

Jackson: Doing So Many Things So Well

By CHARLES SMITH
Contributor

When former Alabama State great Kevin Loder was waived by the Kansas City Kings earlier this season, the small Montgomery, Ala., school was left without a representative in the National Basketball Association.

That oversight, however, should be rectified this spring when Lewis Jackson graduates. Jackson, a silky-smooth 6-6 forward, is getting rave reviews from basketball people everywhere while going largely unnoticed by the general public.

Of course, Hornet Coach James Oliver -- who has sent 13 players to the professional ranks during coaching stints at ASU and Kentucky State -- is Jackson's biggest booster.

"Considering all aspects of the game, Lewis Jackson is the best player I've had a chance to coach," says Oliver. "I haven't had a better shot-blocker than Elmore Smith, a better shooter than Travis Grant or guys that played with more intensity than Kevin Loder and Billy Ray Bates. But as far as having all these qualities in one player and playing with the most consistency, Lewis is the best."

"You can count on Lewis for 24 to 30 points and six to 10 rebounds every

freshman year, Jackson was a first-team all-Southwestern Athletic Conference selection last season after averaging 23.9 points and 6.6 rebounds per game to lead Alabama State to a 22-6 record in the school's first year in Division I.

He was the 12th-best scorer in the nation last year and finished second in the SWAC scoring race behind national scoring leader Harry "Machine Gun" Kelly of Texas Southern. As testimony to his all-around skills, Jackson also finished second in the SWAC in field goal percentage (59.8) and third in free throw percentage (78.1) and steals (66).

This season Jackson, who has 1,735 career points to his credit and earlier this month surpassed Loder to move into sixth place on Alabama State's all-time scoring list, knows a professional career could be in the offing, but has maintained a healthy perspective on the fame and fortune professional basketball could bring him.

"There could be an NBA career in my future," understates Jackson, "but there are no assurances that I will stay in the NBA, even after being drafted."

"It would be great to have a career in the NBA, but the prospect of not making it doesn't frighten me. If the

"Basketball is like most things in life: The more you put into it, the more you will get out of it."

night regardless of who we're playing. And he will always play good defense and show leadership on the floor and off. His completeness is what makes Lewis Jackson such a special player."

Oliver, however, is not the only coach on the Jackson bandwagon. Arkansas' Eddie Sutton, who saw his club edge Alabama State 86-80 despite Jackson's 30 points, calls the Hornet star "a legitimate first-team all-American. There's no doubt he'll be a first-round draft choice."

"Jackson is a complete player -- a good shooter, passer and defender who has a great future ahead of him," said Ole Miss' Lee Hunt after watching Jackson score 27 points in a 87-75 loss to the Rebels last year in the opening round of the National Invitational Tournament.

Jackson's performance in that game earned him a spot on the NIT all-star squad that toured Australia last summer. The Wetumpka, Ala., native averaged 12.5 points and 5.1 rebounds on tour, while leading the all-star contingent in steals with 13.

Although his selection to the NIT all-star team reaped some long-overdue national recognition, Jackson already had established himself as one of the nation's finest collegiate players.

A starter since the fourth game of his

NBA doesn't work out, I have my degree in recreation to fall back on.

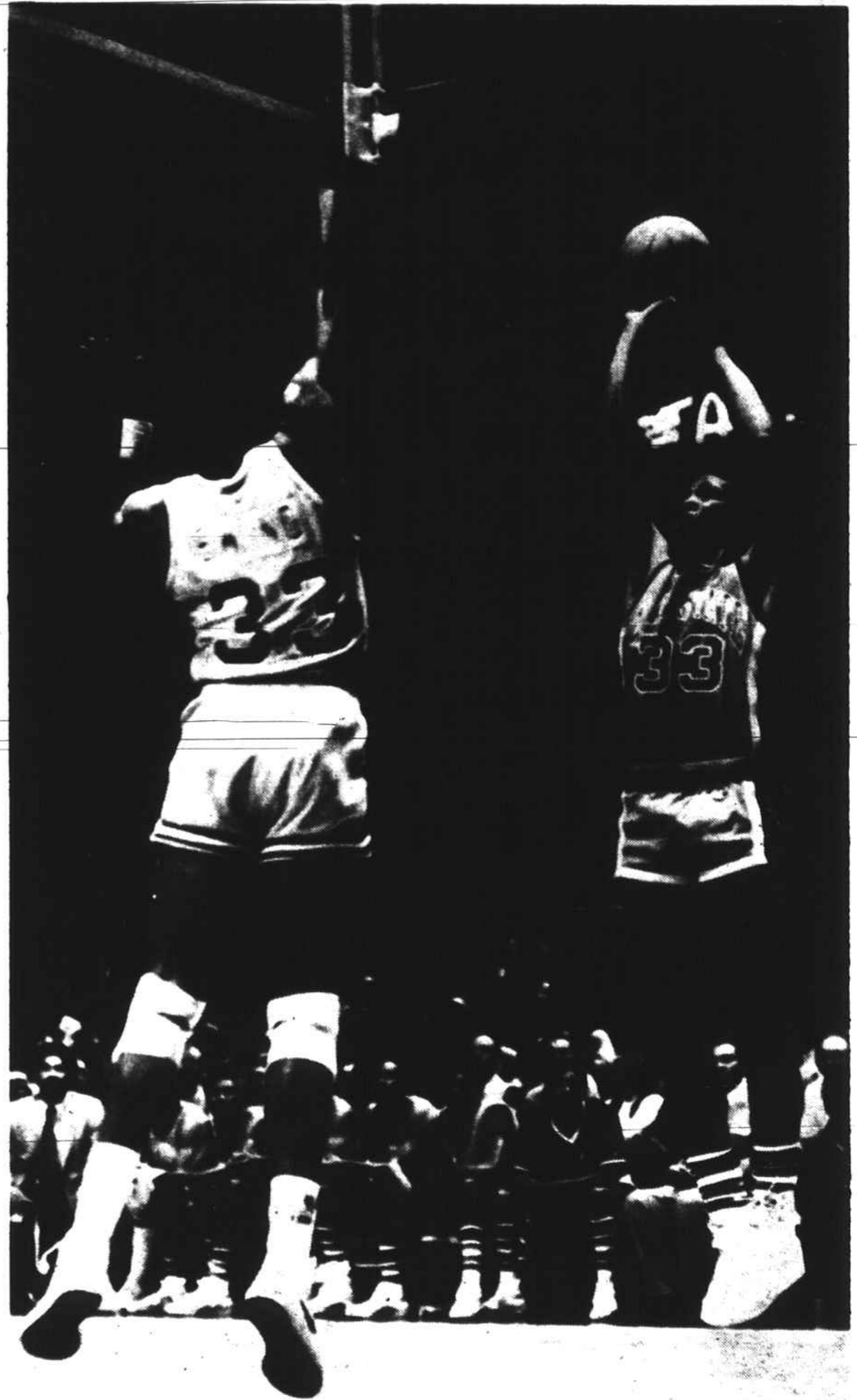
"Basketball has been really good to me," he says. "It has gotten me where I am today. When I first started playing basketball on the playgrounds of Wetumpka, I never thought it would take me this far."

"And I think basketball can take me even further if I'm willing to pay the price. Basketball is like most things in life: The more you put into it, the more you will get out of it."

After many years as a small-college power, Alabama State shocked the basketball world last year by winning a share of the SWAC regular-season title and participating in the NIT in the school's first year on the Division I level.

Oliver is quick to give much of the credit for the Hornets' unprecedented success to his star player.

"I don't know where our program would be without a caliber player like Lewis Jackson. He means an awful lot to us," says the 38-year-old coach. The Hornets are off to another vintage season. Oliver's club has rolled to a 13-4 record with two of its losses being a seven-point setback at Tulsa and a six-point defeat at Arkansas. The upstarts from Montgomery once again are eyeing post-season action.



Jackson against Georgetown: Measuring up with the very best.

"Our first team goal was to go undefeated in the regular season," notes Jackson. "We've already lost four games, so our goals now are to keep from losing any more games and to get into the NCAA tournament. We try to set our goals really high and then work really hard to reach them."

"If we're not fortunate enough to get a bid to the NCAA," Jackson says, "we would be delighted to go to the NIT and try to win it. We would be very disappointed, however, if we didn't get a bid to either tournament."

Jackson, whose outward modesty masks a quiet inner confidence, also has a few individual goals, but, like any good team player, makes it difficult to distinguish between the team's goals and his own.

"The most important individual goal for me is to lead this team as far as it can go in a post-season tournament," says the senior captain.

"I also want to be one of the top scorers and rebounders in the nation, and I would like to end my college career by being named an all-American."

If Alabama State were still playing on the small-college level, all-America honors would be a foregone conclusion, just as they were for Loder in 1981 when Jackson was a freshman.

The star of this year's Hornet squad knows the move to Division I may cost him the all-American status many feel he deserves, and he appears willing to accept that irony.

Please see page 8