

A Reason to Believe

Rookie Brandon Roy helps improve the face of the Trail Blazers and gives new hope to old fans

By Lisa Baker

Don't call us easy.

If you want us back, you'll have to sacrifice, work hard and keep us in the back of your mind at all times. Groveling is not necessary, but humility will always be rewarded.

Call it a recipe for redemption for the Trail Blazers, who are endeavoring to win their fans back after years of taking them for granted.

This year, for the first time, they appear to have all the ingredients, and a willingness to use them.

And fans, for their part, are showing an embarrassing inability to bear a grudge, leaping up and cheering at the slightest provocation.

Brandon Roy, the team's 6 ft.-6 in. rookie guard from Seattle, put it best after a team loss in February: "We're 22 and 30, and they treat us like we're the best team in the world."

Indeed, crowds are coming back to the Rose Garden. Folks who pointedly called themselves *former* fans are returning to the arena with their expectations carefully held in check and their hearts guarded, only to jettison their jadedness by half-time.

It's not about winning. As Roy points out, the team's record by mid-February wasn't sterling, yet games were selling out where just weeks earlier, Blazers' sales staff were having trouble selling even steeply discounted tickets.

It's that ingredient list: sacrifice, hard work, humility.

And the poster boy for the three elements could be Roy himself, who gets positively squirmy when it's suggested that fans have invested so many of their hopes in the rookie whose play — coming off of a heel injury — has all the marks of earnestness.

Despite a flurry of media articles highlighting Roy as the team's new hope, his rookie-of-the-month nomination in February, and his appointment to the prestigious rookie/sophomore All-Star weekend game in Las Vegas, Roy is reluctant to pose for front-runner status. "I don't feel like it's just on my shoulders, it's on a lot of the young guys' shoulders. Maybe I can be *one* of our hopes," he says.

The fact that the Blazers' fortunes are now riding on a pack of young wolves rather than strategic trade yields and proven players is not lost on Roy. "I'll take that as motivation to try to get better. I don't want to let the fans down."

Sigh.

And so, there's extra work after practice, coming in early to shoot around. When the Blazers find themselves behind, they're "fighting to get back," Roy says. "And if we're up, we're fighting to put the other team away. We are putting out a great effort."

The focus now is on unselfish play and the artful assist rather than jockeying for play time. It is an ensemble effort rather than a diva performance.

Mostly, Roy says, the team is keyed on learning and so is he. "I can see the good in a loss where I can work on ways to improve. I mean, this is my first year in the NBA — there are days that are great and other days I don't understand what's going on."

The admission is startling. After all, Blazers fans remember the days of "CTC." This is a player willing to admit that even with great stats, he has not arrived at perfection.

Roy comes by humility the old-fashioned way: He gets it from his parents, who — despite his talent on the court — failed to spoil him as effectively as many athletes' parents have. Instead, Roy says, they put responsibility square on his shoulders and then expected him to handle it with maturity. "Growing up, there were times when I felt my brother and sister were more spoiled than I was. I always had to earn everything I got."

The trend continued when he became a Washington Husky, whose coach, Lorenzo Romar, would not allow him to "take a back seat," as Roy says, but forced him to take the lead and then take the bitter media medicine when he or the team fell short. "I think he saw something in me, and he developed me into a leader."

It might have been drive. Roy exudes the kind of drive that compels him to constantly work on himself, on shots that aren't yet in his game. But he doesn't stop at self-improvement; he's looking for improvement in others, too.

When injury forced him from the floor last year, Roy found that he couldn't simply watch his team play; he had to analyze it, strategize for it, look for missed plays and opportunities. At the time, he told the *Oregonian*, "There's times I'm thinking, 'He missed his rotation,' or, 'We didn't run that play right,' or, 'We gotta get more movement when we go inside to Zach.' "

In the same way, he says he wouldn't hesitate to unload some appropriate peer pressure on a teammate who misbehaved if the misbehavior was compromising the team's mission with its fans or on the court. "Right now, we can't allow one person to bring all of our hard work down," he says. "I would step in and I would say, 'We gotta change up.'" But Roy doesn't believe he'd be alone in the intervention. The team has turned a corner this year, he says, and it will not allow that to be compromised.

Even with the pressure, Roy says he doesn't allow himself to get wound up or obsessive over disappointing games. "Sometimes you've got to let go and relax and put something that's bad on the back burner. Get over things."

Roy de-stresses in ways that might alarm Blazers fans who've been around awhile. First, there's hanging at the mall (Blazers mall scandal circa 1993). Then there's the puppy, Duke, a pit bull (Blazers dog-fighting scandal circa 2004). To top it off, there's blackjack and pool, Roy's favorite games aside from basketball, which don't link to any specific Blazer missteps but prompt visions of gambling, even if he isn't.

Fans could worry, or they could take comfort in Roy's strong upbringing and the close-knit ways of his family. His parents, married 22 years, visit often and come to games. His brother visits frequently.

And then there's home life: Roy is just weeks from becoming a parent with his girlfriend of six years. And Duke? "I'd never do that (fight him). I love that dog like he's my son."

Of course, if you can't trust in all that, you can trust in the Blazers' character exam, a 700-question fill-in-the-bubble survey that seeks to discover whether a prospective player might, say, assault someone at a loading dock or tear down the highway in a Humvee while smoking pot. Of course, those weren't the actual questions. Or, were they?

"Some of those questions were really weird. I was laughing on some of them."