The ball is in Aldridge's court

But UT's Aldridge insists he is in no hurry to make the next move

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By CHIP BROWN / Staff Writer

LaMarcus Aldridge barely remembers the Grandmama commercials Larry Johnson made famous after the Skyline product parlayed a national title at UNLV into life as an NBA All-Star with Charlotte and the New York Knicks.

But he is well aware of the recent history of big men coming out of Dallas, thanks to the likes of Kenyon Martin, Kurt Thomas, Ike Diogu, Greg Ostertag, Tony and Derrick Battie and Chris Bosh. Time will tell if the Texas sophomore from Seagoville becomes the next great big man out of Big D. The first question is, how far can Aldridge lead eighth-ranked Texas in this year's postseason? The next question is, will this postseason be his last at Texas?

Several mock drafts project Aldridge as a lottery pick. Texas students began chanting, "One more year! One more year!" in the closing minutes of UT's 72-48 victory Sunday over Oklahoma.

Aldridge says emphatically, "I'm coming back."

"The NBA is not a concern right now," said Aldridge, who last month said that he sees himself as a four-year player at Texas. "We just have to keep winning.

"Our first goal was to win the Big 12, and we've done that. Now, we have to win the Big 12 tournament and go from there."

Aldridge hears his name being mentioned in the same breath with former Dallas high school big men who went on to success in college and the NBA, and he says he doesn't yet belong in that group.

"I just have to stay hungry and never be satisfied," said Aldridge, who averages 15.4 points and 8.9 rebounds and leads the Big 12 in field goal percentage (.605). "Coach [Rick] Barnes always tells me, 'Proud peacock today, feather duster tomorrow.' I just have to keep working hard to get better."

Getting stronger, developing a killer instinct late in games, showing he can handle the ball and hitting free throws are all things Aldridge can improve before moving on to the NBA. But Aldridge's willingness to be coached is evidenced by the growth he's shown this season. He's become consistent with his hook shot. He hits jump shots with perfect...
form from 15 feet and even has a turnaround, fadeaway jumper that is unstoppable.

"LaMarcus wants to make a difference," Barnes said. "As you project him down the road, I don't think he's even scratched the surface with his game. He has a chance to really separate himself and be one of the best."

No borders

Aldridge is the latest in a long line of Dallas-area big men to benefit from rules changes by the University Interscholastic League over the last 20 years that cleared the way for student-athletes to play unlimited non-school basketball.

In the days of the Southwest Conference, it seemed only college coaches in Texas got to see the state's top high school players. UIL rules forbade high school players from participating in summer basketball against other all-star teams from across the country.

"The best college coaches were going to the East or West Coasts to see other high school kids play off-season," said Mike Kunstadt, longtime basketball recruiting analyst and founder of Texas Hoops.com.

"It used to be a stigma that we were a football state and nothing else. But once the kids began competing against other athletes from other states, the level of competition, the quality of play and the quality of coaching improved."

ESPN college basketball analyst Fran Fraschilla remembers recruiting Dallas as an assistant to Gary Williams at Ohio State and as the coach at Manhattan.

"It used to be that you could slip into Dallas and steal some kids," Fraschilla said. "When the UIL allowed kids to play as much organized summer basketball as possible, the exposure exploded.

"The talent in Dallas was no longer a secret. Dallas became a destination for all the top coaches."

Who's the best?

Johnson remains the standard by which Dallas big men are judged. At one point, Johnson was the highest-paid player in the NBA with an unprecedented $84 million contract. He was a marketing gold mine who parlayed his smile, charisma and fiery disposition into a Converse endorsement deal as Grandmama.

The popular commercials showed Johnson in drag, wearing a gray wig, a pillbox hat, white-rimmed glasses and a floral dress while carrying a purse and flying through the air for monster dunks.

"Larry had a great work ethic, attitude and submissive spirit," said J.D. Mayo, Johnson's coach at Skyline. "He did whatever we asked him to do. His strength was off the chart, and he used his power and explosiveness to the maximum. Then add his toughness and focus, and he was destined for the NBA."
Said Fraschilla of Dallas' run of big men: "I think Johnson was the crown jewel of the bunch. But Chris Bosh is rising fast."

Leonard Bishop, Bosh's coach at Lincoln High School, is biased in his assessment of the best big man to come out of Dallas. Bosh, an NBA All-Star in his third season with Toronto, was averaging 22.8 points, 9.1 rebounds and 2.6 assists a game through Tuesday.

Bosh and Aldridge are good friends who talk all the time.

"When it's all said and done, I think Chris is going to end up the best because he can play inside and out," Bishop said. "He's a complete player. LaMarcus has tremendous upside because he's mature and loves the game. That's going to help make him a great player."

Fraschilla doesn't see the discussion about Dallas big men ending any time soon. South Oak Cliff power forward Darrell Arthur is one of the most sought-after high school players in the country. Kevin Rogers, a 6-9, 235-pound forward from South Oak Cliff, is a freshman at Baylor.

"It seems there's a top-25 big man being produced by the area almost every year, and it's no longer a surprise," Fraschilla said. "It's come to be expected that Dallas is going to produce high-level college players with potential NBA talent."

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BIG D's BIG MEN

The top big men to come out of the Dallas area, with Chip Brown's comment:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Player</th>
<th>Height</th>
<th>Weight</th>
<th>High school</th>
<th>College</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ira Terrell</td>
<td>6-8</td>
<td>208</td>
<td>Roosevelt</td>
<td>SMU, 1973-76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larry Johnson</td>
<td>6-7</td>
<td>235</td>
<td>Skyline</td>
<td>UNLV, 1990-91</td>
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<tr>
<td>Greg Ostertag</td>
<td>7-2</td>
<td>280</td>
<td>Duncanville</td>
<td>Kansas, 1992-95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kurt Thomas</td>
<td>6-9</td>
<td>235</td>
<td>Hillcrest</td>
<td>TCU, 1992-95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derrick Battie</td>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>South Oak Cliff</td>
<td>Temple, 1993-96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony Battie</td>
<td>6-11</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>South Oak Cliff</td>
<td>Texas Tech, 1995-97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenyon Martin</td>
<td>6-9</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>Bryan Adams</td>
<td>Cincinnati, 1997-2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris Bosh</td>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>Lincoln</td>
<td>Georgia Tech, 2003</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Taken fourth overall in 2003; scored career-high 37 in a game this season

Ike Diogu 6-8 255 Garland Arizona State, 2003-05

Rookie is averaging 6.1 pts., 2.8 rebs. in 13.9 minutes for Golden State