Lawal returns for another season
Rising junior withdraws name from ‘09 NBA draft

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Sports Editor

Gani Lawal takes the court before last season’s game at North Carolina. Lawal, who led all Tech players in rebounding last season, entered his name for the 2009 NBA draft before withdrawing to return for his junior year of college basketball.

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Around the same time that Tech’s men’s basketball team secured the last of its six freshman recruits in late April, the team learned that forward Gani Lawal, a rising junior, had submitted his name for the NBA draft.

Lawal did not immediately hire an agent, meaning that he was leaving open the option of returning to Tech for his junior year.

On June 15—the deadline for players to decide whether or not to declare for the draft—Lawal announced that he was withdrawing his name from the draft pool, meaning he would be returning to Tech for his junior year.

Although the men’s basketball team struggled last year and finished 12-19 on the season, Lawal had a strong year as the focal point of the Jackets’ offensive scheme.

The 6-foot-9 power forward from Norcross High School followed up a solid freshman year by averaging nearly a double-double in points and rebounds as a sophomore.

He led the team with 9.5 rebounds per game, and was second in scoring on the Jackets’ roster with 15.1 points per game after leading Tech in that category for most of the season.

Additionally, two of his best statistical games came in Tech’s two biggest wins of the season.

He had 25 points and 10 rebounds in the 76-74 upset of No. 6 Wake Forest on Jan. 31, and his 20 points and 14 rebounds helped Tech earn an 86-81 victory over Clemson in the first round of the ACC tournament.

After declaring for the draft, Lawal participated in a number of pre-draft camps and workouts with several NBA teams, all the while gathering information on where he was projected to be drafted and what he could do to improve his stock.

He performed well in these postseason activities, and NBA scouts had plenty of positive things to say about Lawal’s intelligence, footwork, motor skills, and his potential for success in the pro circuit.

As mock NBA drafts began to emerge, many projected Lawal to be drafted late in the first round, where strong teams such as the Portland Trail Blazers and Cleveland Cavaliers would be making their picks.

However, many believed that Lawal would be better served returning for his junior year of college basketball.

The general consensus among many scouts was that he was still somewhat raw as a pro prospect, and he would likely have to spend his first couple of years in the NBA on the bench continuing to learn the game if he entered the draft right away.

ESPN’s Jay Bilas believed that Lawal was talented enough to be drafted, but that he would benefit from returning to Tech and working on his post play against ACC opponents.

By spending another year refining his game, Lawal would put himself in position to be drafted earlier by a team looking to take someone ready to play right away, and thus avoid the risk of riding the bench during some of his best potential years of professional play.

Also, even though Lawal posted very strong numbers against conference foes as a sophomore, Lawal’s numbers began to decline late in the conference schedule.

In Tech’s first five ACC games, he averaged 11.2 rebounds and two fouls per game, but in the last five ACC games he had just six rebounds per game while committing 3.8 fouls per game.

Both of those trends, a decrease in rebounds and an increase in fouls, can be attributed to fatigue for a post player, and Lawal often had to work hard to get open while facing double- or triple-teams throughout the ACC schedule.

His declining numbers toward the end of the season became a concern among NBA teams, and proving that he could maintain a high level of play for an entire season would go a long way toward improving his draft stock.

In the end, Lawal chose to return for his junior year. “I learned a lot about my game and what I need to work on, and coming back to school will be very beneficial toward that end,” he said in an interview with ramblinwreck.com.

Lawal’s return means that he will team with incoming freshman Derrick Favors of South Atlanta High School to give the Jackets two strong post players for next season.