ALUMNI

Willis Reed is back as head coach in NBA

Grambling Alumnus Leading Net Charge

Willis Reed lifts his massive frame from a seat on the sidelines. His face full of anguish, he calls a timeout and walks out on the court to implore rookie Dennis Hobson to move his feet on defense. He gives Hobson an "I know you're making a good effort" pat on the back, then huddles his team around him to regroup.

Willis Reed is once again a head coach in the NBA, this time as the guiding hand of the New Jersey Nets.

Accepting the job in late February, Reed was all too aware that the Nets' situation wasn't ideal for a new head coach. The Grambling State graduate, former head coach and Hall of Fame player for the New York Knicks will hafe his hands full in turning the New Jersey franchise around.

The Nets had a 12-37 record when Reed took over, then proceeded to win five of nine games after his arrival. That stint of success proved to be short-lived. A combination of overworked starters and a depleted bench resulted in the team finishing the year at 19-63 and a guaranteed place in the Atlantic Division basement. New Jersey went through a 15-game losing streak before, winning their regular-season finale against the Milwaukee Bucks.

For sure, the Nets are a challenge. But Reed knows that the team isn't as terrible as the record indicates. New Jersey is certainly at least a cut above the Los Angeles Clippers, a team whose woeful ways ultimately led to the dismissal of then Head Coach Don' Chaney.

"I knew from the beginning that we didn't have a complete team," Reed said. "Improvement will be a gradual process. It won't happen overnight.

"We have a good nucleus to work with. It's just that after our first seven players, we're not very good. We're just missing people who can come in and give quality minutes and score. Right now, if certain guys don't have good nights, we don't get the job done."

Reed returned to pro coaching after rebuilding the program at Creighton University. However, he hungered for the pro game and took a pay cut to become an assistant with the Atlanta Hawks, staying for two years. Before the start of the '87-'88 season, he joined the Sacramento Kings as Bill Russell's assistant.

Very few NBA observers figured that Reed would remain an assistant indefinitely. When he took the job at Sacramento, it was rumored that Russell would only coach for two years, then move up to be general manager, clearing the way for Reed to take the reins. However, there was a slight change in the script that unfolded in early February.

Kings owner Gregg Lukenbill asked Russell to step down as head coach aanddn assume the GM's role. Jerry Reynolds, another Sacramento assistant, was named as Russell's successor. Reed feels that Reynolds would have gotten the position anyway.

He doesn't regret leaving Sacramento, and is happy to have the New Jersey job. Reed acknowledges that you only get so many head coaching opportunities in the league and in most cases, the situations aren't great ones.

But the one thing he has always thrived on as a coach and player is the process a team goes through to become a winner. He experienced that during his four years at Creighton, where he was 37-25 in his last two seasons. He expects the same thing with the Nets.

Photo by Craig T. Greenlee

Reed is happy to be a head coach again in the pros. He has his work cut out for him in rebuilding a sagging New Jersey franchise.

It's not that New Jersey is void of top talent. Plenty of NBA coaches wouldn't mind having a front line consisting of Buck Williams, Roy Hinson and Tim McCormick. But the team needs more. An assortment of players' personal problems and injuries has contributed heavily to the team's downward spiral.

For starters, star forward Orlando Woolridge, an 18-points-a-night guy, played in just 19 games before entering drug rehabilitation. Woolridge is Reed's first cousin. Evidently, the Nets management feels that their new head coach will have a positive impact on Woolridge's comeback.

Power forward Keith Lee has been out with injuries, and so has shooting guard Otis Birdson. Hobson, a top-round draft choice from Ohio State in last year's draft, is a talent, but needs time to adjust to the league.

With the Nets' low finish, they should get help in this year's draft -- another point guard, small forward and added bench strength.

New Jersey will need every bit of that to return to respectability.

In spite of the Nets' problems, Reed sees some promise for his troops next season. He doesn't view this job as an impossible-to-win type of situation.

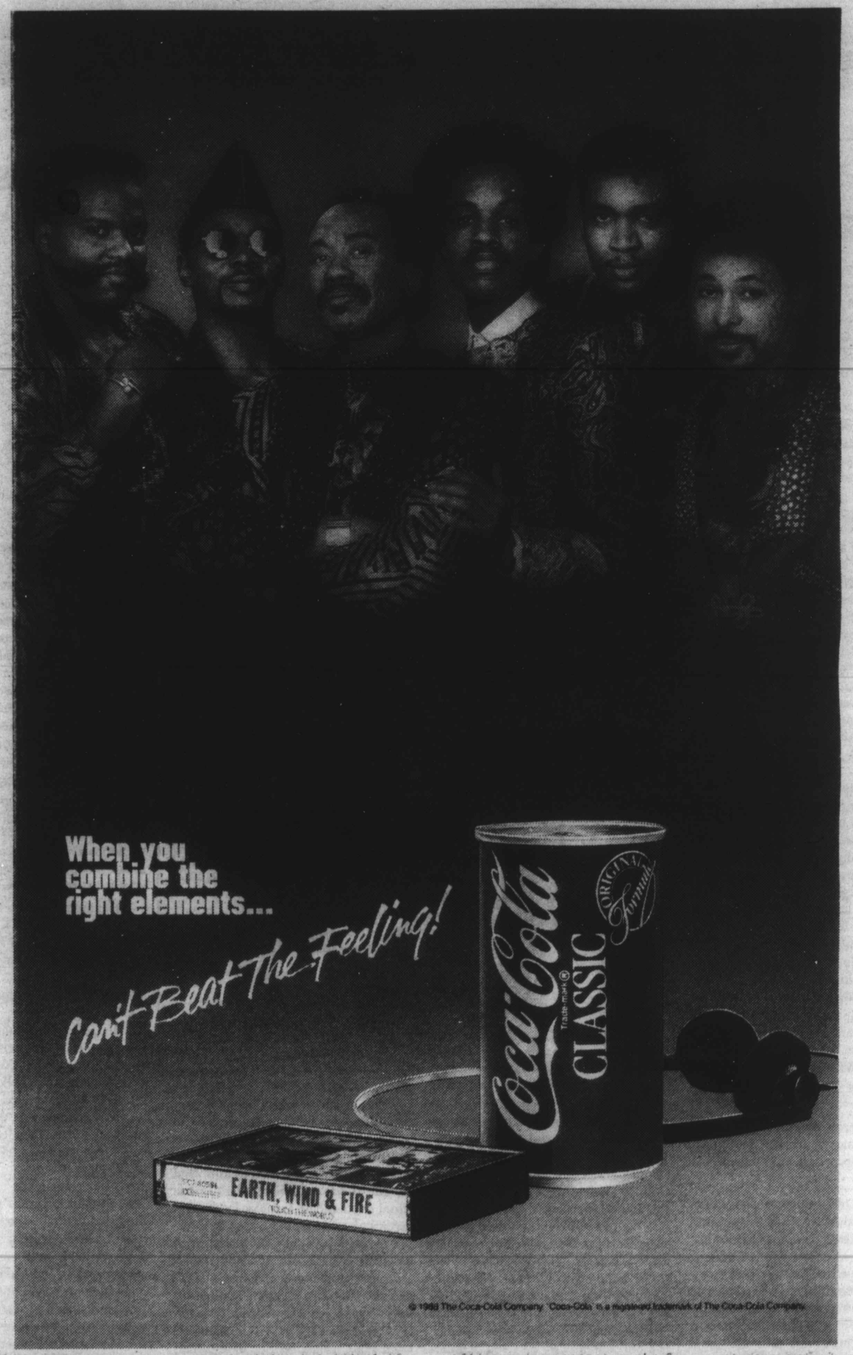
"We had some good moments," the coach said. "We got our big 'W' on the parquet floor (a 117-107 win over the Celtics at Boston Garden). We also had the Hawks and Boston sweating when we played them at home in the Meadowlands.

"However, in the final analysis, we didn't have enough left late in the season. Our first seven players had to play so hard every night, and it was easy to see that fatigue became a big factor in how well they played."

Reed brings several pluses with him as the new head man. Besides possessing game knowledge and being able to tutor his big people on play in the paint, he's a teacher and motivator. He has an innate talent for communicating with players, inspiring them to perform to their potential. The evidence was very clear with the Hawks. He was responsible for the development of power forward Kevin Willis and the rest of Atlanta's talented frontcourt players.

But that was another time, another place. Reed will have to roll up his sleeves to refashion the Nets. The draft is coming up, and the team has signing rights to super guard Michael Ray Richardson. "Sugar Ray" was banned from the league two years ago for drug use but could be reinstated by the start of next season. Reed adds that he will strongly consider bringing Richardson back to the NBA.

It's going to be an uphill climb, but Reed feels he's up to the task. It appears that the Nets will give him ample time to implement a system that produces winning results.

"I was glad to come in when I did (with 28 games left in the season)," Reed said. "I got to see some things and I have a good feel for the team and what needs to be done. I'm very optimistic."

– CRAIG T. GREENLEE