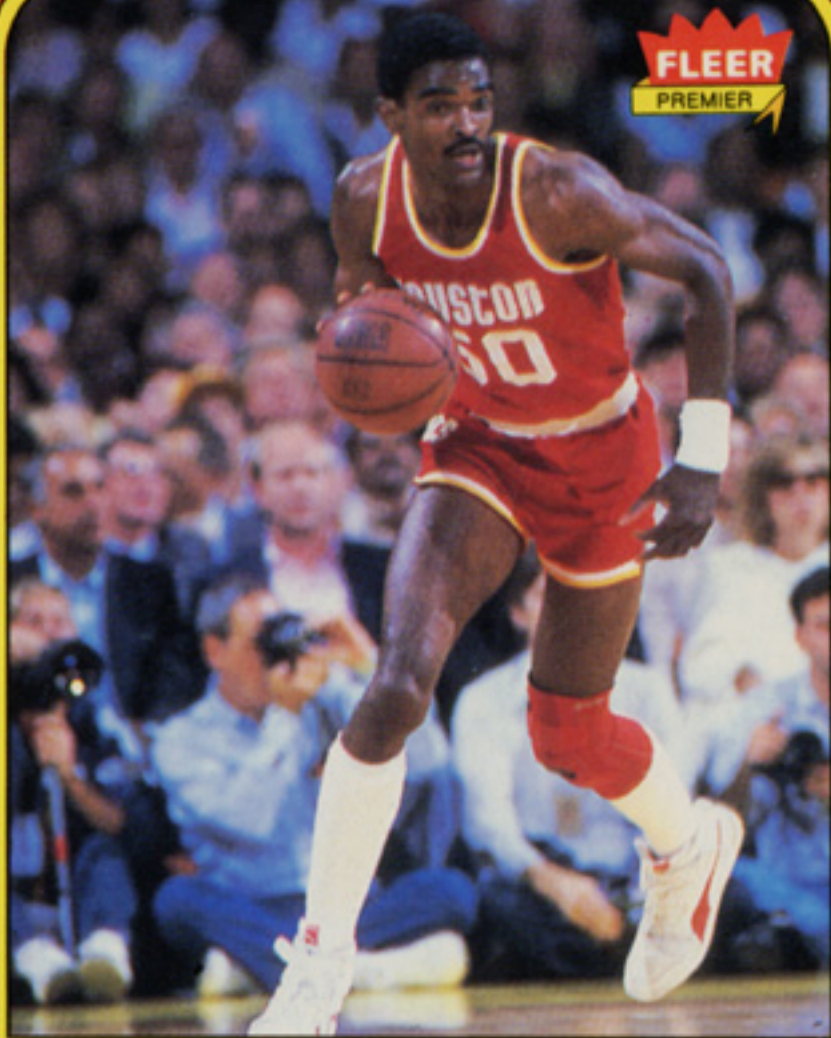


FLEER

PREMIER



RALPH SAMPSON
ROCKETS • FORWARD-CENTER

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ROCKFORD, Ill.-- As the world watches Michael Jordan, former NBA star Ralph Sampson has launched his own comeback as a player-coach with the CBA's Rockford Lightning.

Sampson, 34, hasn't played professional basketball in three years. On Sunday's glorious sun-kissed afternoon, Sampson toiled 29 minutes in the Lightning's 142-138 victory over the Sioux Falls Skyforce. He had nine rebounds, nine assists and no points.

Sampson took just one shot, a slow turnaround jumper that still might be drifting toward Freeport.

During his nine-year NBA career, Sampson drifted in and out of the shadows of Jordan and the Bulls.

A month before Sampson and Jordan appeared in the 1987 Terry Cummings charity basketball game, they talked about playing together for the Bulls. Sampson had been a guest at Jordan's basketball camp in North Carolina. Last fall, Sampson sneaked into Chicago for a weekend workout for Bulls GM Jerry Krause.

"I haven't talked to Mike in a while," Sampson said after Sunday's game. "Both our comebacks at the same time? That could be good. I did see Krause last fall. Nothing happened, so I went back home."

The first pick in 1983, Sampson played for four teams before knee surgeries forced him to miss 183 of 244 games his last three years in the NBA. In January, 1992, he left the Washington Bullets to play in Spain. That fall, Sampson was named a part-time assistant coach to Lefty Drissell at James Madison University in Sampson's native Harrisonburg, Pa.

In 1993, Sampson ran a real estate development business in Richmond, Va., where he lives with his wife and three children. Sampson was working out simply to get his legs in shape to play with his kids. But by last winter, Sampson was feeling so good he began commuting to Phoenix, Ariz., to work with trainer Mack Newton, best known for reassembling Bo Jackson.

Sampson pronounced his knees as "real good." But he added, "My reaction time is way down. It's not where I want it to be. I have to react much quicker to the ball, much quicker to situations. When I jump, I jump too late. It's a matter of playing more and taking care of myself the right way."

In just two games with the Lightning, Sampson has assumed the role of floor coach.

He is rarely involved as an offensive option. On Sunday, Sampson lumbered down the floor, often stopping at half court, directing youngsters like Tony Dawson and ex-NBA role player Brian Oliver. In February, Sampson weighed 280 pounds. The Lightning press sheet lists him at 250. The truth is somewhere in between. Looming over the typically diminutive CBA player, Sampson looked like a tyrannosaurus rex.

"Nothing comes easy when you're off this long," Sampson said as five-year-old son Ralph Lee III listened with wide eyes. "You have to work every day. It's like any house. Once you get the foundation built, then you can start developing the walls and the rooms. I think I've got the roof on and the doors and windows are in. Now I have to work on the inside."

While on the bench in ocean blue warmies that promote "Stash's Sports & Food," Sampson actively drew up plays and assisted Lightning head coach Mauro Panaggio.

Sampson's greatest asset on the floor was as a distributor. The 7-4 giant has retained the graceful touch. A looping right hand lob set up a basket for Oliver. Later on, a pinpoint, around-the-side pass was delivered to Dawson. "I never thought playing with finesse was a burden in the NBA," Sampson said. "I'm grateful, I played very hard. And that's not a burden."

The Lightning's search for Sampson began in October. The team was inspired by Sioux Falls signing ex-NBA spaceman Darryl Dawkins, who since joined the Harlem Globetrotters.

"We thought that was a good idea to get a name player," Panaggio said. "Someone who could help us at the gate. We heard Ralph had ambitions to do coaching as well. So I contacted his agent and we talked and talked until Ralph was finally ready."

The Lightning (25-25) will enter the playoffs after their season ends March 25. By then Panaggio expects more offense from Sampson. Many of Sunday's 4,400 fans already expect that from the NBA rookie of the year.

Groans and moans greeted Sampson when he fell short on four straight free throws in the final minutes of Sunday's game. "He's rusty," Panaggio said. "And it's going to take him a while to get the rust off."

Someday, Sampson hopes to be coaching a comeback of his own. "I'm going to continue to pursue coaching," he said. "But I'd also like to get back in the NBA. You never know what's going to happen. When you do something you've never done before, you have to start at the bottom and work your way up."

Sampson gathered up his gym bag, grabbed the small hand of Ralph and left the locker room. His wife, Aleize, waited with the couple's 7-year-old daughter and 2 1/2-year-old son in the shadows of the Metro Centre. Together, the family walked

outside where the sun was setting on a bewitching spring day.