

## Home Town Hero

Luke Jackson Is the Real Deal; Next Stop Portland?

By Jim Pasero

How does legendary ESPN basketball TV commentator Dick Vitale, or DickieV as he's known on-air, feel about University of Oregon All-American forward Luke Jackson's potential? "Jackson is a player who can really do it all, baby. Scoring, rebounding and shooting the trifecta."

DickieV's website doesn't stop there. He's named Jackson to his 2003-2004 All-Rolls Royce First Team. (*Sporting News* magazine has also named Jackson to its first team All-American honors). That's good news for Jackson, especially since the last 25 members of Vitale's Rolls Royce team have been NBA Lottery picks. And with players leaving college early and with more than 50 international players now on NBA rosters, the competition to be an NBA lottery pick is fierce. But Luke Jackson of Creswell, Oregon (pop: 4,000), a town where his dad works as a sheet rock contractor and his mom as a secretary at the high school, is taking it all in stride.

Not since as far back as anyone can remember, half a century maybe, has a local kid made All-American status in basketball at the University of Oregon. Writes Bob Clark of the Eugene *Register-Guard*, three days before Luke Jackson would stand at the free throw line with no time on the clock and knock down winning free throws in his last PAC-10 conference game, against ... who else ... UCLA, "How many farewells have there been like this one, for an authentic hometown hero who has written his name on page after page of the Oregon record book?"

The 6'7" guard has accomplishments. Jackson's favorite moments in his U of O career: winning the Pac-10 title in his junior year, helping lead his team to the NCAA Elite Eight during sophomore year, and although he probably wouldn't admit it—scoring 31 of the team's last 33 points against Colorado to win the opening game of this year's National Invitational Tournament.

The *Register-Guard* pointed out that Oregon's Luke Jackson and Arizona's Sean Elliot are the only two players in the history of the Pac-10 to compile 1,800, 700 rebounds, and 400 assists in a career. Meantime, Jackson's two teammates from the Elite Eight squad, Luke Ridnour and Freddie Jones, were both drafted in the first round of the NBA draft, Jones going as the 14<sup>th</sup> pick to the Indiana Pacers in '02, and Ridnour, who left school a year early, going , again, in the 14<sup>th</sup> position, this time to the Seattle SuperSonics.

Freddie Jones, now the NBA slam dunk champion, was only two years before dunking on Luke Jackson at practice at Oregon. Jackson remembers those contests well. "Ever since I came in the door I went right after him. I used to try to dunk on him everyday. When he left, he told me that one of the things he respected the most about me was that I was never scared of anybody we ever played against."

Los Angeles Laker broadcast analyst Mychal Thompson confirms Vitale's analysis of Jackson. "He's definitely going to be a first rounder," says Thompson. It's a belief echoed by the *Portland Tribune's* veteran NBA writer, Kerry Eggers.

Jackson's emergence as a high profile figure in June's NBA comes at the right year and time for the Portland Trail Blazers, who this year have two first round picks. Says Jackson of the upcoming draft, "I think there is a need for a guy like me in the NBA ... a bigger guard that can shoot, pass and play defense."

Jackson's play the last three seasons at McArthur Court, where the Ducks went 40-5, convincingly attest to his athleticism. But other qualities Jackson possesses might be needed just as badly by some lucky NBA team, including the Blazers. His intelligence, his work ethic, and his manners.

It's no secret that since the days of Bird, Magic, Jordan and Barkley, the NBA could use an image upgrade. And the Portland Trail Blazers have been the NBA poster team for needing an image upgrade.

### **What kind of a person is Luke Jackson?**

He's the kind of person who didn't redshirt but still managed to graduate a quarter early with a 3.0 GPA. "If I hadn't gone to summer school I wouldn't be in the position I am in—I absolutely hated summer school. It is so hard to sit in a classroom in the summertime. But looking back, I'm really glad that I pushed through."

In an era when most college basketball stars are on a campus for a year, maybe two, Jackson's early diploma is a big accomplishment. Not bad for a country boy. But if Jackson is a country boy from Creswell, Oregon, he's a shrewd one with direction.

"The difference between good players and some of the great players," says Jackson, "is that the great ones are the guys who just figure everything out... how to budget time... how to look at it like, I'm here so I might as well work really hard, give it my best shot, instead of looking at it as, why do I have to go to another practice."

One of the people who has helped Jackson keep his balance and handle the pressure of being an All-American is former University of Oregon Rose Bowl quarterback Danny O'Neil. O'Neil pastors the Christian church that Jackson attends on Sunday mornings in Eugene. "He's an amazing pastor, especially for someone like me because he's gone through the same things that I've struggled with... just being an athlete and getting all the attention on campus." PGA golfer Casey Martin is also a member of O'Neil's church.

With his last college quarter off, Jackson is honing both his entrepreneurial and philanthropic skills. He's busy organizing an all-star tour of recent college graduates, including current Gonzaga star Blake Stepp. Stepp, like Jackson, is from the Eugene area. The college all-stars will play a series of games at Oregon high schools this May—South Eugene, Creswell and Lake Oswego—taking on high school talents like Lake Oswego's Kevin Love. Jackson will pay the athletes participating in the games, donate a portion of the proceeds to the schools' athletic departments, and keep a portion for himself as promoter. From there it will be on to the NBA pre-draft camp in Chicago, and then to the NBA draft.

Jackson has an interest and a sense for basketball history. He's in touch with past University of Oregon standouts. "I know Jim Barnett ('61-63). He emails me all the time. He's still a commentator for Golden State."

It is also through that sense of basketball history that Jackson continues to learn the game. His favorite player is Boston Celtic great Larry Bird, someone whose game resembles Jackson's. Jackson watches videotape cassettes of Bird in the 1980s, in his prime. Jackson's thoughts on Bird, "He was a great competitor. He could beat a team several different ways, and understood how to pass and shoot and play the game. He was so competitive; people don't understand how competitive he really was."

Who was the Pac-10 conference player that Jackson liked going up against most? "Casey Jacobsen of Stanford. We used to talk to each other during games," says Jackson. And who is his favorite player that he's ever guarded in a summer camp game? "That's easy," says Jackson, "Michael Jordan."

Another basketball mentor is former New York Knick and U.S. Senator Bill Bradley. Bradley, like Bird, like Luke Jackson, was a passer. "I read Bill Bradley's book, 'Sense of Where You Are,'" says Jackson. "It's a great book. His game reminded me of the way I try to play. Bradley's just a real intelligent guy and you've got to respect who he is and how he played."

Jackson is not the only admirer of Bradley on the University of Oregon team; another is Assistant Coach Fred Litzenger, who has spent time talking basketball theory with Jackson. "Coach Litz (Fred Litzenger) was talking about Bradley's book and he told me, 'That's where I got all my shooting stuff.'"

Studying basketball theory has led Jackson to some pretty definite theories on team play. And to some opinions about this year's Blazers: "I think the Blazers have done a good job this year of trying to clean up their image. How many teams in the NBA can you think of that have won championships that didn't play well together? So you can say, we will be all right, we will be entertaining, but we are not going to go very far because we don't have the guys that do it well together."

Then Jackson gets diplomatic. "I'm not saying this was the case with the Blazers, but it is hard if you don't have guys who fit the ideal of a team. I think the trades will pay off in the long run, just from the fans point of view, they respect the Blazers a lot more than they used to."

### **And where would Jackson like to play professional basketball?**

"I would love to play in Portland."

A month ago, NBA scouts would have almost guaranteed that Jackson would still be available in the draft when Portland used its first selection midway through the first round. But now, thanks to Jackson's strong finish in his last conference home game against UCLA and his heroic performance in the opening round of the NIT, his NBA stock keeps rising and the hometown hero made not be on the board when the Blazers pick.

Will Jackson miss the University of Oregon? "Well, it is definitely a diverse community. You never know what you are going to see on campus. One day there is a caravan of gypsies selling stuff that takes over the whole thing, and the next day there is someone preaching...but overall it's been a good experience."

