

Behind The Beavers Beat

Eyeing the future, embracing history

Posted by Daniel Uthman, Special to The Oregonian April 02, 2009 21:01PM

At halftime of Oregon State's College Basketball Invitational game Wednesday night, with the Beavers leading by five points, David Lucas reached over the head of Michael Johnson and high-fived Lamar Hurd, who was elbow-to-elbow with Mustapha Hoff.

The four former Oregon State men's basketball teammates, whose careers spanned from 1993 to 2007, celebrated as they watched the current Beavers on a flat-screen television from orange sofas in the basement of The Agency sports bar in Portland.

The viewing party, which included a dozen or so other fans, was the second of the week as Oregon State seeks to win its first men's basketball championship of any kind since Jim Anderson led the Beavers to a share of the Pacific-10 Conference title in 1989-90. And in some ways, the existence of such a gathering is as meaningful as the title that Oregon State would capture by defeating Texas-El Paso in the CBI's final game tonight.



Ross William Hamilton/The Oregonian
AC Green taking a more active role in the OSU program.

"The top programs are at the top because they have that continual support," Hurd said. "We're just trying to create that for Oregon State now, to make that family tradition."

Wednesday night's party was the latest in a series of events that have brought decades of Oregon State basketball alumni closer to the team than they have been in years. The events are a product of a number of factors, including first-year coach Craig Robinson's philosophy and sense of history, and former players' feelings of wanting -- and deserving -- to be closer to the program that they worked so hard for as collegians.

The fact that Robinson has the Beavers (17-18) in position to clinch only their second non-losing season since 1990-91 has helped strengthen the bond between the program's past and present faster than anyone imagined.

Reaching out

When Robinson was a player at Princeton, Oregon State was at its peak, winning three Pac-10 championships and 97 games in a four-year period. Yet when he arrived in Corvallis last year, replacing Jay John, that tradition wasn't reflected in former Oregon State players' connection to the school. So many years of losing and so much coaching turnover since the 1980s had left them crestfallen over what had become of the team they had known.

"When I got here, it was very clear that there was a rift between the former players and the school, for whatever reason," Robinson said. "I just found it odd that such a storied program with such a rich history didn't have a connection to the former players.

"I just think that no one really invited them out. Coming from a place like Princeton where I played and am an alum, it was amazing to me that there was such a disconnection. For a lot of players, their strongest connection to the school is through basketball, and they didn't have that here."

Robinson recognized it, and so did the Oregon State administration. Athletic director Bob De Carolis said via e-mail that during the interview process last spring he and Robinson discussed the value of connecting with alumni.

"It is quite important," De Carolis wrote. "To have your alums interested and connected to the program keeps alive the legacy. It also gives you an army of advocates out in the field for either recruiting, fundraising or just general interest. We want our alums in all sports to feel good about not only their experience during their college days but also to be proud of the current team."

Robinson said that on his first day on the job he sought input from former coach Jim Anderson, whose association with Oregon State dates back more than 50 years. Anderson suggested that it would be crucial for Robinson to get

the Beavers' former players back in the fold, and Robinson asked Anderson to help him with introductions when possible.

One of the first alumni Robinson met was former all-American Charlie Sitton. Robinson told him how important the alumni were to his plans, and he showed it soon after by speaking to 120 children on short notice at Sitton's annual summer basketball camp in McMinnville.

"He had everyone in the palm of his hands," Sitton said. "I was just thinking, 'I don't know if he can coach or not, but what a great person.'"

By fall, Robinson was hosting football game tailgates for past and present basketball players. Then he invited the former players, through Sitton and fellow all-American A.C. Green, to watch the current team play in the Civil War game Jan. 31 in Corvallis.

"He's just trying to involve everybody," Hurd said. "It's super-refreshing. We didn't have anything like that when we played. There was no basketball tailgate. There were no functions to come to. Now you have it. And you've got a guy who is taking the right approach to everything."

By January's Civil War, the alumni also had begun to take on the event-planning role. Hurd and Green suggested to a half-dozen former teammates that they meet up before the game. Word spread so fast that their get-together turned into a 300-person party next to Gill Coliseum in the Founders level of Reser Stadium. Steve Fenk, an Oregon State associate athletic director, said he's seen more former players at games since January than in the past 10 years combined.

Involving alumni

Those former players have helped in many -- albeit barely visible -- ways.

Lucas met with former all-American Steve Johnson over coffee to talk about ways the alumni could support the program. Hoff talked privately with Beavers guard Lathen Wallace in Beaverton last summer about how, after going 0-18 in the Pac-10 in 2007-08, this season would be Oregon State's chance to prove everybody wrong. Anderson has continued to make introductions and offer insights when asked. Hurd and Lucas next week will help run a clinic at the Rose Garden that bears Robinson's name.

Hurd, Lucas and others say they don't do these things to be ersatz assistant coaches. They do it because the best programs in the country employ similar practices, and because the current Beavers players endured so much negativity and criticism of their talent and performance -- internally and externally -- in recent years.

"We're happy for those guys, because we know what they went through," Hurd said. "We were on the inside of that program, and we know a lot of the stuff that happened, so just to see them winning now and to see them happy, it just means a lot. If anybody deserves it, it's them."

Following the Beavers

What: Oregon State at Texas El-Paso, CBI Championship

When: Friday, 7:05 p.m.

Where: Don Haskins Center, El Paso, Texas

On the air: TV on HDNet, radio on KPAM860

Lowdown: Deciding game in the CBI's best-of-three championship series. ... Oregon State took Game 1 in Corvallis, 75-69, and UTEP evened the series with Wednesday night's 70-63 victory in El Paso before a capacity crowd of 12,000 at the Haskins Center. ... "We did a great job of handling them, and their crowd," OSU coach Craig Robinson said. "If we had just gotten that last rebound." ... The Beavers were down 66-63 with 34.9 seconds left when they failed to rebound a missed free throw. ... Beavers' senior point guard Rickey Claitt was bothered by back spasms in Game 2, but Robinson said, "This is his last college game. He'll be out there." ... Also, point-center Roeland Schaftenaar -- who led OSU with 17 points in Game 2 -- is slowed by his chronically sore ankle. ... Being in the CBI's 16-team tournament, playing in a best-of-three series, and playing this late in the season are program firsts for the Beavers. ... Robinson said Game 3 "will come down to which team is tougher mentally. We're both tired. We're both sore and banged up. It's been a long season." The longest in OSU history, in fact.

--Paul Buker

Sitton said he couldn't emphasize enough how nice it is for him to see smiles on the current players' faces, win or lose, this season.

"It's unbelievable the way (Robinson) has turned it around with the same players who were there and who nobody wanted to coach," Sitton said. "It took a lot of courage for him to go in there and not bring in a bunch of (junior college) guys, to stick with the kids who were there."

Just as Robinson has relied on players who were at Oregon State when he arrived, he plans to rely on alumni who played for the Beavers many years before.

"It's so important, it's hard to even describe," Robinson said. "Your former players are the ambassadors for your program. They're going out in the neighborhoods and selling your program even more than you can do as recruiters. And you want them to say good things.

"We want our players to say it was hard, but it was fun, and we got better. Oregon State's been going without that for decades."

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