

TUCSON HEAT PROVIDES POSITIVE EXPERIENCE

By Brad Allis
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Recruiting camps are not a place to find feel good stories. Most of what comes out of AAU tournaments are about college and NBA bound athletes. Rarely do you hear about the coaches of a program unless they do something wrong.

The Tucson Heat is an exception to the rule. The team is not full of big-time prospects. There are maybe three D-1 players on the roster. The team has not won any tournaments. In fact, it is well under .500 over the summer. It may be getting better as a team, but that is not the important part.

Former Wildcat walk-on Jason Stewart took over the Heat two years ago. Initially he was looking at a way to start an educational foundation, but found the cost to be too prohibitive. He then looked toward basketball to try and give back to the community.

"The reason why I did it was I started to notice that in Arizona that the high school dropout rate is terrible," Stewart said. "I think we ranked last in the nation in education. Initially I wanted to start an educational program, but I didn't have the money to do a startup. Since the community knows me through basketball, I decided to use basketball as a means to an end and able to instill upon kids the value of education and the moral aspects of adulthood."

Stewart may not be the best-known player in the Lute Olson era. The guard walked on and wound up with a national championship ring. He was respected for his hard work, selfless attitude and knowledge of the game. He has used that knowledge as a broadcaster for Fox Radio in Tucson and now he tries to pass that onto his players.

"In everything there is a lesson," Stewart said. "Even when you lose you are winner because you learned something. Just because you are not the tallest guy on the floor, you can still make a difference."

To aid in his endeavors, Stewart went to one of the great role players to ever don the Wildcat colors. As a collegian, Justin Wessel did what was needed. He started out as a small forward and concluded his career in the paint. Many will remember him filling in for an injured Loren Woods during the 2000 NCAA Tournament with an ankle injury that should have kept him out for two weeks.

It was that selfless attitude, plus a great friend of mine and I asked to be my partner in this," Stewart said. "I know he and I think along the same lines."

The team gets the benefit of learning from two former Olson disciples. Most of the time their Wildcat lineage does not come into play, but every once in awhile they use their college pedigree to make a point.

"I'm 'Coach' to them, but if you feel like you are losing them you drop in a story," Wessel said. "You drop in an experience from the NCAA Tournament game or something you went through, like a personal experience from a Final Four game to help them relate. It helps to open their eyes. A lot of coaches have never really been at that level, they kind of lose guys sometimes. We can get their attention and make them listen up just a little bit more."

Of course they draw on their Wildcat experiences while dealing with their charges. Obviously they use the lessons taught to them by the Hall of Fame legend.

"We take 90 percent of everything we do from 'Coach O,'" said Stewart. "You really don't understand the complexity of Coach O's program until you play four years and graduate. They say hindsight is 20-20 and I fell like that. I didn't understand everything he was doing when I played for him, but when I find myself implementing his same strategies and implementing his same work ethic in my programs I see how it develops other aspects that I didn't know I was learning."

Another advantage they have is their youth. Both coaches are in their 20s not too much older than the players they are molding. It has not been all that long since they faced many of the same problems the current athletes are going through.

"Both Justin and I are fairly young, we relate to the kids on a certain level that maybe older guys would have a hard time," Stewart said. "That's probably when we are the most effective, the off-the-court stuff. On the court kids take instructions from whomever, as long as they know that you know the game. The off-the-court stuff that is where Justin and I can come in as young adults and try and straighten them out."

Things have been rough on the court for the Heat. Their roster has gone through a bit of an over haul in recent weeks, but a more stable line-up has made them much more competitive. When the summer started they competed in a tournament in Nike where the running joke was that they were 30-point underdogs in every game.

As they summer progressed, so did they. They hit the Pangoes Summer Shootout and looked like a different team. They went 0-3 in pool play, but took some quality programs to the wire. Powerhouse Belmont Shore, a Southern California team with at least five D-1 recruits, trailed by as many as 14 before the Heat just ran out of gas. They lost to Friso's Finest by a basket and had another disappointing second half in their final game that looked like a replay of the Belmont Shore match up.

"That was frustrating," Stewart said. "We get tired and start getting sloppy. We get behind and we start to press and make bad decisions. We have to work on that."

Even with their great intentions, keeping the team active is not easy. Stewart spends much of his time trying to raise funds. Down the line he'd like to be able to make enough to open a full-time education center to go along with the basketball program, but for now the Heat have to suffice.

"Tucson is such a small market, so everyone who is anyone is getting hit up for donations all the time," said Stewart. "We try to show ourselves as a unique organization. We're a non-profit organization out there trying to raise money for Tucson's youth."

While education and positive morals are a major focus of the program, basketball is still very important. The team has a number of very good players, including a few with legitimate college basketball aspirations.

"We've got some real quality kids and obviously we have some standout athletes as well," Stewart said. "Four or five could play at the next level."

Point guard Sean Howell has a reputation as a street ball player, but he has great athleticism and could play somewhere. Dewey Gradillas is a great outside shooter that is on the radar of some smaller schools. Quitten Jimmerson looks and plays like a mini Michael Wright.

The best prospect is 6-9 David Jackson, a mobile, athletic big man who will play college ball somewhere. The Rincon standout could develop into a special player.

"David Jackson is younger, so I have two years to work with him," Stewart said. "I expect great things from him."

While getting their players some scholarships would be great, it is not the emphasis. It's more important to keep kids in school and make them better people on and off the court.

"I definitely it is worthwhile to give our children something to look forward to when they are in school," Stewart said. "If we can do that we can improve the graduation rate. The X's and O's are easy. I mean I played for a Hall of Fame coach for four years. Basketball is an easy game. It is the rest of life that is hard."