

BABY BIRDS AND GRANDPA HAWK

Lenny Wilkens must confront a Gen-Y roster and his own laid-back style



The Hawks didn't waste time washing the footprints off their old unis before remaking the squad that was swept in the second round by the Knicks last May. With a new arena (and new unis) on tap for the new season, Atlanta traded away its entire starting backcourt, and now sports a Gen-Y roster with five players 24 or younger. But talk about a generation gap: 61-year-old Lenny Wilkens is still calling the plays.

There's no doubt Wilkens is old school, always expecting his guys to be adults when the balls are rolled out. That approach mostly worked with veteran teams in Cleveland and Atlanta; though Wilkens could n't bring home a title, his squads often won 50-plus during the regular season.

But early playoff exits had players and fans grumbling about whether Lenny was just a little too laid back. With all those seats to fill in the new downtown Philips Arena and Isaiah Rider waiting to greet him at the team's first practice in October, the NBA's all-time winningest coach (1,151 W's) suddenly has a lot to prove.

"A guy like Lenny doesn't feel like he has to pound the blackboard because he feels like it won't do any good," says ESPN's David Aldridge. "But it's a different type of player today. You can't just roll the ball out there and say 'Go!' anymore."

Two seasons ago, after the Hawks were eliminated in the first round by Charlotte, many players griped about practices they thought were too short and unproductive. Only Dikembe Mutombo and Alan Henderson remain from that squad. Rider not only has to replace Steve Smith's 18.7 ppg at 2-guard, he also must provide some veteran leadership behind Mutombo—not exactly J.R.'s strong suit. But it's hard to see Wilkens getting into Rider's face after another stupid 1 or 4-for-17 bricklaying job.

It doesn't get any easier on the other side of the backcourt. Rookie Jason Terry was taken 10th overall in the draft but was only the fourth point guard picked. Wilkens is none too fond of starting rookies



Wilkens has five guys like Anthony Johnson—24 or younger.

in the first place, but all he's got is journeyman Bimbo Coles behind Terry. "He bristles when you tell him he doesn't like playing younger guys," says one longtime Wilkens watcher, "but this year, he's got no choice."

That's not to say Wilkens, who's in the second year of a four-year, \$20 million deal, can't still coach with the best of the league's thirty- and fortysomethings. But leaning on experience he won't get him near those 50 wins, never mind something better than an early playoff exit. Mutombo is 33 and starting to creak, and the rest of the vets—Jim Jackson, LaPhonso Ellis and Lorenzen Wright—don't scare anyone. If fans were indifferent to last year's Hawks, they won't be lining up for this edition, either.

"Maybe with a younger team, he'll alter his style," says Aldridge of Wilkens, who turns 62 next month. Sounds like he doesn't have much choice.

-Mark W. Wright

Role Playing

Pacers rookie Jonathan Bender, sprawled on his stomach, is asking questions, locked in on the veteran's face as if not to miss a word. The veteran answers, remembering when he was the wide-eyed NBA newcomer asking the same questions. Which, for Al Harrington, was less than a year ago.

Harrington's role reversal began on draft night, when the Pacers dealt Antonio Davis to the Raptors for the No. 5 pick, Bender. After practically being adopted by Davis last year—living in his home the entire season—Harrington arrived at last month's Pete Newell's Big Man Camp with a high schooler looking up to him. Having spent more time last season in one-on-one drills than playing, he was the camp's best at sizing up a defender. "I think the game rather than just react now," he says.

Bender asked about training camp and NBA road life, both of which, Harrington warned, are different under Larry Bird from anywhere else. "You better be in shape, but no matter what, it won't be enough," Harrington says.

Harrington, 19, and Bender, 18, who both have the speed of a 2 and the size of a 4, will battle each other for minutes. But that won't affect Harrington: "I learned from Antonio that on the floor we're all business."

After Newell's camp ended, Harrington was in Indy furniture shopping for the house he'll rent this season. Is there room for Bender? "Naw," he says, laughing softly. "He's on his own there." -Ric Bucher

9.23- Chat Room

9.26 NBA bigwigs head to Vancouver to discuss, among other things, proposed rules changes.

