

Sharing a Rookie's Downs and Ups

By JAMES RESTON Jr.

New York Times (1923-Current file); Mar 7, 1982;

ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2007) with Index (1851-1993)

pg. S2

Sharing a Rookie's Downs and Ups

By JAMES RESTON Jr.

FOR the last 11 months, along the way to an agonizing rookie season as a National Basketball Association fan, I spent a fair amount of time with Al Wood. Our relationship began before he left Chapel Hill last March to lead North Carolina to the Final Four of college basketball. I was at the Spectrum in Philadelphia, dazzled by his record-breaking performance of 39 points in the semifinal game, and there on the grotesque night of the final, feeling seedy and sullied, as the lives of President Reagan and James Brady hung in the balance.

Philadelphia was the beginning of our friendship. My ostensible reason for being there — and later at the draft in New York on June 10 (when Al was chosen fourth) and at the Atlanta Hawks' training camp in October and, most recently, at the San Diego Clippers games in New York last week — was to chronicle the bizarre rite of passage of a sensational college star to the professional ranks. He had been the third-leading scorer in North Carolina basketball history; he had never missed a game from injury in college, and many thought he was the best team leader the school ever had.

I saw his passage as metaphor, dramatizing the demands of an overheated commercial world for instant production. In the N.B.A., the point was cut to its garish extreme, where time was compressed to dog years, the professional's career spanning about four years generally instead of 40. What human was mature enough to bear the instant sea change that college stars, turning pro, experience?

Ostensibly, I was the chronicler of that process, but there were deep personal reasons for immersing myself in sport. I, too, had been living on the outer extremes, on that mad fringe, where sports stars always reside. For two and a half years, I had been obsessed with reconstructing the awful,

James Reston Jr. is the author of "Our Father Who Art in Hell" about the Rev. Jim Jones. His radio documentary, "Father Cares," which grew out of the book, won the duPont-Columbia University Award last month.

morbid and endlessly fascinating jungle of the Rev. Jim Jones. Last March, that difficult work was finally complete and a book near publication, and so I was turning to sport as therapy.

If Al Wood's story was about his loss of innocence, my attention to it was an effort to regain my own innocence. If he needed to become cunning and even jaundiced overnight at the dangers of professional sport, I set out to recapture, through sport, what was happy and competitive in my own nature.

He was a good subject. Bright and attractive, easygoing and witty, he had been perfectly groomed by his college coach, Dean Smith, not just for the first months of rookie hoopla, but for a solid 10-year career. He was schooled for humility at his 39-point performances, but also insulated against a time when (hard to imagine last summer) the sports press might label him "a major disappointment."

And he was a good subject for me. He hailed from the rural South I knew well — Gray, Ga. I had been living in rural North Carolina for 10 years.

When we traveled to Gray last fall, on the day before the Hawks training camp opened, Al would not admit to me that he had signed a \$2.45 million contract, by far the highest ever paid by the Hawks. The Atlanta papers were reporting the figure of \$1.8 million, and he was content to let me believe that, as if the lower figure was somehow less embarrassing.

Sensitive about press complaints about astronomical N.B.A. salaries and about possible strife among the Hawks over his "big bucks," he stressed the petty change in his pocket. It was all in the stratosphere to me, bearing no relation to earth reality.

When the chronicle was finished and published ("A Perilous Passage to Big-Time Basketball," *The New York Times Magazine*, Dec. 6, 1981), I sat back to enjoy my rookie season as an N.B.A. fan. My enthusiasm for the league was strictly vicarious; I would live through Al. I would glow at his success and share in his excitement.

But as the season got under way, the early reports were strange and confusing. The story was not proceeding the

way it was supposed to; it became more interesting and less predictable. The shoulder, which Al injured in the N.C.A.A. final, popped out again during the exhibition season, and it took the Hawks a considerable time to discover that their top pick was double-jointed in both shoulders.

Meanwhile, the club was pleasantly surprised at the early play of the veteran John Drew, who, the reports had it, Wood was acquired to replace, and at the play of their third-round pick, Rudy Macklin, whose salary was a fraction of Al's. Upon his return to active status, Al's playing time remained scant. As I searched the box scores, finding Al's name last with 2 or 4 points a game, I wondered what was going on. Why would the Hawks' management pay this graceful athlete so incredibly well, and then not work hard for a return on its investment? Al was given four minutes a game and expected "to star." When he did, it did not seem to matter. The better he played, the less playing time he got. And the press picked up the management line: Al Wood had lost his North Carolina shooting touch; his confidence was shattered, and he had become a "major disappointment."

For Al, it was time to shed the romance, and concentrate on his career. He would have been better off to have been drafted by any other club except Atlanta, he began to think, especially as his Olympic teammates and other first-round draftees were getting the instant recognition in the league that he had expected. But he remained intensely aware of his rookie status. His contempt for the "bad dudes" of the N.B.A. was great. He did not feel himself in a position yet to invoke a "play-me-or-trade-me" demand.

No one in the Hawks management offered any explanation, but Al had a pretty good notion.

The Atlanta Hawks, one of the poorer teams in the league, had concluded that they could get a very competent, if not star-studded performance, out of Macklin for a fraction of Al's cost. "I knew what was going on," he said last week. He was operating in the business world now.

From afar, I commiserated.

On Dec. 20, Al was traded to the Clippers for a guard, Freeman Williams,

who made a salary reportedly less than half of Al's.

Al's sense of rejection was acute, but short-lived. It was as if he had been dismissed from a job he had never been allowed to perform. He knew the move "would be great for my career." And it has been.

Last week over breakfast in New York, his serenity showed. With San Diego, he had become immediately important, the way it had always seemed predestined. It was the rookie's joy at being with a team that needed all the help it could get. His tenure began with 20 minutes playing time and soon moved to 30 minutes a game. He felt his timing and confidence surge back. At first, he averaged 15 points a game; then against Atlanta on Feb. 16, he had a "sweet" game-high 25 points. Two days later, he scored 26 against the Indiana Pacers. He had magically rediscovered his shooting touch. The stretch

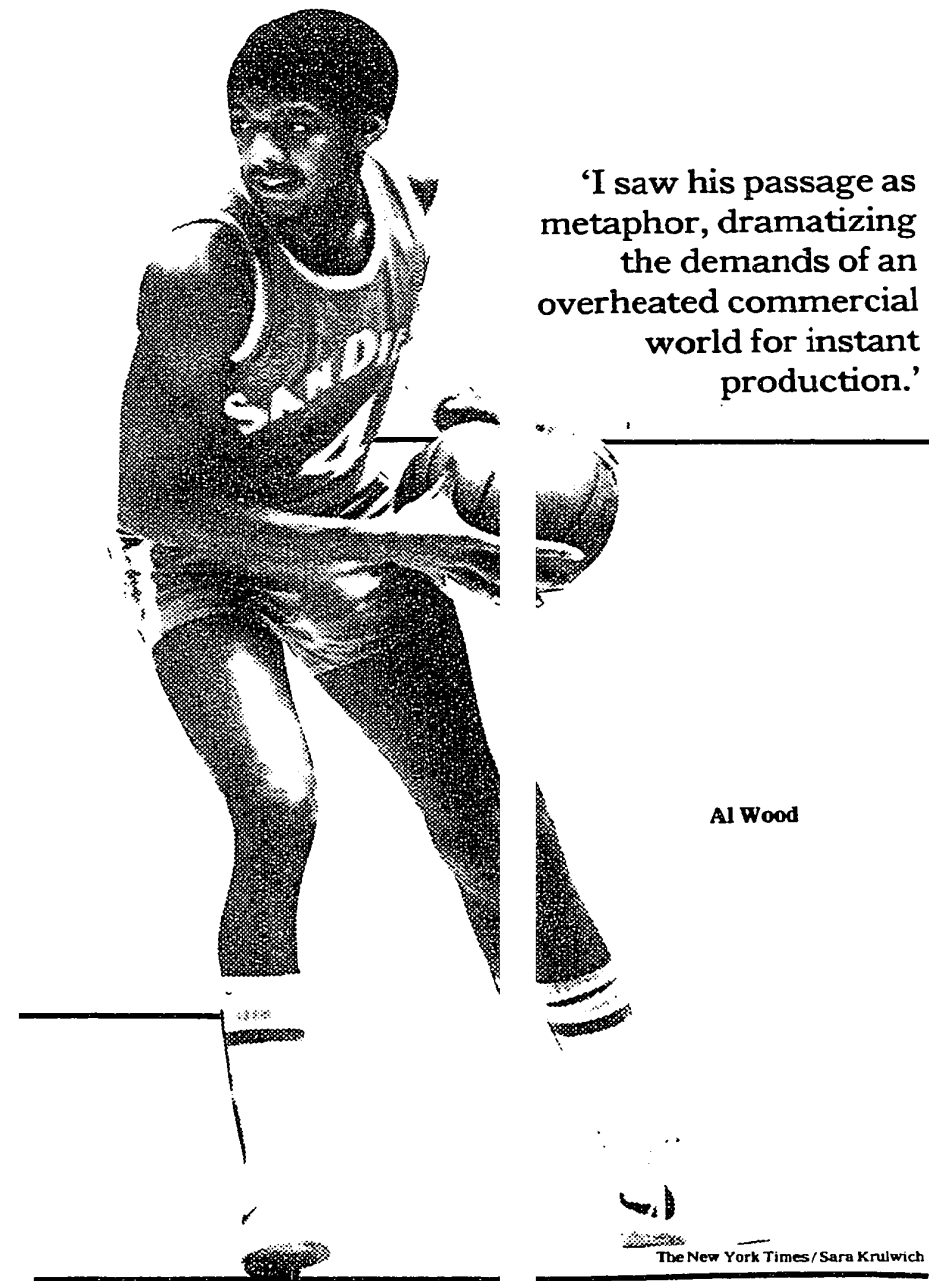
'Al's sense of rejection was acute, but short-lived. It was as if he had been dismissed from a job he had never been allowed to perform.'

did wonders for that fragile sensibility. He believed now that he could be not just another mediocre pro, but a superior one.

And I expect to have a much better season as a second-year fan.

It is a pity that Al will not join that elite club of North Carolina stars who seem to move so naturally to the top of their rookie class in the pros — Charlie Scott, Bob McAdoo, Bobby Jones, Walter Davis, and Phil Ford. Al might have been among them, but there are other considerations.

Along the way, I had talked about Al to Scott, the first black superstar of North Carolina basketball. Scott, who



Al Wood

The New York Times/Sara Krulwich

'I saw his passage as metaphor, dramatizing the demands of an overheated commercial world for instant production.'

played nine years as a pro and now is a shoe salesman, stresses longevity rather than the instant stardom that had been expected of him, too.

The basketball senior citizen at age 33, lamented: "Athletes are never allowed to mature as men."

Perhaps it will be different with Al

now. Perhaps he will become a speed reader of the process as he needs to be. At breakfast last week, I forgot to repeat the warning about quick success that a writer gave me 10 years ago, before my first novel was published:

"I wish you success, but not too much."