

Martin a solid addition for fast-paced Lightning

By Jeffrey Dransfeldt

Thursday, July 2, 2009

Darrick Martin still has it.

He drives the baseline, spins toward the key and flips in the shot while absorbing contact for a three-point play. A few possessions later, Martin leads the fast break, pauses near the 3-point line and buries a jump shot.

Basketball is fun for Martin.

The former UCLA standout is no longer running the point for an NBA franchise, but as a member of the Los Angeles Lightning he is helping bring an up-tempo, exciting brand of basketball to Ventura County.

Martin is playing in a far smaller venue inside Cal Lutheran's Gilbert Arena than he grew accustomed to in the NBA. But he likes the satisfaction and interaction with fans and kids.

"It's amazing the respect and admiration they have for you. I give it back," said Martin.

"I've always played the game of basketball because its fun and I love to win. When it stops being fun to me, then it's time to do something else."

This season marked the second year for the Lightning, a member of the International Basketball League, under the stewardship of owner Mark Harwell.

The start-up franchise a year ago managed to bring back its core group of players this season and the benefits of the team's continuity has shown with it's 14-4 record going into today's playoff opener.

The Lightning begins the playoffs today in a semifinal game at 2:30 p.m. against the Seattle Mountaineers in Monroe, Wash.

Lamond Murray, Toby Bailey and Fred Vinson — all former NBA players — returned this season and the Lightning bolstered its roster with the additions of Martin, Bryon Russell and Juaquin Hawkins.

"Everybody's here and we're a lot stronger than we were last year," Lightning coach Ron Quarterman said. "A lot of talent here so that makes a big difference."

Only two years ago, Martin, 38, served as a backup to Jose Calderon on the Toronto Raptors.

He plays now for his love of the game. He remains confident that if another NBA team came calling he could suit up and play.

Toronto was the last stop in a 13-year career that included six games and two stints with the Minnesota Timberwolves and Los Angeles Clippers.

“If I had an opportunity, I think I could get in real NBA shape,” Martin said. “I think I could do it, definitely.”

The Lightning offers a faster pace of basketball that draws fans and allows players to move up and down the court at will. Los Angeles, which had a six-game winning streak snapped Tuesday, had won its previous six games by an average of 144-115.

“I love it,” Martin said. “I just can’t do it for as long a period of time as I would like to, so I have to pick my spots.”

Martin’s familiarity with the variety of NBA pros on the roster has helped as well. Martin actually joined the roster via a friendship with Russell, who called the veteran point guard after mainstay Kamran Sufi missed time with a knee injury.

“It makes the game so much easier for all of us,” Martin said. “If you’ve been watching us play, we know how to play with each other. We know our right defensive assignments without really saying (anything). We know offensively where to be. That just makes the game that much more enjoyable to play and that much easier to play.”

There appeared to be a youth movement in the recent NBA playoffs with Aaron Brooks, Derrick Rose and Rajon Rondo capturing the spotlight as young, promising point guards.

Even so, Martin believes a veteran’s experience can be invaluable.

“Prime example was the last two years I was in Toronto. I helped bring Jose Calderon along to where he is now,” Martin said. “And with the draft (on June 25) I saw so many young guards — freshmen, sophomores, one-year in college, one year out of high school — coming into the NBA, you need someone to teach them how to play.

“It can’t always be the coach or the assistant coach. It has to be somebody else in the locker room with them that can show them how to do it.”

Martin has continued to share that experience with members of the Lightning.