

CROWE'S NEST

Smith was a block chairman

JERRY CROWE

Even now, nearly 40 years later, Elmore Smith wonders why the Portland Trail Blazers kept tempting fate.

"It didn't seem like they were catching on," the

former Lakers center says. "They continued to try to score close to the basket and I just kept blocking their shots."

On Oct. 28, 1973, the 7-foot Smith swatted away 17 in all, setting a single-game NBA record that still stands.

"There have been a lot of talented guys that I thought would have broken it by now," Smith says, "but it just didn't happen."

Smith, 61, holds a unique place in Lakers lore: Acquired in a 1973 trade to replace Wilt Chamberlain, he was packaged two years later in the trade that brought Kareem Abdul-Jabbar.

In between, Smith lived in Inglewood, "right around the corner from the Forum," where he and wife Jessica often entertained and Smith developed his signature line of BBQ sauces, which he now sells in the Midwest and hopes to market nationwide.

"I just mainly made the sauce for family and friends," Smith says from his home in Beachwood, Ohio, a tony Cleveland suburb, "but it got to a point where it got too expensive to send out, so I started marketing it three or four years ago."

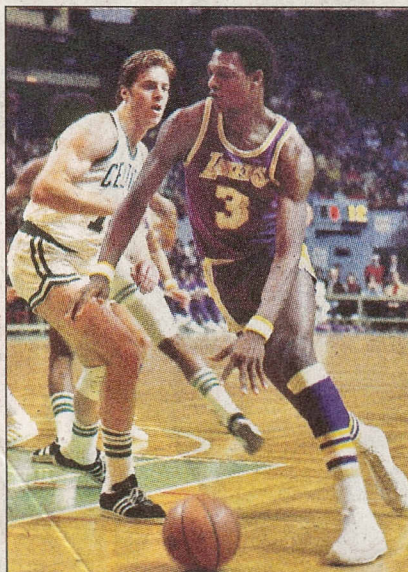
As the Lakers center for two seasons, Smith averaged double figures in points and rebounds and in 1973-74 led the NBA in blocked shots, averaging nearly five a game.

That was the first season that blocked shots were officially compiled by the NBA — this explains why 1950s and '60s stars such as Chamberlain, Bill Russell and Nate Thurmond are missing from the all-time leaders' list — and Smith got off to a flying start.

Three times in the Lakers' first 12 games Smith blocked 14 or more shots, a figure that has been topped only three times since, twice by Manute Bol and once by Shaquille O'Neal.

They each blocked 15.

When Smith blocked 17 against the undersized Trail Blazers on a Sunday



DICK RAPHAEL NBAE/Getty Images

REJECT MAN: Elmore Smith (3) blocked an NBA-record 17 shots against Portland in 1973.

night at the Forum — the visitors' starting center was 6-7 Lloyd Neal — he broke his own two-day-old record of 14.

Says Smith, who played all 48 minutes in a 111-98 Lakers victory, also tallying 12 points and 16 rebounds for an unusual triple-double, "I didn't realize how many I blocked until after the game, when people were asking me about it. You don't keep count of things like that."

Nor did the record seem to cause much of a stir, perhaps because blocks as an official stat were so new.

The game story in *The Times* focused on Gail Goodrich, who scored a career-high 49 points, and the Lakers' mastery of the Trail Blazers, who at that point were 0-17 against the Lakers.

Smith's feat wasn't mentioned until the 11th paragraph.

Smith, who grew up in Macon, Ga., was an unlikely candidate to set such an enduring record.

As a 5-11 high school freshman, he was all but kicked out of the gym by the basketball coach, he says, because he had no skills. But after sprouting to 7 feet over the next two years, Smith says, "The principal threatened me: 'If you don't go out for basketball, we're going to kick you off campus.'"

Making the team but rarely playing, he says he attracted three scholarship

offers "just by being tall and coordinated."

At Kentucky State, he and all-time college basketball scoring leader Travis Grant (another ex-Laker) led the Thorobreds to two NAIA championships before Smith was taken by the Buffalo Braves with the No. 3 pick in the 1971 NBA draft.

Two years later, after the Braves shipped him to the Lakers, Smith says he still wasn't quite sure of himself.

"To be honest," he says, "I never really began to feel comfortable playing the game until my last year in the NBA. I learned to really appreciate that the game wasn't as difficult as I made it out to be and I really began to enjoy it."

Shot-blocking, he says, came naturally to him.

"I had the unique ability to jump pretty high from a standing position," he says, "and I had pretty good timing."

Says Lakers assistant Jim Clemons, who played with and against Smith in the NBA: "E-mo was light on his feet. He had wonderful anticipation for a guy his size . . . and he played with his hands in kind of a cocked position so that at the last minute he could just kind of go get the ball."

After eight NBA seasons, however, Smith's knees told him his basketball career was over. He wasn't entirely pain-free, he says, until he had them replaced two years ago.

A father of three grown daughters, he makes public relations appearances for the Cleveland Cavaliers and spreads the word about Elmore Smith's All-Natural BBQ Sauces.

"Everybody that tastes it likes it," he says. "Since '74, I haven't had anybody say they didn't. They joke around and say they don't, but they always come back for more."

Tuning in to NBA games these days, Smith notes, leaves a less agreeable taste in his mouth.

"It aggravates me to watch guys go in and make layups," he says. "It's amazing that guys are not more conscientious when it comes to protecting the basket. I haven't seen a guard whose shots couldn't be blocked, but I guess you have to have the mind-set."

Smith had it.

It says so in the NBA record book.

jerome.crowe@latimes.com