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Mourning: Nets lacking in talent

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BEAVERTON, Ore. - Alonzo Mourning's frankness about the Nets has bothered some in the organization. But he may have delivered his most painfully honest assessment of all following Friday's loss at Seattle.

"We can't rely on our talent because to tell you the truth we're not that talented across the board," Mourning said. "We have to do it with effort."

Mourning had no hidden agenda here. He wasn't complaining about Nets owner Bruce Ratner or lobbying again for a buyout. Mourning was stating the truth about a team that has lost eight straight games, and appears to have taken a couple of steps backward on this four-game Western trip, which ends tonight against the Blazers.

The Nets (2-10) are still learning each other, but the lack of effort lately, particularly on the defensive end, is what's most confounding.

In Friday's loss at Seattle, the Nets trailed by 21 points in the first half, and needed a halftime-locker room jolt from coach Lawrence Frank to play hard in the second half.

For some reason, the Nets, who practiced for two hours Saturday at the Nike headquarters, don't show they understand what playing with a sense of urgency means.

"We're not very talented," Mourning said. "We've got some great players, and some players that have been a part and been pieces to other good teams. And we've all come together now to try to learn a whole different system.

"We're trying to pick it up, and we're showing flashes of good basketball. But when you have a team like this still in the learning stages, you have to do it with effort until all the little things fall into place for you.

"The effort has to be there consistently. I'm not just speaking for everybody. I'm speaking about myself, too."

Richard Jefferson, the Nets' top scorer and rebounder, has pointed out ad nauseam that there are plenty of games left.

That thinking will get old soon if the Nets don't turn things around, though.

"You definitely expect improvement," Nets president Rod Thorn said. "We constantly are on the lookout to try to improve ourselves from within and without. We definitely need to improve."

On the horizon is Jason Kidd's return from left knee surgery. He is expected to begin practicing this week and could be playing as early as next week if all goes well.

In his absence, the Nets haven't made a strong case to convince Kidd that he should stay in New Jersey.

Early on, at least, he could say the Nets played hard. But in the last two games they've hardly played.

"We're all professional athletes," forward Eric Williams said. "Nobody likes to lose. We keep losing. You just have to look in the mirror, want to compete and go out there and get the job done."

The Nets are getting inconsistent play from everyone other than Jefferson and Williams.

Mourning has been struggling grabbing and shooting the ball with his tendon-damaged right pinkie.

Jason Collins is mired in a 4-for-23 shooting slump over his past six games. Free-launching Rodney Buford is 5-for-20 in his past two games.

Searching for answers, Frank already has started every healthy point guard on the roster.

He inserted Travis Best in place of Zoran Planinic on Friday, but it didn't improve things. The Nets missed 16 of 18 shots in the first and matched their franchise low of eight points in a quarter.

"We have a mixed group of individuals here that all need to learn how to trust each other and trust what the coaches are talking about," Jefferson said. "Then it will come together."

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