

NBA

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Shareef Abdur-Rahim

Abdur-Rahim: Trappings of success give way to balance

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has an inner peace with himself.”

By the time the shutters stop, Abdur-Rahim is nothing but hungry. It’s 2 p.m., and he hasn’t eaten since he woke up before sunrise. He won’t eat again until after 6:20 p.m., when the sun sets.

Such is life during Ramadan, the Islamic holy month in which more than 1 billion Muslims worldwide and 8 million in North America refrain from eating, drinking, sex and smoking during daylight hours for a month. It is a time of sacrifice, introspection and charity, one of the five pillars of Islam that not only requires fasting but prayer five times a day. According to Muslim beliefs, the first verses of their holy book, the Quran, were sent to the prophet Muhammad from Allah during this month.

Ramadan began in the United States on Oct. 5, while Abdur-Rahim’s first game as a King came six days later. When tiptoff comes at night, as it did in the preseason opener against Dallas, the games are easier than practice on the body. He expends less energy during the day and can sneak in a small meal or snack before the game and drink fluids during timeouts.

“I think, overall, it cleanses you,” said Abdur-Rahim, who took part in his first Ramadan as a 6-year-old. “Spiritually, mentally, it cleanses you. It’s a time where you try to be closer to God, read the Quran more. You’re sacrificing something for God.”

The surface has never mattered to the Kings’ new 6-foot-9 power forward, save for those few times when he was caught by the trappings of youth. When Vancouver selected him as the third pick of the 1996 draft after one season at Cal, Abdur-Rahim didn’t take long to apply the tattoos and a diamond earring.

Three years later, he had the tattoos removed and lost the jewelry because his younger brother was following his footsteps tit for tat, not realizing until later that his artwork was in conflict with the Quran. He had bought a Mercedes G-series sport-utility vehicle, too, one that cost well above six figures. But who wouldn’t do the same, especially if your first adult job paid \$6.3 million for three years of work and you hadn’t had a car, or even a driver’s license?

He said experience has made the balancing act easier between his religion and his NBA career, in which temptation and excess are prevalent. Abdur-Rahim has never consumed alcohol, and he spends most of his non-basketball time with his family.

The early lures of lavishness never stuck, while his roots stayed firm.

Abdur-Rahim grew up a notch below middle class, surrounded by a Muslim community in which giving was the norm. His father, William, was the Imam (preacher) of a large congregation in Atlanta, while working long hours as an operations manager for a freight company. His mother’s name is Aminah. When Abdur-Rahim was 6, they opened a private Islamic school in Atlanta that eventually taught children from the first grade to the eighth grade. The lessons didn’t stop with the education in the classroom.

“You’re talking about people who would buy (food) in bulk, and we’d say, ‘Let’s do the collecting, with wholesale meat, beans and everyone sharing.’” said William, who divorced Aminah when Abdur-Rahim was 15 and has seven children by his second wife.

“It had to be teamwork. That’s what he was brought up in and what he learned. He’s been taught to not be a liability. Wherever you are, be an asset.”

So when Abdur-Rahim went pro after becoming the only freshman to win the Pacific-10 Conference Player of the Year award, he set up college scholarship funds for his siblings and made sure his mother didn’t have to work, and he enjoys knowing his wife and kids are set for life. He became president of an Atlanta Investment Firm, AVF Inc., that has been the catalyst for inner-city development.

He founded the Future Foundation in 1999, in the spirit of the nickname he earned in high school – “The Future” – and geared toward at-risk kids. He built a “Reef House” in Atlanta that he would like to duplicate in Sacramento, offering after-school programs for kids and literacy classes for adults every day. He established Abdur-Rahim Enterprises, which provides start-up businesses with financial assistance.

“When you think of somebody who, economically, can do things, it’s about the resources,” said Abdur-Rahim, who provided none of the details of his charities for this story. “I can help my family, take money and invest it back in the community I grew up in. I can see children do things they would never have been able to do. That’s the beauty of being in a good economic situation.”

In 2001, Abdur-Rahim – who once was named one of the Sporting News’ “Good Guys” in sports – received the NBA’s Community Assist Award for a program dubbed “Rebound America.”



Sacramento Bee/José Luis Villegas

Power forward Shareef Abdur-Rahim has career averages of 19.8 points and 8.1 rebounds.

In response to the Sept. 11 attacks, the effort raised about \$212,000 for the victims, including \$69,600 from Abdur-Rahim.

When asked whether Americans will ever understand his religion or forever associate it with terrorism, he shrugs his shoulders.

“They only know what’s been given to them,” Abdur-Rahim said. “People who are open-minded, and search for a true understanding of what’s really going on really do (understand). (Connecting all Muslims to terrorists) is like saying David Koresh (the late leader of the Branch Davidian sect) represents true Christianity.”

Abdur-Rahim’s faith has been his compass for his basketball decisions as well. After taking Wheeler High School in Marietta, Ga., to the state title game two consecutive years, he chose Cal over the likes of Georgia Tech, Duke and North Carolina because of the spiritual freedom he felt in Berkeley. He saw Muslims praying on a campus lawn his first time there and wanted that sort of security.

Now, nine years into a career that has been marked by an anti-Abdur-Rahim trend – personal success and collective failure – he’s keeping the faith that things will change.

Faced for the first time with his own free agency this offseason, Abdur-Rahim chose to join the New Jersey Nets. Then came the infamous MRI that revealed scar tissue on his right knee, a result of an operation done when he was 15 and something that never was a concern to his former employers. The Nets, however, were worried enough to nix a sign-and-trade deal at the 11th hour in August, and the Kings swooped in for the follow-up signing three days later.

Abdur-Rahim now considers the twist of fate a godsend. How badly did he want to go to a winner? While his last contract paid him \$71 million over six years with losing franchises in Vancouver, Atlanta and Portland, the new one is worth \$29.3 million over five years, well below his market value and more than a 50 percent annual pay cut.

It will be worth it if he can stop the losing. All told, Abdur-Rahim’s teams have gone 216-493. It has become the unflattering half of his legacy, coupled with the career averages of 19.8 points and 8.1 rebounds that have him known as one of the game’s best.

“I still love the game, so I haven’t let (the losing) take that from me,” Abdur-Rahim said. “But to say it hasn’t affected me, I’d probably be lying. It killed me, you know what I’m saying? It killed me.”

“If you’re competing, and you’ve got pride, you want to win. You want to be part of success. I think, definitely, that there’s hurt. It eats at me, and it should.”

The Portland period took a chunk out of him, too. He was traded there from Atlanta midway through the 2003-04 season, just after the Trail Blazers had brought in small

forward Darius Miles and about the time they signed power forward Zach Randolph to an \$84 million deal.

In the first year, Abdur-Rahim started only three of 32 games, and the Blazers finished 41-41. In Year 2, Abdur-Rahim became the starter, and Miles became disgruntled. Early in the season, he exploded at coach Maurice Cheeks in a well-publicized verbal bashing that earned him a two-game suspension.

“(In the first season) I’m coming in 40-some-odd games into the season, just thinking, ‘Let’s go get in the playoffs,’” Abdur-Rahim said. “If this team has continuity, let’s go with it. Let’s not have Darius worrying about his playing time or anything like that, so I said I was cool coming off the bench.”

“But I’m secure in this: that my whole focus was to go there, and, whether I was going to be there long term or not, to win and have fun doing it.”

Neither happened. There was constant speculation that Abdur-Rahim would be traded last season, followed by a right elbow surgery that forced him out of 28 games and had some members of the organization questioning the injury.

Making it worse, the situation had gone sour with Abdur-Rahim’s support group out of reach. His wife of five years, Dee Dee, was in Atlanta pregnant with their second child, daughter Samiyah.

“It was extremely, extremely frustrating for him, because he had sacrificed by coming off the bench,” said Hashim Ali, 39, who also is an Imam and has been a close friend of Abdur-Rahim’s since meeting him as a graduate student at Cal. “He got injured, and they thought he was lying. I think, because they wanted him to play it out so they could trade him. His patience was like, ‘You know what, when this is over, something better is going to happen.’”

So it did, and then it didn’t, and then it did. Call it the New Jersey No-Go, followed by the Sacramento Save. Dee Dee’s family is from the Bay Area, a convenience she hasn’t enjoyed since she and Abdur-Rahim were together at Cal. On the court, the Kings offer the recent history of success that Abdur-Rahim made a prerequisite during his search for a team.

As Ramadan has taught him, sacrifice can bring growth and progress, and so he views his role with the Kings.

He never has been around this much talent, never had a chance to play a small role to help with the bigger picture.

The hunger, meanwhile, has never been so strong.

“If anything, I’m thankful I have an opportunity to change (the losing).” Abdur-Rahim said. “I feel like that’s not my story. It’s not the last chapter. The book’s not closed.”

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KINGS 100, TRAIL BLAZERS 80

Wells draws boos; Blazers deserve them

By Sam Amick
BEE STAFF WRITER

PORTLAND, Ore. – There was no love at the Rose Garden, where the name couldn’t be less fitting these days.

The fans who wanted a moral makeover have it now, in the form of a happy and hapless Portland Trail Blazers squad that has given them new reasons to boo.

Saturday night at what could be dubbed The Stinking Rose Garden, one of the old reasons for rancor returned: Kings guard Bonzi Wells, the guest of dishonor who was less than beloved by the time his five-plus seasons ended in Portland in 2003. He sparked the boo-birds with every touch, grinning at most of the catcalls and even flashing one of his digits to a harping fan – a hearty thumbs up.

The only semblance of pleasantries went to Shareef Abdur-Rahim, who spent last season on the good side of Portland and drew a smattering of applause from the 17,613 fans every time he held the spotlight.

The preseason game itself? Kings 100-80. Halftime score: Kings 48-24. Portland shooting percentage in that span: 20.9 (9 for 43). Team resembling the newest National Basketball Development League addition: not the Kings.

Kings coach Rick Adelman pulled a surprise move at the start, going with Corliss Williamson at power forward after Abdur-Rahim or Kenny Thomas had started every game. Williamson, who was having a quiet preseason, exploded for 13 first-quarter points and finished with 18 in 26 minutes, scoring from every spot on the block.

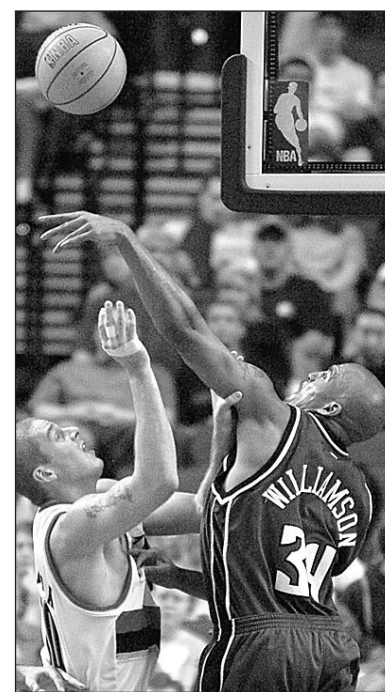
With point guard Mike Bibby, small forward Peja Stojakovic, center Brad Miller, Williamson and Wells playing the entire first quarter, the Kings led 30-14.

Abdur-Rahim entered in the second quarter, driving hard with almost every touch and scoring 12 points in 22 minutes. The minute-less man was Thomas, who wasn’t quite sure what to make of his absence.

“You’ve got to ask (Adelman) about that,” Thomas said.

Adelman chalked it up to big-man logjam, saying his desire to give Williamson extended minutes made more sense against a more brutish Blazers front line than it did against tonight’s more stealth opponent, Phoenix.

“I can’t play everybody if I’m going to give Corliss a good run and give Shareef and Brad and Brian (Skinner) time,” Adelman said. “And that’s what’s going to happen during the regular season. I don’t know how you get guys enough minutes where you get quality minutes and play 12 people. It’s just impossible to do. ... I didn’t see any



Associated Press/Greg Wahl-Stephens

The Kings’ Corliss Williamson blocks a shot by Portland’s Joel Przybilla.

KINGS 100, TRAIL BLAZERS 80

KINGS (100)
Wells 4-10-2-2-11, Williamson 8-12-2-4-18, Miller 4-13-1-1-9, Stojakovic 3-8-0-0-7, Bibby 4-7-2-3-11, Martin 3-7-3-3-9, Abdur-Rahim 3-6-6-1-2, Skinner 5-7-1-1-11, Garcia 2-9-0-0-5, Price 1-6-0-0-2, Sampson 1-2-0-0-2, Sandrin 0-1-1-2-1, Flores 0-0-2-2-2, Totals 38-88-20-24-100.

PORTLAND (80)
Miles 7-17-0-2-14, Patterson 5-11-3-4-13, Przybilla 2-5-1-2-5, Smith 3-8-0-0-9, Telfair 2-9-2-4-6, Dixon 0-3-1-1-1, Jack 3-8-1-1-8, Rattiff 0-1-0-0-0, Outlaw 3-4-1-2-9, Khyrpa 0-0-0-0-0, Monia 4-4-0-2-9, Webster 0-6-2-2-2, Blake 0-0-0-0-0, Seung-Jin 1-1-2-2-4, Totals 30-82-13-22-80.

KINGS 30 18 23 29 – 100
Portland 14 10 31 25 – 80
3-Point Goals – Kings 4-18 (Garcia 1-3, Wells 1-3, Stojakovic 1-4, Bibby 1-4, Price 0-1, Martin 0-3), Portland 7-17 (Smith 3-5, Outlaw 2-2, Monia 1-1, Jack 1-3, Telfair 0-1, Dixon 0-2, Webster 0-3), Fouled Out – Rattiff, Rebounds – Kings 59 (Miller 12), Portland 56 (Przybilla 15), Assists – Kings 20 (Stojakovic, Miller, Garcia, Price 3), Portland 22 (Telfair 7), Total Fouls – Kings 19, Portland 24. Technicals – Kings Defensive Three Second. A – 17,613, (19,980).

sense in playing (Thomas) five or six minutes.”

As expected, the loss of backup point guard Jason Hart (hip pointer) meant more time for the No. 3 floor leader. Rookie Ronnie Price was on the floor for 23 minutes and struggled, hitting 1 of 6 shots.

The Kings treated the Blazers’ front line as if it was invisible. In the second quarter, Abdur-Rahim blew by one Blazer and dunked over another in his most electrifying play yet as a King. Skinner, who had 11 points, dunked in the face of 7-foot-3 Ha Seung-Jin in the fourth quarter.

Despite the absence of franchise forward Zach Randolph (sore knee), the Trail Blazers (1-4) still qualified as horrendous. Their losses have come by an average of 20 points.

“Those guys probably don’t even want to play,” said Wells, who had 11 points on 4-for-10 shooting in 24 minutes. “They’re probably calling their agents every day, like, man, is there any way you can trade me out of here?”

“I feel sorry for them, because those are my friends. I’m just glad I got out of here, and I’m not one of those guys sitting around here getting crazy.”

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Preaching patience

The thing about trail blazing? You’re bound to get burned doing it.

Such is the daily existence for first-year Portland coach Nate McMillan. He brings all the credibility and discipline the Trail Blazers’ front office wanted. But he was handed a squad that – well-behaved as it might be – hasn’t shown an ability to play well. McMillan, who led Seattle past the Kings and into the second round of the playoffs last season, said the on-court turnaround in his new locale won’t be quick.

“It’s not going to be fixed overnight,” McMillan said. “It’s going to take some time. People down here were really hurt by what has gone on in the last few years, and they want to see change fast. And the direction that we’re going, and the direction we’re going to take, it won’t happen fast.”

Friendly chats

Before they were greeted in different ways by Blazers fans, Bonzi Wells and Shareef Abdur-Rahim caught up with friendly faces at the halfcourt line.

Wells chatted with old teammate Darius Miles, who was sporting an Afro that made him look like a skinny version of Detroit’s Ben Wallace. Abdur-Rahim joined in, talking with Miles and Portland forward Zach Randolph.

Key dates

Today: Vs. Phoenix in Fresno – For a day, Fresno State takes second place on the sports totem pole in Bulldog town.

Wednesday: Vs. Phoenix in Albuquerque, N.M. – The Suns and Kings continue on Obscure City Tour 2005.

Friday: Vs. Lakers in Las Vegas – The trifecta is complete in the last non-NBA city location, as Lakers coach Phil Jackson faces the team he was so close to coaching (wink, wink).

Oct. 31: The official cut day before the regular season begins. – Sam Amick