

Rockets miss Lucas

By GARY TAYLOR
United Press International
HOUSTON — The Houston Rockets loss of guard John Lucas as compensation for signing free agent Rick Barry is becoming the biggest pro sports blunder in this town since the Houston Astros traded Joe Morgan, Cesar Geronimo and others to the Cincinnati Reds.

"It's too early to evaluate the deal for Rick," Rockets president and general manager Ray Patterson said. But less than 24 hours before he spoke quietly about the Rockets' current backslide, the team's plush offices rang with the sounds of shouting matches between Patterson and third-year Rockets coach Tom Nissalke over a narrow loss.

"My relationship with Tom is the same as it's always been," Patterson said. "We've known each other for 30 years. Even though I know his strengths and he knows mine, we both start talking at the same time and the loudest one wins."

The Rockets are hurting without the ball-handling and play-making of Lucas, who was awarded to Golden State by the NBA commissioner as compensation for Houston sign-

ing the Warriors' Barry in June. This season Nissalke has tried four players at the lead-guard position.

"It's a matter of finding the right combination that can sustain us for 48 minutes," Patterson said.

The Rockets record after a mid-week loss to Washington was 0-12. The team of deadeye outside shooters Rudy Tomjanovich, Calvin Murphy, Mike Newlin and Barry has been awesome in a few of those games. But they show no consistency and no stability one-eighth of the way into the NBA season.

Barry has been moved from position to position. He is scoring 15.8 points per game, handing out an average of 7.3 assists and grabbing four rebounds a game. He was hampered

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by an ankle sprain in the first three weeks of the season.

Lucas is averaging 19.7 points, 10.9 assists and 3.3 rebounds.

Following a game in which he had hit one of nine field goals, Barry sat patiently on his locker room stool and answered questions until every reporter had left.

Patterson engineered the signing of Barry to a two-year, \$1 million contract after the former ABA and NBA all-star became disaffected with the Golden State management.

"We went for broke," Patterson said. "We wanted to eat our cake, too. And away we go, we thought. We didn't get that."

The criticism is tough for Patterson to take because in recent years he had NBA people watching his deft moves. He traded for hard-to-handle center Moses Malone and

has made him a star attraction. He drafted Lucas, an unheralded guard, as the first selection in the 1976 college draft and Lucas immediately took the Rockets to the NBA playoff semifinal round.

Before the start of this season, however, NBA Commissioner Lawrence O'Brien ruled that Houston must give Golden State starting guard Lucas as compensation.

"Yes, we knew when we went after Rick that we might have to give up John," Patterson said. "I'm not so sure that we would be a better ballclub right now with the front line we had before Rick."

Meanwhile, Lucas's Warriors had beaten Houston twice and were 13-11 at midweek.

"John is doing a good job for them," the club president said, "but I'll make you a little side bet that we win as many games as Golden State."

Barry says the compensation price was too high.

"Frankly, I was upset. Because of the difference in our ages John Lucas can give the Warriors 10 more years than I can. To have John Lucas passing the ball to me, that was one of the big reasons why I came to Houston," Barry said.

Lucas, 25, appears durable. Barry, 34, says he does not plan to play next season.

The big winner of the Rockets poor play may be the image of the baseball franchise in town. A reputation of front office mistakes under a previous management group remains attached to the Astros six years after the infamous trade in which they acquired Lee May, Tommy Helms and Jimmy Stewart for Morgan, Geronimo, Jack Billingham, Dennis Menke and Ed Armbrister. But that reputation could be pushed farther back in the file by the Rockets' possible mistake.

The shuffling caused by Lucas's loss has unsettled several Rockets veterans as well as the management personnel.

Immediately after the Rockets blew a 9-point fourth quarter lead Wednesday night, Patterson broke his personal rule of never going into team's locker room. In the past he has not wanted to seem to interfere with his coaches' decision.

In a loud voice, Patterson asked Nissalke to come to his office.

Thirty minutes later the two emerged to find a group of reporters waiting. Nissalke dodged questions. Patterson asked that reporters call back the next day.

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This is the seventh in a series of articles profiling Texas A&M's 1979 Southwest Conference basketball opponents.

FORT WORTH — The two teams that have the farthest to go to catch up with the improving image of Southwest Conference basketball are Rice and TCU.

Rice coach Mike Schuler says his team is on its way and so does TCU's Tim Sommerville.

"I'm glad last year is over," said the Horned Frogs coach. "We will be a much improved team from last year. There is no way to compare. I'm pleased with our freshman. They are exciting. We are going to build a program with freshman."

The TCU squad will have only two seniors and one junior on it and among the more highlight thought of first-year players at TCU are 6-4 Ed Wineinger of Indianapolis, 6-4 Mark Nickens of Washington D.C., and 6-6 John Mansbury of Indianapolis — all of whom started in a warmup game against a team from Finland.

Sophomore Larry Frevert and senior Steve Scales will be the other starters.

"Wineinger may be the best shooter this school has had in some years," said Sommerville. "Last year there were times when we reached our level and could not play any better (despite a 4-22 record). This year I think we can improve every game because we have talent to improve upon."

Sommerville plans to use this new

talent to do some different things at TCU.

"Instead of walking the ball down the floor we intend to run it," he said. "We walked it down the floor last year in hopes of cutting down on our mistakes and we turned it over 26 times a game."

"In the Finland game we had 16 turnovers."

"We looked basically for guards when we recruited and we are going to be 20,000 per cent better in our guard play."

Sommerville decided that his youthful club was going to have to have some confidence builders so he has managed to put such teams on his schedule as St. Edwards, Santa Fe, Trinity, Wayland Baptist, California-San Diego, Roosevelt and Robert Morris (twice).

"Our schedule is easier," Som-

merville admitted. "We've had some confidence I hope. It has worked on your mistakes when you've made 60 points behind."

"And when we win it makes us look like a better coach."

Sommerville said that the thing that he asked from his last year was to lead the league in grabbing loose balls and floor balls.

"We did that," he said. "We will do it again this year. We'll do it in that year we'll do it more."

"When we played Finland we had more people in the stands than did for most of our home games last year. And when they left they smile on their face."

TCU presently holds a record of 2-4. The Horned Frogs will play at Robert Morris on day.

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