

Webster center of attention for Knicks

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NEW YORK — The race isn't always to the swift. Sometimes, the runnerup gets lucky and winds up the winner by default, which is how the New York Knicks finally cornered the kind of center they've been trying to sign for years in 7-foot-1 Marvin Webster.

He didn't come cheap, costing \$3 million over five years, but in the current market for basketball players, that's a relative bargain. At least the Knicks think so, and they're the ones shelling out the money.

Only three years in pro ball, the 26-year-old Webster already is regarded one of the better defensive centers in the NBA.

Last season, he was a workhorse for the Seattle SuperSonics, dominating the boards in the final championship series even though the Washington Bullets eventually won the title. At the conclusion of those playoffs, Webster became a free agent.

With Larry Fleisher, head of the NBA Players Association, representing him, Webster began listening to the offers. Ultimately, it came down to only two teams, the SuperSonics and the Knicks. Dollar-wise, their offers were comparable and that being the case, Webster had no difficulty making his decision.

He would stay with Seattle. Fleisher informed the Sonics of Webster's decision and last Thursday morning he called Mike Burke, President of the Knicks, and told him the same thing.

But then something happened.

The "understanding" Webster and Fleisher had, or thought they had, with the SuperSonics turned into a misunderstanding.

None of the parties involved cared to be specific about what caused the breach between Webster and the Sonics.

Fleisher turned back to the Knicks.

He called Burke back Friday and told him something had happened in the negotiations with the Sonics that Webster didn't like.

"Is your offer still on the table?" Fleisher asked Burke.

"Yes," said Burke.

Whereupon, Fleisher and the Knicks' attorneys negotiated all last weekend and Webster finally signed with the New Yorkers Monday night.

At Tuesday's news conference in Madison Square Garden, where Webster posed with Knicks' Coach Willis Reed, he said he decided to sign with the Knicks because "they offered the truth."

The Sonics, Webster elaborated

under questioning, had "reneged on a promise."

"My decision wasn't based on money at all, although I consider myself a good ballplayer and feel I should be paid that way," he added.

Among those present Tuesday were Sonny Werblin, president of Madison Square Garden; Knicks' General Manager Eddie Donovan and Knick players Bob McAdoo, Spencer Haywood, Jim McMillian and Toby Knight.

Werblin confirmed Webster would be the highest paid player on

the team and said the Knicks had not yet decided on the terms of compensation to Seattle. If the two teams can't agree on those terms, Larry O'Brien, the NBA Commissioner, will have to step in and decide.

"We asked the commissioner what he intended to do and he said he would decide after we signed Marvin," Werblin said. "I imagine the commissioner will be fair. I don't think he will break up the Knickerbockers."

Haywood, one of the Knicks' for-

wards, looked absolutely delighted with the addition of Webster, and admitted he was.

"I've played nine pro seasons, but never with a center," he said. "I mean a big center like Marvin. I need to be in a championship atmosphere and his coming here gives us that kind of atmosphere."

When Webster graduated from Morgan State, the Atlanta Hawks had the NBA draft rights to him as well as to David Thompson. The Hawks didn't have the money to sign either one and gave the Knicks

permission to talk with Webster, feeling they could possibly sign him to a contract.

Meanwhile, Webster had been negotiating with Denver, who then in the ABA.

"I remember calling him home at the time and he told me he was on his way to the airport in Denver," said Donovan.

The Knicks missed getting him the first time, but landed the second time around. They felt very good about it if they did it by default.

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