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Against The World

A Behind-the-Scenes Look at the
Portland Trail Blazers' Chase for the NBA Championship

Kerry Eggers
Dwight Jaynes

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*For Dad: I know you'd have been proud.
Kerry Eggers*

*For my bright and wonderful children, Willie and Beth, who are nearly
ready to take on the world. The world, by the way, has no chance.
Dwight Jaynes*

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Most of all, though, gratitude must be expressed to Trail Blazer fans everywhere, without whom this book would not have been possible. It's for those fans the ones who recognize that vivid, close-up looks at their heroes often reveal small blemishes that this book is written.

Introduction

There is a time and a place to celebrate, and for the Chicago Bulls and their legions of fans, this was New Year's Eve and Mardi Gras, rolled into one.

Up on the playing floor of venerable Chicago Stadium, the Bulls players were gleefully answering a collective curtain call after claiming their second straight National Basketball Association championship. Minutes before, Chicago had rallied from a 17-point deficit late in the third quarter to win Game 6 of the 1992 NBA Finals and polish off the Portland Trail Blazers with stunning deliverance.

Michael Jordan was toting the championship trophy courtside, then leading his teammates in a giant line dance on top of the scorer's table as their supporters screamed in delight. Pandemonium prevailed as photographers tripped over each other trying to capture the moment, fans pressed in to touch or give a back pat to their heroes while overmatched security guards and police struggled to maintain control of the situation.

Downstairs, in the area of the visitors' dressing room of the old, decrepit arena, there was a much different scene. A small number of media mostly television camera crews and reporters from Portland waited outside in the hall, speaking only in hushed tones. Bert Kolde, the Blazers' vice chairman and second in command to owner Paul Allen, managed a smile as he held 3 1/2-month-old daughter Sasha in his arms. Soon, a grim-faced Geoff Petrie, the team's senior vice president/operations, pushed his way inside the dressing room, and Allen followed.

Inside, a trash can lay horizontal, compliments of a fierce kick from Buck Williams. Clyde Drexler had taken a swat at it, too. Cold chills hit Drexler as he sat on the bench by his locker near the entrance. Sweat beads trickled down the arms and legs of his sinewy body. His sore right knee ached. He stared at the floor for the longest time, seeing nothing but the end of a long season, thinking about what had happened and what he could

have done to prevent it. "Torn," he said to himself. "I feel torn." Finally, he grabbed a towel, wiped himself off and started to undress.

The players sat mostly in silence for several minutes. Danny Ainge kicked at his locker in frustration. Jerome Kersey was almost inconsolable, and his sobs brought waves of teammates over to try to comfort him. Wayne Cooper, the respected veteran who had played his last game in a Trail Blazer uniform, also wept openly. He realized it might have been his final shot at being a member of a championship team. He felt a sense of loss, both from a personal standpoint and for the way he felt about the players sitting with him in the locker room. To lose a chance at a championship always hurts. To lose the way the Blazers had, by blowing a 15-point lead after three quarters, was worse. Much worse.

Rick Adelman entered the room. His sports jacket was removed, his necktie loosened, his white dress shirt untucked, his hair askew, his face drawn. This was one of the most difficult moments of his 3 1/2-year reign as coach of the Blazers. Expectations for his team had run high everywhere, but nowhere were they higher than with the 13 players and their coaches. Anything but a title would mean they had fallen short of their ultimate goal. Now, they had fallen short, and despair filled the room.

Adelman, almost nonpareil in the coaching field in terms of drawing the most from each of his players, was crestfallen, especially with the way the Blazers had lost blowing the big lead in the fourth quarter. But that wasn't the message he wanted to deliver on the evening of June 14, 20 minutes after John Paxson tossed the basketball high into the rafters as the final horn signaled the end of Game 6 and the long NBA season.

"We should have won this game tonight," Adelman began, his hoarse voice cracking with emotion, "but we didn't. And I know everyone in this room feels we should have won (a title) this season. You're disappointed, I'm disappointed, because it was there for us to win.

"I'm very proud of every one of you. You didn't quit tonight. We lost because we flat-out ran out of gas. I'm not happy about that, and it hurts. But you did not quit, and I'm proud of you for that. We won't be champions, but you guys have the

hearts of champions. You played your asses off. You had a great season a great three seasons, and nobody can take that away from you. Our dream is not dead yet. This team has a lot of character.

"This team has a great future. I don't think it has to be broken up. Right now, you don't believe it. Maybe next week, you won't believe it. But we're still the team that came out of the West two of the last three years. We're still the best in the West until somebody knocks us off. I think we'll be back here next year and maybe it will be our turn to win it."

Adelman worked the room, shaking hands with the players, thanking them for their contributions and trying to lift their spirits. In his three full seasons as Portland's head man, the Blazers had averaged nearly 60 regular-season wins, running up a win-loss record of 179-67. Twice they had reached the NBA Finals. They were working on back-to-back Pacific Division crowns.

They had climbed the mountain but had failed in their bid to plant their flag at the top. And there was really very little Adelman could say to soften the blow for his disconsolate players.

Moments later, the media entered and the Blazer regulars were forced to deal with the harsh realities of losing a championship series they had their chances to win.

Petrie looked on the scene with empathy. He had never played for a championship, but he had been an All-Star player and he knew the enormous commitment each of the players had made to make the Blazers a winner. He had great admiration for the group.

"I don't think most people realize what a toll it takes on guys both physically and mentally when you get as far as we've gone the last three years," Petrie said. He had watched Drexler and Kersey and Porter and Kevin Duckworth grow up as players, and as people, and wished they could have been rewarded with a championship. "Guys you used to know as bright-eyed kids look like guys coming back from eight years of war. They're grizzled, they're worn down physically, they have bumps and bruises but they continued to push themselves as hard and as far as they could."

"Maybe it just wasn't meant to be," said Buck Williams, the rock of a man who had been so instrumental in the Blazers going from also-rans to contenders in the 1989-90 season. There was a resigned tone to the familiar husky voice that would have fit so neatly into one of the old-time westerns. He was icing a sore foot that he wouldn't have played on under normal conditions. The veteran power forward was struggling to come to grips with the fact that shouting "We're No. 2" is nowhere near as fun as being fitted for a championship ring.

For the past two seasons, the Blazers had been among the best in basketball at rebounding, at 3-point shooting, at running the fast break. They had also been among the league leaders in technical fouls and run-ins with referees. What they had developed was a reputation as whiners, both with the officials, and with the league's media and fans. And appropriately, a string of calls early in the fourth quarter had played a big part in Chicago's surge and impending triumph in Game 6.

"We had four or five plays that really hurt us in the fourth quarter," Williams said. "This has not been a season of getting calls."

It was a familiar refrain among the Blazers. The way they saw it, respect was something they didn't get enough of.

"The officiating was not the way it should have been," center Kevin Duckworth said. "I seen other guys get calls, the nobodies, and they get calls over you. I hate to put the blame on one thing, but whew "

Kersey, distraught and uncommunicative, refused an interview with a couple of TV types, then grudgingly opened up to a newspaper beat reporter.

"I thought we played very well tonight the fourth quarter, too," said the Blazers' ultra-competitive small forward. "It's hard to play against eight people." To him, Hugh Evans, Mike Mathis and Ed Ruschmeyer might as well have been suited up in Chicago Bulls uniforms.

The Blazers' antagonism extended to the Bulls, too, who had fueled the "Blazers-are-a-dumb-team" theory by questioning their court intelligence after a win over the Blazers at midseason. In the finals, the Bulls and their eccentric coach, Phil Jackson, had lamented "giving away" Games 2 and 4, and had

made no secret they felt they should have won the series with a sweep, a source of irritation with the prideful Blazers.

"Chicago's players have a certain arrogance about them," Williams said. "They have a lot of confidence in themselves, and they said some things that didn't show too much respect for us.

"But you have to hand it to them. They're a fine team. They came out and showed the world they're the best team. They know how to get the big plays when they need them most."

Across the room, Terry Porter was being asked if this was a great Chicago Bulls team.

"I don't know if I'd call them a great team," Porter said. "They have one great player. Outside of Michael, they really have a bunch of role players."

If that seemed an ungracious response, and unfair to Jordan teammate Scottie Pippen, it reflected the mood of the Blazers. Without Jordan, the Portland Trail Blazers are champions of the world. That's like saying that without Julia Roberts, "Pretty Woman" is a bomb. Roberts starred in "Pretty Woman" and the movie was a smash. The Bulls have Michael Jordan, and they're the best team on the planet.

And soon Drexler was dressed and marching along the back halls of the arena toward the Bulls' dressing room, his everlasting devotion to political-correctness on automatic pilot. "I thought we had it, but they took it away from us," he said, managing a smile. "Give them credit." And then he was shaking hands with the Bulls players, his internment as the star of the second-best basketball team in the world not yet over.

The Blazers had blown this golden opportunity to cast away all the doubters who had questioned their heart and their intelligence and their mettle. Just before the playoffs began, Ainge distributed t-shirts to all his teammates with "Us Against the World" emblazoned across the front. It became a slogan that symbolized the feeling held by the Blazer players and management and fans alike.

The feeling was something like this: Portland is a small city located far from the major metropolitan areas. Because of it, the Blazers never get their just due, not from the national media or the television networks, or the schedule-makers or those prejudiced broadcasters or, especially, from the referees.

"Our philosophy was it was the 12 guys in this room, along with the coaches, against the rest of the world," Ainge said. It was a Three Musketeers approach One for All and All for One together with a little Martin Luther King: We Shall Overcome.

In the end, they couldn't overcome the Bulls. "In time, I still think they will look at this as a great experience," Petrie said. For now, they were facing the long, solemn bus ride through the celebrating streets of Chicago, and, the following day, a long flight home to Portland, where it had begun with such promise and hope some 8 1/2 months earlier.

1

"Walter Could Still Play, But He Screwed Up My Whole Game."

Right from the start, it was obvious that this would be a different kind of season.

The previous two years, training camp had been held at Salem's Willamette University, as Coach Rick Adelman took his team out of town in an effort to find solitude and a good working environment.

Evidently Adelman felt those things weren't necessary or important any longer. The 1991-92 Blazers gathered on October 4 on the campus of Lewis & Clark College, a small NAIA school tucked away on a wooded hill in the southwest corner of Portland. It was a much different base for the team but just one of many fundamental changes that greeted the Portland players at the onset of the season.

The college would continue to be the team's practice site throughout the season, ending a long-time run at the Mittleman Jewish Community Center. The team's uniforms would be modified "updated" as the marketing people would say even though traditional wisdom in sports dictates that you don't mess with success. The good guys were still wearing black, but the lettering was now all upper-case rather than the familiar lower case, and the team's pinwheel-like logo had been tilted. Home games would be moved, too from 7:30 to 7:00.

Walter Davis showed up without his trademark mustache. Danny Young, who had shaved his upper lip during the summer,

grew his mustache back by popular demand. Alaa Abdelnaby flashed his familiar smile through braces on his teeth. Change was everywhere.

"Everybody tells me I look 10 years younger," the 37-year-old Davis said on the eve of his 15th season of professional basketball. "Wish I felt like it inside."

Adelman came to camp with real on-court changes in mind for his team. The Blazers' six-game loss to the Los Angeles Lakers in the 1991 Western Conference finals had left the team, the coaches, and the entire state of Oregon in alternating stages of bewilderment and despair. Coaches and players recovered more quickly than fans, however. And Adelman had plans.

"We like a lot of things we did last year," he said. "But there are things we'd like to improve on."

Most of that improvement involved the team's offense. A running team that scores a lot of points off its transition game, the Blazers would often struggle in the slow-paced, halfcourt-oriented style that dominates the playoffs. In fact, the Lakers whipped Portland the previous spring by hustling all five players back on defense, shutting down the Blazers' fastbreak baskets and then clogging up the middle to handcuff Portland's slashers. The Blazers, with rare exception, didn't move the ball or their own bodies quickly enough to exploit the Lakers' strategy.

"We were inconsistent," Adelman said. "And it was our lack of patience sometimes. We have to pay more attention to how we execute, to have better spacing on the floor, things like that. We need to take it one or two more passes at times."

But the Blazers have basic faults that prohibit them from ever functioning as well in the halfcourt game as other teams. Their front court—Buck Williams, Kevin Duckworth, and Jerome Kersey—features solid offensive players, but only Duckworth is a dependable shooter from beyond 10 feet. None of the three is much of a passer.

The team's best outside shooter is Terry Porter, its point guard. Its next-best outside gunner is its center, Duckworth. And the team's best passer is probably Clyde Drexler, the off-guard. It's a team of paradoxes, a funky blend of players with marked strengths and weaknesses that seems to provide unique matchup problems for teams with less-versatile players.

But as is his wont, Adelman tends to spend more time

thinking about what his players can do, rather than lose sleep over what they can't.

He planned to introduce an important wrinkle into his team's halfcourt game, one that would help maximize the strengths of his guards. Adelman's plan often sent Drexler to the low post where he could score over smaller defenders and make slick passes to teammates when double-teamed and allowed Porter to spot up on the outside for jump shots.

But it wasn't Portland's starting guards in the spotlight as training camp opened. It was the third man, Danny Ainge, who was getting the attention.

The Blazers feared for a while that Ainge wouldn't even show up for the camp. He had said a few days beforehand that he was "considering" becoming a holdout. Ainge was playing the final season of a \$725,000-per-year contract that served as a monument to the idiocy of signing a long-term contract in the National Basketball Association. It was the final season of a contract that must have, to Ainge, seemed to be a life sentence a six-year deal that Ainge originally signed during his days with the Boston Celtics. A sweet deal at the time, perhaps, but inflation in the NBA had made Ainge's contract look embarrassing in an era when \$1 million was the league average and nearly \$2 million per year was the going rate for decent guards.

Ainge had asked the Blazers to extend his contract two or three seasons, with terms that would call for him to make an average of \$1.7 million annually. He would have settled for a little less. The Trail Blazers had extended contracts for Drexler, Williams, Kersey, and Cliff Robinson. But they didn't seem at all interested in offering Ainge any real money. Ainge, who said he was told when he arrived in a trade with Sacramento that his contract would be taken care of, felt rejected and betrayed. But the Blazers claimed they had promised no such thing.

"We did not promise to redo his contract," Geoff Petrie said. "We told him we would sit down and discuss it at season's end."

"That's just a matter of semantics," Ainge said. "To me, it's the same thing. They told me the same thing they told Buck, and they took care of Buck."

But Williams hadn't struggled the season prior to signing his contract extension. The fact of the matter is that Ainge dropped off to 44.8 percent shooting from the field in the playoffs

the previous year, averaging only eight points and fewer than 17 minutes per game. The coaches had lost confidence in his ability to play the point, and a swing guard who can't handle the ball against pressure isn't worth much.

On top of that, he may have offended some of his teammates the previous spring. Ainge was asked about the Blazers' demise against the Lakers, and the player responded by questioning the team's leadership.

"Verbally, Danny is his own worst enemy," Williams would say some months later. "He made some statements about (lack of) leadership on our team. I think it kind of betrayed some people. It separated him from some of the other players after that. I don't think it was wise of him to do that."

In general, though, Ainge's teammates liked him a lot. They just learned to take some of the things he said with a grain of salt.

"He's so opinionated," Porter said. "Every time we'd lose, he had about 80 different opinions about why it happened. But he's been through everything in this game and he still brings an excitement to it. We all used to ask him, 'You're not really 32, are you?' He was in his 30s, but he acted like he was 18 all the time. I wanted to see his birth certificate."

At 32, was Ainge still a player who could command \$1.7 million? The Blazers' braintrust, quite frankly, didn't think so and wasn't about to be bullied into offering such a deal. Ainge, by the same token, felt he deserved the same treatment others on the team got. After all, he was going to give the team two seasons of hard work at much less than market value. Why couldn't they give him the benefit of the doubt over the next two years?

"They haven't shown any sense of making this a priority," Ainge said before camp. "It frustrates me because I see players in the league who do a lot of negative things image-wise for their organization, who don't play hard every night, who don't play injured, who complain about contracts and hold out. These guys get rewarded."

"Maybe they think I've been a nice guy my whole career and they've got a fish. They're taking advantage of the situation instead of being fair. The dollars we're asking would make me the seventh-highest paid player on the club."

Ainge would report to camp on time, but bring his disgruntlement with him, where it would fester all season. In his mind, he had been screwed. And he is too much of a competitor

to take it lying down as the Trail Blazers would discover several months later.

Ainge felt Davis' arrival the previous season did a lot to change his role on the team.

"One of the biggest mistakes we made was trading Drazen Petrovic for Walter Davis," Ainge said long after Davis was gone. "I love Walter Davis, but we should have gotten future draft picks for (Petrovic). Walter could still play, but he screwed up my whole game. We were playing great the first half of last season, with me and Danny Young coming off the bench. But from the point we got Walter, everything changed. And everybody played worse. I didn't see why we needed another guy. If we could have gotten a backup center or a fast point guard, I could have seen it.

"The problem is, outside shooters are [needed] to complement Clyde's driving or Duck's inside game. You don't get outside shooters to set picks, double downs. Walter and I would come into the game and we'd run our 4-strong and have him come off a double pick and we'd be on the floor with Wayne Cooper and Mark Bryant. They didn't have to guard those guys. They'd switch out on me or Walter. When I'm handling the ball, the one shooter is taken out of it. The combinations weren't working. If you were to bring Walter in for Jerome Kersey and left Clyde and Terry out there with him, he might have been a great player for us. A lot of the time we came into the game together, and we're the same type of players.

"I think Rick felt pressure to play Walter when they got him and he tried to figure out a way. But he didn't have a training camp to figure it out."

But Adelman had Davis in camp this year and still couldn't find a way to make use of him. At one time in his brilliant career, Davis could defend small forwards, making it possible to use him at that position. But during the previous season, each time Adelman used Davis in Kersey's spot, the opposing team would immediately isolate him and capitalize on his defensive liabilities.

It appeared that Davis would probably just sit quietly, an expensive insurance policy against an injury to Drexler or Ainge. But as camp opened, it quickly became apparent that Davis would have trouble even making the team. There were hungry youngsters on hand and a front office very interested in keeping the team from aging all at once.

Out of USC and out of the draft, too, came free-agent point guard Robert Pack, a tightly wound 6-2 package of quickness and guts who seemed to thrive on the impossible dream of making the veteran-laden roster. In camp, too, was rookie Lamont Strothers, a second-round draft pick, and free-agent veteran Ennis Whatley, another roster longshot.

Adelman's wish was to stand back, give everyone an equal chance and then see who emerged. It made for an interesting camp as did the physical preparedness of the team's enigmatic center.

Duckworth came into camp at somewhere between 275 and 300 pounds. His actual weight is more of a secret than the number on George Bush's red telephone, but there was little question that Duckworth didn't spend the summer in serious training. Oh, but he did, he said. It's just that Duckworth didn't have time for a lot of physical exertion during the offseason, because he was "getting the mental part taken care of."

And on the first day of practice he hauled his body up and down the court well enough to be the leading scorer in the team's scrimmages. "Duck played very well," Adelman said. "He was very active."

That's one thing he wasn't during the summer active. The sensitive big man spent much of the summer back home in Chicago, inside the protective cocoon of his family and away from criticism he was getting in Portland for his play in the playoffs.

"I didn't want to have anything to do with the team or anybody," Duckworth said. "I just wanted to be alone. I got to the point where I really didn't care, and that's pretty bad. That's why I stayed in Chicago as long as I did. I felt more comfortable there, around my relatives and people who love me. Family always loves you, no matter what."

Adelman had spent a part of the first day of camp in a meeting with his players, during which he talked about their on-court demeanor. By the end of last season, Portland was known as much for its whine as its roses. Adelman himself made a big point of trying to alter his stance with officials who often thought of him as a crybaby.

But it was certainly a team-wide problem.

"We've talked a lot about that as a team," Drexler said after the meeting. "We have more experience on this team now, and

we have to realize you must leave the officials alone and concentrate on the game. I think you'll see us make tremendous strides in that area this season without losing our intensity."

Adelman came up with a unique approach to regulating behavior that he hoped would also increase unity. He suggested the team use a kangaroo court similar to the ones baseball teams have used for years to allow players to bring cases in a lighthearted way against each other for various transgressions. In a narrow balloting, Duckworth won a vote of his teammates over Wayne Cooper and Buck Williams for the key position of judge.

Fines were scheduled for missed free throws, technical fouls, and poor decorum on the playing floor. Then there were the usual amount of what Duckworth called "crazy rules."

"Passing gas in a concentrated area, like on the airplane or in an elevator," Duckworth said.

"We're just wondering how Duck plans to prove it," Ainge said.

"You're a very important man now, Duck," Robinson said. "You're the judge."

Alas, Duckworth was probably not the right choice. He was too lenient, too moody, and didn't really get into the spirit of the thing. As the season went on, it collapsed. Ainge, who during his professional baseball career had seen kangaroo courts work well, admitted he made a mistake when he nominated Duckworth for the position.

"I thought he'd be one of the most just judges," Ainge said. "It turns out he is very soft."

Later, when the season ended, Ainge looked back at the ill-fated idea and said, "We made Duck our judge and that was a horrible mistake."

At the same time he set up the court, Adelman also let the team know that he was going to tighten the reins a little.

"I don't think I'll change that dramatically," said Adelman, who would, indeed, do that very thing late in the season. "I am going to be demanding of the players. For two years, we've been finding out about ourselves. Now we know how we can play. I'm going to do what I have to do to make sure we improve in certain areas."

The emotional improvement actually went better than the basketball improvement. The team started sluggishly.

The first exhibition game seemed to set a tone for most of the first part of the season. Drexler stepped in and became a one-man rescue squad. He scored 11 points in the final 7 minutes and 15 seconds, including a game-winning three-point play with 9.6 seconds to go as the Blazers held off Indiana 97-94. The biggest news of the day was sad, though, as Porter was informed his father, Herman Porter, died of a heart attack in his sleep.

Porter returned to Milwaukee for the funeral and eventually missed about a week of training camp, something that would contribute to a decrease in his physical condition and an ensuing slow start. Porter's mother had passed away early in the 1989-90 season, and the death of his father seemed to be even more of a blow. His parents had been divorced, and Porter had lived with his father throughout his high school years. Since the passing of his mother, the father and son had become even closer.

"When you lose one parent, it makes you appreciate the other parent a little more," Porter said. "After my mother died, we got closer and closer. I'm so thankful that within the last year I was able to spend a lot more time with him. I got a lot of pictures of him and have a lot of moments, a lot of good times to think about. I just have to think he's in a better place now."

There was another subtle change that was picked up only by a few writers right from the first exhibition game. The coaching staff wasn't even aware that prior to the first game, it was Drexler not co-captains Kersey and Porter who met with officials in the customary mid-court captain's meeting.

There was no new election. There was no mandate.

"I just felt the inclination to become the captain," Drexler said when asked about it. "On our team, four or five guys are leaders, so it's not that big a deal. But I just thought I'd take a more active role. Since I've been here the longest, it's only fitting that I be the captain."

Kersey deferred to Drexler.

"He started going out there," Kersey said. "He's always had the leadership ability on this team. It doesn't matter to me."

Coaches in the NBA usually don't arrive at courtside until just before the national anthem, and Adelman admitted he didn't know anything about Drexler meeting with the officials until a reporter asked him about it. Adelman handled the situation in an interesting way. In the end it was the right way, too. A situation

that could have resulted in some hurt feelings just kind of went away.

"Rick came over to Terry and I and said Clyde wants to be captain all three of you guys can be captain," Kersey said. "I said, 'I'm not hung up on being captain. It's a nice honor, but if Clyde wants to be captain, that's great for the team.' Clyde can probably get away with a lot more stuff talking (with the referees) than me or Terry can."

Said Adelman: "I had discussions with Terry and Jerome about it. We had never had an election since I took over as coach. Terry and Jerome were elected prior to that, and I just kind of left it that way. Clyde said he wanted to be more vocal and talk to the officials, and I had no problem with that.

"But I was not going to take Terry and Jerome away from the captaincy. I just let the whole thing ride. I don't think it was a big deal. I kind of look at those four guys Terry, Clyde, Jerome, and Buck as the same, anyway. If I'm thinking about doing something, I always talk to all four of those guys, anyway.

But Drexler would blossom in the captain's role. As the season progressed, he would become more and more vocal in leadership situations something that seemed impossible just a couple of seasons earlier when Drexler showed no affinity for the captaincy.

Portland captured wins in three of its first four exhibition games, before dropping a 120-108 loss at Chicago to the defending world champion Bulls. Then with Kersey resting a sprained ankle that would become a season-long problem, and Williams visiting his critically ill mother in North Carolina, the Blazers were blown out 131-116 at Indiana.

Adelman feels that eight exhibition games are two too many and got his way this season. Portland returned home 3-3 in its non-counting schedule and faced the big decisions.

Pack had played so well in the exhibition games that it was obvious he'd earned a roster spot. The player personnel types Bucky Buckwalter and Brad Greenberg weren't about to let their only draft pick, Strothers, go. It was an early sign of problems to come, a split between the front office and the coaching staff, with Geoff Petrie in the middle.

David Kahn, who formerly covered the NBA for *The Oregonian* and who now works as a pro basketball expert for NBC,

recognized immediately that the Adelman/Petrie relationship would be threatened.

"A lot of the problems that haunted that organization in the down years seemed to resurface in the front office," Kahn said. "It wasn't so much the backstabbing, although there was some of that. It was more a case of certain people trying to take credit for everything that turned out positive and similar trying to distance themselves from everything that turned out to be negative. That's what I like so much about the Petrie/Adelman faction for the most part, they're stand-up guys who don't pride themselves on seeing their name in national columns, and they don't run away from errors in judgment."

There were other decisions, too. Whatley had shown enough savvy that the team didn't want to ship him out, either. And what about the veterans, Young and Davis, whose experience made them much more valuable than the youngsters to a team seeking a championship?

Then providence, or at least the NBA's version of it, played a hand. What is the injured list for, if not to use? The Blazers leaned on it heavily throughout the season, constantly putting off what once seemed an inevitable decision of which player to keep and which to send home.

Whatley suffered a chipped bone in an ankle and would be out of action for months. Strothers, showing amazing instincts for a rookie, came up with back spasms that he said began during the final exhibition game, and was placed on the injured list a place that would prove to be his home away from home during much of the season.

But that still left the team to decide between Davis and Pack, with youth being served. Unable to make a deal, Portland placed Davis on waivers prior to the opening of the regular season. After clearing the process, he would end up back in Denver, from whence he came.

It was an agonizing decision for the coaches, mostly because of their warm feelings for Davis, a class veteran with strength of character unbroken by his history of drug problems. To its credit, the coaching staff also had respect for Davis' long and productive NBA career and didn't feel it would be fair to ask him to spend what would probably be his final season in the league as a benchwarmer. Davis' credentials had earned him at least a chance to compete for playing time with another team.

"It was the hardest decision I've made since I've been here," Adelman said. "Walter is a class person and a real professional, and we hated to let him go. The guy we kept was going to be our 12th man. You don't expect a lot of minutes at that spot, unless an injury occurred. We were concerned that if Walter sat for a long time, his effectiveness would be hampered.

"Robert gives us a younger player with potential. He has grown from the first day we had him. We feel we can use his quickness in spots and can bring him along slowly."

But no one expected Pack to contribute as quickly as he did.

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