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Stewart has high hoops connections

By Phil Anastasia
Inquirer Staff Writer

With an economics degree from Brown University, Doug Stewart could discuss the particulars of the stimulus package with President Obama.

As the top assistant basketball coach at Oregon State, Stewart also could chat up the nation's chief executive on the intricacies of the motion offense.

But Stewart, a Haddonfield High graduate, has firsthand knowledge of the difference: He knows there are times when the president seems to prefer talking back-door cuts rather than budget deficits.

"He loves talking basketball," Stewart said of the sport's unabashed First Fan. "I guess he has all these other things that he has to deal with that have such huge consequences. It's like a great escape for him."

Stewart, who recently was inducted into the Haddonfield Athletic Hall of Fame, is the top assistant at Oregon State under Craig Robinson, the president's brother-in-law.

Robinson, who has revitalized the Oregon State program in his first season, is Michelle Obama's brother.

"I remember when I first started working with Craig at Brown," said Stewart, who was an assistant under Robinson at Stewart's alma mater from 2006 to 2008. "He said his brother-in-law was the U.S. senator from Illinois. I was like, 'Wow, it doesn't get any bigger than that.'"

Stewart, who prepares scouting reports and also is the program's recruiting coordinator, has helped Robinson create one of the college basketball's biggest turnarounds in Corvallis, Ore., this season.

Last season, Oregon State was 6-25; the Beavers were the first team in Pac-10 history to go 0-18 in conference play.

This season, Oregon State is 17-17 and in the championship round of the College Basketball Invitational, a two-year-old tournament for teams that aren't invited to the NCAA tournament or the NIT.

Oregon State beat Texas-El Paso, 75-69, on Monday in Game 1 of the CBI's unique best-of-three championship format.

In Pac-10 play this season, the Beavers went 7-11, sweeping both Cal and Stanford. Oregon State beat Stanford a third time this season in the semifinals of the CBI.

"It's been exciting to be a part of it," Stewart said. "I think it's something like the fifth-biggest turnaround in Pac-10 history."

Robinson said Stewart has played a big role in Oregon State's revival.

"Doug is a great basketball guy," Robinson said. "He has a great knowledge of the game. He was a good player, and he's a good teacher. He knows his X's and O's."

"But the main thing is that Doug is a terrific communicator with people. He engages everyone."

Stewart said Robinson, who was a two-time Ivy League player of the year at Princeton in the early 1980s, manages to separate the demands of his coaching position from his status as the president's brother-in-law.

But Robinson also left the team for a few days in January to attend the presidential inauguration. In his place, Stewart ran practices as Oregon State prepared for games at Cal and Stanford.

"We had to convince him to leave," Stewart said of Robinson. "I ran practices that week, and Craig came back for the games, and we swept Cal and Stanford on the road for one of the only times in the history of the program."

Robinson said Stewart "was running the show for us" during the head coach's time at the inauguration. Robinson said it was another indication the 38-year-old Stewart is ready to be a head coach.



Oregon State assistant Doug Stewart (left) chats with men's coach Craig Robinson, President Obama's brother-in-law. Both have been known to talk hoops with Obama.

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"There's not a doubt in my mind he's ready for that," Robinson said.

Stewart graduated from Haddonfield in 1989. As a senior, he was the leading scorer, averaging 22 points, for a team that won its first 31 games and captured the Group 2 state title.

"Doug was a great scorer for us," said Haddonfield coach Paul Wiedeman, who was the point guard on that 1989 team. "He was so intelligent and such a competitive guy. You could see him becoming a coach."

Stewart spent a year at Lawrenceville Prep, where he was coached by former Princeton star Armond Hill, which led to his connection with Robinson. Stewart then was a four-year varsity player at Brown.

Stewart spent five years as a player-coach for the Washington Generals, the team that travels with - and always loses to - the Harlem Globetrotters. He's been an assistant coach at Washington and Lee, Columbia, and Brown, as well as a head coach for two years at a junior college in Casper, Wyo.

Stewart was Robinson's assistant for two years at Brown. After the team won 19 games in 2007-08, Robinson got the Oregon State job and took Stewart with him to the Pacific Northwest.

Stewart said Robinson's connection with Obama has helped in recruiting and noted that Rivals.com has ranked Oregon State's incoming class as the 22d best in the country.

Wiedeman has no problem imagining his boyhood friend involved in a deep conversation with the president.

"I definitely could see Doug chatting it up with President Obama," Wiedeman said. "He's a pretty good schmoozer."

Stewart said he hasn't played basketball with Obama, who said during his campaign that he'd like to replace the bowling alley in the White House with a basketball court. But Stewart has talked hoops several times with Obama.

"He's the same guy you see on TV," Stewart said. "He's very deliberate and thoughtful. He's very intelligent. He's not a me-first guy."

"He's very passionate when it comes to talking about basketball. You have to stop him."

Contact staff writer Phil Anastasia at 856-779-3223 or panastasia@phillynews.com.

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