

New league brings old hero out of retirement

By Anthony Wilson
Sports Writer



Viewpoint

I remember lying awake in bed at night, transistor radio on the nightstand, listening to Gene Peterson's play-by-play calls, anticipating the moment when the Houston Rockets' offense needed a spark or some instant offense and Coach Del Harris would send in No. 23.

Peterson also seemed to favor sixth-man Calvin Murphy. Whenever the ball made its rounds around the perimeter and ended up in Murphy's hands, Peterson's voice bubbled over the airwaves with even more than its usual enthusiasm: "Paultz sets a pick for Murph on the right wing, Murphy takes the bounce pass from Dunleavy. He fakes the dribbles through the lane, stutters steps and puts up the baby hook. (Pause) It's GOOOOOOD!!!"

When Calvin Murphy retired from pro basketball in 1983, it was a solemn day indeed for all true Rocket fanatics. I remember Murphy even symbolically wore a black suit, shirt and tie to make the announcement. I think I grew up a little that day, because I lost my favorite childhood hero.

But Wednesday when I picked up the *Houston Chronicle* and read the sports page, it was a time to rejoice and reflect on some good memories

about Murphy that I hadn't thought about in a long time, because Murphy is back — it said so on page 4, section 3.

No, Murphy won't be back in the Summit wearing gold and red and blasting off with Akeem, World and the other Rockets. He'll be launching jumpers in Toronto where he'll be the player-coach of that city's International Basketball Association team.

The IBA is a newly formed 10-team league for basketball players who are 6-foot-4 or shorter. The 39-year-old Murphy was the first pick in the league's draft Tuesday.

Some may be skeptical of the wisdom of Murphy's decision to return to the court, but I for one am not. After all, when the 5-foot-9 Murphy entered the National Basketball Association as the Rockets second pick in the 1970 draft, critics said he was too small to play with the big boys,

even though he had set several NCAA scoring records at Niagara.

He finished his 14-year career 23rd on the NBA's all-time scoring list with 17,949 points. He made the NBA's All-Rookie team his first season and is the Rockets' all-time leader in scoring, assists, games, steals and minutes played. He is sixth in scoring average and second in free throw percentage.

In 1980-81 he set NBA records for free throw percentage in a season, .958, and consecutive free throws made with 78. His No. 23 was retired last year by the Rockets, something the team had done for only one other player.

Along the way, Murphy created a niche for the little man in basketball making it possible for current mighty mites such as Spud Webb, Muggsy Bogues, Michael Adams and Andre Turner.

Although he hasn't played professional basketball in four years, I doubt Murphy would return to playing if he wasn't sure he could perform at the level at which people were accustomed to seeing him play.

The reason Murphy's retirement was so hard for his fans to accept was that his physical skills had shown no signs of decline, even at the age of 35. He was still one of the best pure shooters to ever play and seemed to be as lightning quick as he ever was. One opponent compared guarding Murphy to trying to catch a fly with your bare hand.

And after enduring "the Caldwell (Jones) years," with his skills intact, Murphy should have been looking forward to playing with draft picks Ralph Sampson and Rodney McCray. The team's future looked stunningly bright, but Murphy said it was time for him to move on and let the younger guys have an opportunity at the big time.

Murphy is a proud man, fierce competitor and a fighter. No, not a fighter in the literal, pugilistic sense, although he has been known to go to fist city to engage in some fisticuffs when a bigger man tried to manhandle him just because he was smaller. Murphy never gave up or gave less than all he had to give, no matter what the score or situation was.

I remember watching one Rocket road game on television where Murphy and a 6-foot-8 player squared off for a jump ball. The crowd laughed at and jeered Murphy, but was silenced when Murphy won the tip over a man 11 inches taller.

Maybe I'm just a dreamer who can't let go of the past, but I believe Murphy can step in and provide some of his old magic for a new league. It sure would be sweet to lie in bed one night in the near future, listening to the radio and hear a rambunctious voice say, "Murphy bounces his man off one, two, three picks. Smith passes cross court to Murphy. He takes two quick dribbles and a lets a 19-footer fly. (Pause) It's GOOOOOOD!!!" Nothing but cotton for Murphy!

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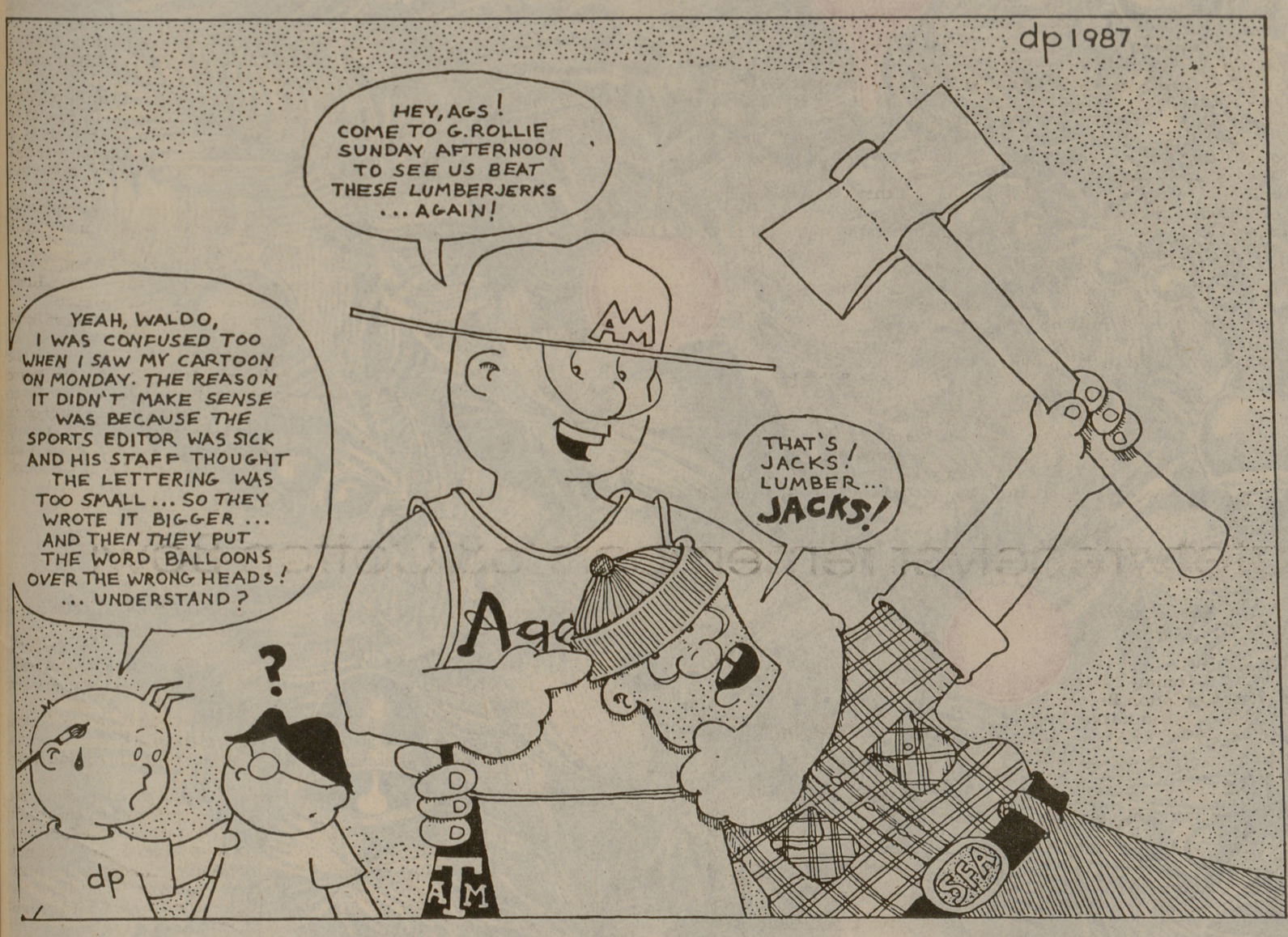
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Oilers ready to face playoff-bound Saints

HOUSTON (AP) — Houston Oiler Coach Jerry Glanville expects to be greeted in the Superdome Sunday by a capacity New Orleans Saints crowd booing the Oilers and cheering their playoff bound Saints.

And after Sunday's game, Glanville will cheer for the Saints too.

"I hope we kick their butts and then they win all the rest because nobody deserves it more than those people," Glanville said. "They never gave up."

After 20 years of frustration, the Saints are in the NFL playoffs with the first winning season ever.

At last, Saints fans have something to cheer about and Glanville already knows about being booed in the Superdome.

"Nobody can boo better," Glanville said admiringly. "They boo as good as Detroit and Chicago. That's part of the fun. I'm glad we're going over there."

Glanville recalled playing against the Saints when he was an assistant coach with the Atlanta Falcons.

"You come out at one end and have to walk across the field to get to your side," Glanville said. "They'd give you a standing boo when you walked across. It was

the greatest feeling. You knew you were in the NFL."

Glanville also praised the rebuilding work of second year head coach Jim Mora.

"It's not mirrors, it's not a fluke, it's no mystery, it's just good football," Glanville said. "When you watch the film, it's no mystery, they're the hottest team in football right now."

The Oilers will take a 7-5 record and playoff hopes into the game after a 33-18 victory over San Diego last week. The victory ended a two-game skid in which the Oilers suffered big game fever in losses to Cleveland and Indianapolis.

"I think we realized that we hurt ourselves in the Cleveland game by being too nervous and up tight," Glanville said.

"I think we realized last week that the only way we can play well is if we're relaxed and free-spirited."

Oiler quarterback Warren Moon thinks the team learned from the big-game jitters against the Browns.

"We can't go into this game realizing the importance of it," Moon said. "That may sound crazy but you have to approach it as a regular season game. If we can do that and not get caught up in the hype, we'll be OK."

Cards' game Sunday may be last in St. Louis

ST. LOUIS (AP) — Tickets and apathy were plentiful Thursday as the St. Louis Cardinals prepared for a game that may end a 28-year run in this city.

Busch Stadium could be one-third empty Sunday when the Cardinals play their final game in St. Louis this season — and possibly forever — against the New York Giants.

"There haven't been too many sales today," Cardinals ticket manager Steve Walsh said. "Not much is happening."

The Cardinals, who have a 5-7 record after winning nine games total over the last two seasons, have improved their on-field performance.

But with owner William V. Bidwill entertaining offers from several cities to move the NFL franchise and advising his players not to buy homes in St. Louis, fan fallout has been significant.

Only 11,795 showed up Oct. 11 for the replacement game against the New Orleans Saints, and many of them hooted at the hometown team. Only twice have the Cardinals drawn more than 30,000 this season.

A newspaper reporter from Baltimore, one of the cities angling to get the franchise, said Thursday he had been looking for diehard fans to talk to all week but couldn't find any.

The Cardinal players have been prepared for a move for a long time.

"I'm sure it will be an emotional game Sunday," quarterback Neil Lomax said.

"But I've learned through several years of experience to go with the flow, roll with the punches."

Not everybody is resigned to Bidwill moving the club, which has been in St. Louis since 1960.

Three years ago, when Bidwill first began complaining that 54,392-seat Busch Stadium was too small to be competitive in the NFL, businessman Ed Watkins founded "Keep The Birds In Their Nest."

Last week, Watkins and Jim Otis, a running back for the Cardinals in the 1970s, were behind a move that persuaded the team to buy 1,000 tickets for the Washington Redskins game and donate them to charity.

"The team's been here for 28 years and this might be the last one and that should be a compelling reason to show up," said Watkins, who has planned a postgame rally for the team and expects the players and coaches to attend.

"The experience itself could be a collector's item."

And because Bidwill said no on Thursday to representatives from Columbus, Ohio, and hasn't yet said "yes" to Baltimore, Phoenix, Ariz., or Memphis, Tenn., some fans are hopeful. But not nearly enough for a show of force on Sunday.

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