

There's always hope

Former A&M basketball standout Smith shooting for NBA

by Frank L. Christlieb
Sports Editor
Two unsuccessful, short stints with professional basketball teams haven't caused Vernon

Smith to lose faith in his ability. And with his confidence currently at its highest level, the former Texas A&M basketball star has his eyes focused on cracking

the roster of a pro team next season.

"I do have confidence in myself, so I believe that by this time next year, I'll be on somebody's team either getting ready for the playoffs or going home," Smith said Sunday in a telephone interview from his Dallas home.

Smith, who completed his four years' eligibility after the Aggies' 15-12 season in 1980-81, finished his college career as the all-time Texas A&M leader in scoring and rebounding. During 119 games, the 6-8 forward had 1,778 points and 978 rebounds, while teammate Rynn Wright had the second-highest rebound total and the third-highest point total in the University's history.

During the NBA draft last June, the Philadelphia 76ers picked Smith during the second round. In fact, Smith was the last player to be picked in the round and the 46th player chosen overall.

After playing for the 76ers on the team's summer league squad in Philadelphia, Smith played through the exhibition season with the team, and appeared to have an excellent chance of surviving the final roster cuts. However, Philadelphia's final

cut sliced Smith from any chances of participating with what is now the second-best team in the NBA.

After playing for a semi-pro team in Mexico during November, Smith returned to Dallas. And his sole goal? Preparation

"I believed I had a real good chance up there in Philadelphia. I was the last player to get cut from the roster, but I didn't get down. I wanted to play, but it wasn't the end. I can always try it again." — Former Texas A&M basketball star Vernon Smith.

for upcoming summer professional league play in California.

But in February, Smith received a call from the NBA's Detroit Pistons, who were experiencing injury problems at the time.

"They told me they wanted me to sign me for 10 days (a trial contract)," Smith said. "They've invited me to play in their camp this fall. I didn't get a chance to play during the 10 days. I left Detroit and came home, and I knew that I would just wait for the summer league to start."

"Now, I'm working out every day and getting ready for the summer league."

That summer league competition, which annually includes NBA veterans George Gervin and Earvin "Magic" Johnson, begins in July.

Smith had been under a three-year contract with the 76ers before being cut in August. However, as a free agent, Smith is now available to any team that wants to pick him up.

Although he's been invited to the Detroit and Philadelphia training camps next season, Smith says he only wants to play well enough to impress the pro scouts and representatives during the summer session.

"If a team decides that they're interested in you, they can sign you," Smith said. "I think that'd be the best place to play in the summer, because you play against a lot of great pro players."

Smith had been invited to play in the Continental Basketball Association earlier in the year, but opted instead to wait for the California league. As for his stays with the 76ers and the Pistons, Smith said he learned a great deal about the world of professional basketball.

"I believed I had a real good chance up there in Philadelphia," Smith said. "I was the last player to get cut from the roster, but I didn't get down. I wanted to play, but it wasn't the end. I can always try it again."

But Smith, who talked to representatives from the Atlanta Hawks and San Diego Clippers last summer, said he's considered the possibility of not making an NBA squad next season. He said if he isn't able to play professional basketball in the United States, he may go overseas to Spain or Italy to play in a semi-pro league.

And Smith said that although had not received his recreation and parks degree upon leaving Texas A&M, he hopes to complete the two semesters of work he needs for that degree.



Vernon Smith, Texas A&M's all-time leading scorer and rebounder, shoots during the final year of his college career. Smith, who was cut by the Philadelphia 76ers before the current NBA season, says he thinks he has a good chance of making a pro squad next year after he completes his career here after 1981-82.

"I'd really like to go to school next summer, because this summer I'll be in California," Smith said. "Playing in the summer league is something I probably would do every summer if I was on somebody's club. I'll probably end up going to Philadelphia's camp. I think I might have a better chance there this year."

Smith said his basketball experiences during the past year have helped his play and have boosted his confidence.

"I think I've improved my

game," he said, "because I've been working on a lot of phases. Though the A&M team didn't do real well in their opener Friday, some of the things I learned worked on being able to beat their left more, and I think that's a lot better than what I had State, to say the least."

"You get to learn a lot of double-elimination tricks and knock-knocks on the way you play in pro ball. I couldn't have just picked them up and done it in a routine thing. You have to work for you."

Smith credits his career at Texas A&M for a lot of his ability.

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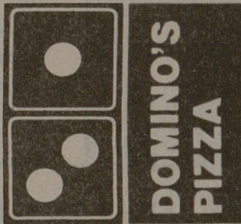
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