

After Injury Walter Luckett Rounding Into Shape With Ohio U.

By AL YOUNG

Yes basketball fans, Walter Luckett is alive and well in Athens, Ohio.

In fact, he's finally starting to play like the Luckett of old. The Luckett that made him New England's all-time schoolboy scoring leader, an All-American at Kolbe high school and one of the most sought-after players in the country.

"I've just started to get my strength back," said the highly-publicized Ohio University freshman who became of a knee injury wasn't able to live up to his pre-season billing. While at Kolbe, Walt suffered torn ligaments in his left knee as a result of a collision with another player during a tournament game last winter and was forced to undergo surgery this past August.

Came Back Too Soon

"I guess I rushed trying to come back," he explained in a recent telephone interview. "Two days before the season opened, I reinjured it in practice. After that I just couldn't move laterally and my game was limited."

Despite the handicap, which limited him to an average playing time of 15 to 20 minutes a game in the earlier going, Walt still made his presence felt. In his first game as a Bobcat, Walt scored 12 points in an 87-75 loss to highly-touted Missouri. Three nights later, in his second game and first home appearance, Walt tallied 12 points, including the winning basket with 13 seconds left when he stole the ball and dribbled the length of the court to pull out a chilling 16-8 overtime win against Central Michigan.

After the Bobcats' downed Youngstown State and Northwestern and bowed to Indiana, Luckett hit for a career-high 23 points in a victory over Loyola of Chicago. After losing to arch-rival Ohio State, the Bobcats went on to edge Southern Illinois and crush Cornell 100-68, in the championship round of the 90 Ranzhback Invitational tourney, with Luckett leading the way with 17 points.

Going into yesterday's crucialing Conference leader Miami of Ohio, the Bobcats, now 13-6, were working on a four-game winning streak — longest of the season — with much of the credit going to the young Mr. Luckett.

MACE Player of Week

During this surge, Walt, who had been averaging 9.8 ppg, tied in 33 points, an average of 23 a game, to raise his season norm to 12.1 and earn the Mid-American Conference Basketball Player of the Week award. It's a first freshman in the 27-year history of the conference to win the honor.

"Sure Walter's been a big factor in this drive," said Ohio's head coach Jim Snyder. "Now that the knee is coming around, he's helping us that outside shooting dimension. But he's still not a jumper as well as the Luckett of old. Once he's only about 10 ft. per cent healthy."

Walt himself realizes he's still not exactly 100 per cent. "At least I'm jumping off one foot now," he said. "Before I was shooting flat — faded a n taking sort of a set shot when

WALTER LUCKETT

I'm used to take jumpers." As for his point production, which is a far cry from the nearly 40 he averaged as a senior in high school, Luckett said: "I haven't been taking as many shots as I used to and I'm not crashing the boards like I did in high school where I would pick up a few extra points."

Even though he ranks fourth on the team in both scoring and field goal percentage (45 per cent), there are still some skeptics who insist that Walt, who adorned the cover of Sports Illustrated in the pre-season, has been disappointing.

"He's only a freshman," noted coach Snyder, "and like any freshman he's going to have his problems."

As for all the pre-season buildup, his star recruit received, Snyder said: "I thought he handled it well, although there were certain instances like in the Sports Illustrated article where I told me he was misquoted."

"I admit," he continued, "in the beginning of the year the publicity hurt him and made him seem like a selfish ball player, but that's come to pass. He's a freshman playing under tremendous pressure, and with a bad knee, but he's going to be okay. I have all the confidence in the world in this young man."

SI Cover Great Thrill

Calling his selection for the cover of Sports Illustrated a "great thrill," Walt confessed that it did have a psychological effect on him. "It made me have to live up to my expectations," he explained. "I would rather have started from the bottom and worked my way up because I think it's better when you earn such a recognition."

"But I still have a lot to prove to people and I haven't really broken loose yet," he said. "Now that the season has sort of just begun for me, I wish there were more than seven games left."

And the way the Bobcats have been playing lately, it's quite possible they could wind up 20-6, good enough for a post-season berth in the NCAA tourney or the NIT.

So when leaves, he might get his win after all.

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