

Couldn't pass up 'golden opportunity'

Raffin's back after Italian hoop tour

By BRIAN MILLER
Collegian Sports Writer

He was to be the starting center on this past season's Penn State basketball team. Cage coach John Bach said it was time that he stepped out and develop. John Bach had "confidence" in him.

But Rommel Raffin, the 6-8 transplant from Kitchener, Ontario stepped out somewhere else. He opted instead for a pro basketball league in Italy to play as an import player for a team sponsored by a fruit juice company. Raffin received a \$15,000 a year salary, tax free, plus an apartment with all expenses paid.

"I really enjoyed it, the people were fantastic," Raffin said, who is back at Penn State to continue his studies in physical education. Both of Raffin's parents are Italian so fitting in "over there" was no problem.

As for leaving Penn State, Raffin is philosophical. "Well, I got along with all the coaches and the players. I just spent a lot of time thinking about it and realized it was a golden opportunity," Raffin said.

So with all things considered, well, Raffin's glad he went. Raffin's tour in Italy was only part of his international experience. He played in the 1974 World Games in Puerto Rico, on the 1975 Canadian Pan-American Games squad and on the Canadian Olympic team last year in Montreal.

"That (the Olympics) was another thrilling experience,"



Raffin said. "We just worked our buns off training for the Olympics. The talent was really good. (Adrian) Dantley (a forward for the U.S. squad) I idolized."

During the Olympics, Raffin was playing in pain. Raffin played two and a half years for Penn State, but his junior season was cut short when he broke his foot. He was fitted with a cast, and after working out, tried to come back.

But the bone was just too weak, and Raffin broke it again. Then, since bone doesn't heal when you break on a break, Raffin's foot fractured a third time when he tried to come back. The injury forced Raffin to miss action in the Italian league, and his foot had to go under the knife. The bone was fitted with steel and transplanted bone. Raffin said now that it feels fine.

There are 24 teams in Italy, with clubs being sponsored by different industries. A company named Jellycolombani sponsored Raffin's team. Former Penn State center Randy Meister also played in Italy, for one of the top teams, Mobile Girgi.

Each team can have one American player. Raffin played with Italian import status, since both parents are full Italians. Raffin said most of the players make in the \$30,000 to \$50,000

salary range, although Bobby Morse, a former Penn star, is a celebrated player in Italy who makes \$100,000.

Along with Raffin and Meister, another Penn State alumnus, Dave Angstad, also played in Italy. Raffin said there are many Americans who think about playing in Italy, but the disadvantages, like being away from home and losing contacts, hinder the overseas hoop migration.

Raffin himself admits to problems returning to the States. "Yeah, it was a bitch to come back," Raffin said about the culture change. "They are so drilled into hamburgers and french fries here."

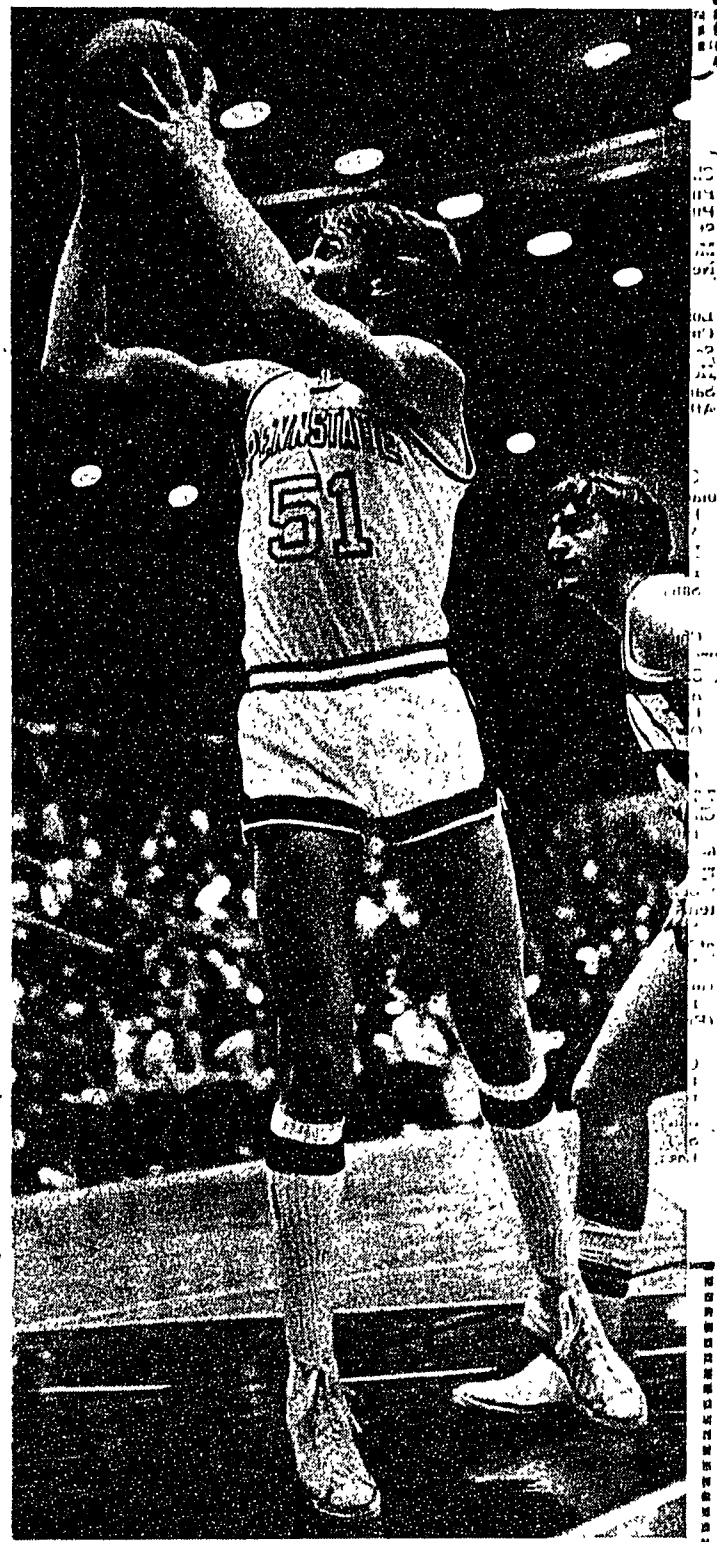
Trying to earn his degree hasn't been easy, either. "I'm subject to course changes," he said. "I'm taking correspondence courses. I have to take a practicum though, and it's kind of hard, since high school isn't in session in the summer."

So Raffin would like to go back to Jellycolombani. "I'd definitely like to play more pro ball," Raffin said. But because of a change in the Italian status rules, he may need a special exemption to play in Italy again. So what about the pro leagues in America?

"I've thought about it, but my chances are pretty slim," said Raffin, who only started playing basketball seven years ago at the urging of his coach in Canada. "There are just so many really talented players in this country who are sitting on their tails thinking the same thing. So mine (chances) are pretty slim."

Raffin is ninth term now, and realizes that if he keeps playing basketball, he might be trying to finish for a while. For the Happy Valley summer, "I just love it, I'm having a great time."

He should be. The IM team Raffin plays for, the Dunkers, is 5-0.



No, this picture wasn't from the past season. Rommel Raffin left Happy Valley for a professional team in Forli, Italy and did not play for the Lion cagemen in 1977.

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