

Rockets hope to shed injuries, ready for first season with Yao

HOUSTON (AP) — The Houston Rockets have used the formula before.

In the 1990s, they won two NBA titles after building around Nigerian center Hakeem Olajuwon. This year, they'll begin building around another foreign center, 7-6 Yao Ming of China, the Rockets' No. 1 pick this year in the NBA draft.

The Rockets aren't expected to go straight to the top with Yao, who has a soft jumper but plenty to learn about fighting for rebounds with the likes of Shaquille O'Neal.

"The guy's only been here a week," said coach Rudy Tomjanovich. "Don't get me wrong. He's doing great, but he had two practices that were way up here. He leveled off to being a normal human being. You're going to have your ups and downs."

Yao has had little rest before his first season in the NBA. He played for the Chinese national team in the Asian Games then came directly to the United States.

He had two practices with the Rockets before playing in his first exhibition game against the San Antonio Spurs. The following night, he played at home for the first time against the Philadelphia 76ers.

Since then, he's been practicing and trying to absorb enough information to be able to start the season for Houston.

"It'll be the start of my NBA career," Yao said. "I hope the game gets here quickly."

The Rockets feature all-star guard Steve Francis and Yao, and Tomjanovich is excited about getting over the injuries that plagued the Rockets last year.

Glen Rice missed most of last season recover-

ing from knee surgery. Maurice Taylor was out last season recovering from Achilles' tendon surgery.

Taylor will miss the first five games serving a suspension for marijuana possession last season. Rice isn't full speed because of his knee, and Kenny Thomas has a fractured thumb.

"I just wish we were healthy," Tomjanovich said. "I can't get anxious. The good news is these aren't season-long things. I feel good about it when we get healthy and a young kid like Yao has a chance to be with us a while. Then, I'll have good positive feelings."

Shot-blocking forward Eddie Griffin is ready for his second season after an impressive rookie year. He had 134 blocks and was the first rookie to lead the Rockets in blocked shots since Olajuwon in 1984-85.

He was the first rookie in NBA history to average more than one blocked shot (1.84) and one 3-pointer made per game in a season.

"I definitely want to lead the league, that's one of my goals," Griffin said. "Blocked shots are the best moment, when you block somebody's shot, they get down a little bit."

In addition to Yao, the Rockets drafted Bostjan Nachbar of Slovenia in the first round.

Tomjanovich's pledge for the season has been to play better defense, and it's been a big emphasis throughout the preseason.

"Coach told us today he thought our defense was ahead of the offense and normally it's the other way around," Francis said. "I think that's (offense) the only thing we need to catch up on. We'll be ready. I know we'll be ready."



YAO MING

Braves' coach Yost returns to former team, named manager of Brewers

MILWAUKEE (AP) — Atlanta Braves coach Ned Yost was hired as manager of the Milwaukee Brewers on Tuesday, returning to the team where he was a backup catcher in the 1980s.

The 47-year-old Yost agreed to a two-year contract with a club option for 2005. Financial terms were not announced.

"Ned showed great determination for this opportunity," general manager Doug Melvin said in a statement. "He has enthusiasm for the organization and brings a great desire to help us to return to winning baseball."

Yost will replace the fired Jerry Royster, who was fired after the Brewers finished with a franchise-worst 56-106 record this season.

Oakland bench coach Ken Macha turned down an offer from the Brewers last week. The A's will introduce Macha as their new

manager Tuesday.

Melvin's other candidates included Brewers bench coach Cecil Cooper, Arizona Diamondbacks bench coach Bob Melvin (no relation) and New York Yankees third-base coach Willie Randolph.

Yost interviewed for a major league managerial job for the first time with the Brewers.

The 47-year-old Yost has been the Braves' third-base coach the last four seasons, a position he believes has groomed him to become a manager.

"I'm not sure I was ready four years ago because I'd never been tested," Yost said after interviewing with the Brewers earlier this month.

"I'd never been in situations that were pressure situations. But when you become a third-base coach for a championship-caliber team, it's almost like you

become a player. Your decisions have direct impact on a game, and you better make them correctly and you better make them quickly," he said.

Yost was a backup catcher on the 1982 Milwaukee team that won the AL pennant. He said he would love a chance to try to turn around the Brewers, who haven't been to the playoffs since losing to St. Louis in the '82 World Series.

"I'm not interested in any other job," Yost said after his interview. "I want to see this organization flourish again because I know how wonderful it is in this town when they can (win), and when they do. That's what gets me excited."

Yost batted .212 with 16 career homers over six major league seasons. His only experience as a manager was with Atlanta's Class-A affiliate from 1988-90.

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