being able to get steals, blocks and charges."

Abdul-Wahad likes his new situation, on a talented team with unlimited opportunities in the playoffs.

"The Western Conference is extremely tough and the beautiful thing is I think this team has room for improvement. It got younger. Speaking for myself, I have a lot of work to do.

"I hope I'll be able to do something special. If not this year, next year. If not next year, the year after next. It's like a path you have to go through before you get to the Finals. We went to the second round last year. We'll try to go one step further this year and see what happens."



Abdul-Wahad warms up before a game.
 Glenn James/NBAE/Getty Images

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