

The NBA looks past Clark College's Ernest Lee

By CRAIG T. GREENLEE
Review Staff Writer

When you've led the nation in scoring for three consecutive seasons, it seems reasonable that your chances of being drafted by an NBA team are pretty decent.

It didn't quite turn out that way for Ernest Lee of Clark College. Of the 161 players selected in last month's NBA Draft, Lee's name never came up.

Strange? Extremely. Sounds like a vintage scene from "The Twilight Zone."

Lee ended his final college season with a career total of 3,298 points, vaulting him into fourth place on the NCAA's all-time scoring list. Only three players have scored more as collegians - Travis Grant, Kentucky State, 4,045 points; Bob Hopkins, Grambling State, 3,579 points; and Pete Maravich, LSU, 3,667 points.

Besides that, Lee is only third player in the history of college hoops to have led the nation in scoring for three straight years in any division. Oscar Robertson, University of Cincinnati, did it from 1958-60 and Maravich pulled it off from 1968-70. In late January, Lee reached the 3,000 points in a career milestone, making him the first player in 15 years to do so.

Realistically, nobody ever expected Lee to go in the first or second round of the draft. Guys from black colleges normally just don't go that high. Charles Oakley, formerly of Virginia Union, and now with the Chicago Bulls, was an exception. Nevertheless, you'd be hard pressed to find anyone who believed that Lee would be completely overlooked in the draft.

At 6'3", 210, Lee has a pro body. There's guard type quickness emblazoned in an NFL type physique. On the Clark campus, he's known as "the Horse."

Before the season began, Lee wasn't an obscure player on the college basketball scene. He was a pre-season All-America selection for Street & Smith's. There was also a picture of him in sports Illustrated's college basketball preview issue.

"I thought my stats were good enough for me to be drafted," Lee says. "I thought that the 3,000 points was at least good enough for me to go in the late rounds at least."

"Naturally I was a little disappointed. It seems that every year (in the draft), there's always someone that things just don't go right for. I guess I was the one this time, but I know that the scouts didn't really see my entire game."

Marty Blake, director of NBA scouting has seen Lee in action and feels that the Clark gunner had sufficient skills to warrant some serious looks by NBA teams. "He has some shooting skills and has deceptive quickness," Blake says. But Lee has some glaring deficiencies, according to Blake. "I've never seen him guard anybody and he doesn't play hard."

Lee is the first to confirm that his defense needs improving. But the lack of



Ernest Lee is out to prove that he belongs with the best in the NBA (photo by Craig T. Greenlee).

intensity label leaves him puzzled. "I don't know about that," Lee responds. "I thought I was pretty consistent most of the time all year."

Blake acknowledges that he believed Lee would be drafted, but adds that he will get a shot with some pro team as a free agent. Would he be surprised if he made an NBA roster? "Not at all," he replies.

Aside from ballhandling and defense, Blake feels the biggest question mark surrounding Lee is that scouts didn't see him as a guard during his career at Clark.

Guard is Lee's natural position. He played the point at John F. Kennedy High School in Sacramento, Calif. And was an All-American, averaging 25 points and 12 assists a game. Lee is still a legend in Sacramento, having been recruited by the University of Washington where he was destined to be a starter as a freshman.

Only grades prevented Lee from getting more of the media limelight in the PAC-10. But because of a mix-up in his grades, Lee was never able to play Division I ball. He left the Washington campus and eventually wound up in Atlanta two years later with his mother, Delia Lee.

Because Lee played small forward for Clark, he never got the opportunity to play his most suitable position. And these days,

you don't have any 6'3" forwards in the NBA. Given that situation, how does one project him as a pro? Certainly not as small forward, and certainly not as a guard when you've never seen him as a guard.

"The Horse" demonstrated what he's capable of at the guard slot in a Pizza Hut series that pitted Georgia's collegiate stars against a national team of collegians. Lee revved his game up, scoring 21 points as a point guard and copping MVP honors. And the competition? Only a number of "name" players that were drafted by NBA teams - Steve Alford (Indiana), Horace Grant (Clemson), Tommy Amaker (Duke), and Tyrone "Muggsy" Bogues (Wake Forest).

Lee's Pizza Hut performance confirmed his inner feelings. "I knew I could play with them. I ran the point most of the time and I felt a lot more comfortable. I didn't have to shoot a lot of jumpers because I was able to drive the lane at will. But I also know that I'll have to concentrate a lot more on defense."

Not being drafted could work in Lee's favor. As a free agent, he can choose his own team. That way, he can go to a team that needs his skills. Had he been drafted by a team that really had no room for him, Lee would have been wasting his time. With no-cut contracts and established play-

ers, it's difficult for any rookie to break in, especially if you play the same position as an established veteran player.

For example, there were sentiments around Atlanta that the Hawks should've drafted Lee as a "public relations gesture." Since Clark College is about a mile from the Omni where the Hawks play, the idea seemed feasible. But that's only until one looks at reality. The Hawks are stacked at guard and it will be very difficult for any new guard to make that team, especially since Atlanta is one of the up and coming franchises.

Several NBA teams have expressed an interest in "the Horse" from Clark, but the teams most often mentioned are the Phoenix Suns and the Sacramento Kings.

Lee isn't committing himself anywhere for the time being. There's a pro summer league in California that he'll be competing in "to show what I can do." The California league is no rest period. Some of the top pros have played in this league for this past few years including Byron Scott (Lakers), Isiah Johnson (Pistons) and Dominique Wilkins (Hawks). And there are more, so Lee will get ample chance and you get the feeling that more than a few eyes will be watching closely.

If "the Horse" chooses to attend a Sacramento rookie camp, it will be a true homecoming. As a matter of fact, it's even money as to which city is more upset over Lee not being drafted, Sacramento or Atlanta.

Whether Lee survives someone's NBA training camp cuts is yet to be answered. Still, he's determined that he will get his legitimate shot, even if it means playing in the CBA. It makes sense that the CBA could be the best place for Lee if he's cut by the NBA.

Lee senses that his career could take a path in that direction. Not that he doesn't have the talent to play with the pros. But he may need more than a few months to dust the moth balls off his guard play to get ready for big time roundball. In the CBA, nobody can question the leveled of competition and scouts can get a closer look at how he handles playing guard.

"I wouldn't mind playing in the CBA," Lee says matter of factly. "I'll be around some quality players day in and day out. I'll be handling the ball and making decisions at either guard spot."

All along, "the Horse" knew he'd have to get back to the guard position. He's honing his skills now for that task. He's preparing to accept the challenge for NBA rookie camp in October.

"I don't feel it's the end (of basketball) for me," he points out. "As for what happened in the draft, I'm not bitter. I know there's a lesson in this all of this somewhere. I'm still looking for that lesson."

Craig T. Greenlee is an Atlanta-based freelance writer who is a frequent contributor to the Review.