

MassBay experiencing junior high

By Dan Shaughnessy, Globe Columnist | March 12, 2009



No bumpy van ride through the streets of Roxbury after the game tonight. No. The Massachusetts Bay Community College Buccaneers will retire to their Catskill Mountain Holiday Inn after playing Richland College (Texas) in the first round of the NJCAA Division 3 men's basketball tournament.

With a win, MassBay can make it to the JUCO Final Four in the three-day tourney held on the campus of SUNY-Delhi.

There are no charter aircraft or four-star hotels on the junior college basketball circuit. You won't see a lot of JUCO highlights on ESPN and you're probably not going to run into Billy Packer or Dick Vitale at the Floyd L. Maines Arena. Nobody's got MassBay Community College in his March Madness office pool.

The Bucs certainly aren't flush with cash. During the regular season, most of them rise early in their Boston homes, take the MBTA to Riverside, where they hop on a shuttle bus to MassBay's Wellesley campus. After school, the players ride in the team van to the Framingham campus for practice and home games. At the end of the long day, coach Billy Raynor puts most of his 15 players into the van and drives them home.

Raynor knows the route pretty well.

"Starting in Framingham, we go down Route 9," says the coach. "We cut over and go through West Roxbury and into Roslindale. We drop off Kerline [team manager Kerline Desir] next to the Archdale projects. We proceed down to Forest Hills Station, boom, drop off Sam [center Sam Etienne] and drop off Jakeen [guard Jakeen Cobb]. Then we proceed down Washington Street, boom, drop off Jordan [forward Jordan Moors] right before Egleston. Then we proceed down past the Shelburne, boom, drop off Deshawn [star forward Deshawn Gibbons]. Then we proceed to Dudley, drop off James [Barnes], [Alexander] Hoover, and Mike Nelson. Then we take a left and we proceed over to Roxbury Crossing, boom, drop off [starting point guard] Paul Rose. Then we do a U-turn, come back, and I go home [to Roxbury]. On game nights, I'm walking in the house, it's after midnight.

It's probably not the routine favored by Jim Calhoun or Al Skinner.

But this is not UConn and it's not BC. It's MassBay, an open-access, two-year public institution. It's a landing spot for a lot of Massachusetts kids who never got a break or perhaps let things slide during those high school years.

"Basically, I came here to fix everything that I did wrong in high school," says Gibbons, a former Division 4 star at Cathedral. "I wasn't a great student. I had to fix a couple of things.

"I was supposed to go to George Mason, but I went to prep school in Maine. Then my great-grandmother passed and I had to take care of my grandmother and all my SAT scores got wiped out and that's when I had to come here."

Rose, a Globe All-Scholastic last year at North Cambridge Catholic, says, "This is kind of like a second chance. I didn't do too well in high school. This is a chance to get my grades right so I can transfer to a better school and play at a higher division."

Raynor understands all of it. He grew up in Roxbury, where his dad was a cab driver. His basketball ability got him to Catholic Memorial, where he played for Ronnie Perry Sr. alongside King Gaskins and Fran Costello on teams that went 56-0 in his junior and senior seasons. That led him to Dartmouth, where he was a star guard. That led to coaching at places like Harvard, Brown, and eventually Holy Cross, where he was head coach for five years. After leaving Holy Cross, Raynor served as director of recreation for the City of Boston. Four years ago, he came to MassBay.

He has seen the Bucs' record rise along with their grade-point averages.

"My first year as head coach we had six players and three flunked out at midterm, so we became a club team," he says. "The next year we lost five guys at midterm. The GPA of the first three teams was 1.7, 1.9, and 1.8, respectively. This year, it's 2.7 and we've had the same guys all year. Our record is 25-5, but the biggest success is that we started with 15 players and we've got 15."

Raynor's Ivy years give him perspective, and clarity of purpose.

"From A to Z, everything's different," he says. "In the East, people do not hold the same

reputation for community colleges that they do in other parts of the country. When I was at Harvard or Brown, we'd look at kids from community colleges. The state supports it as part of the educational process. Here community colleges unfortunately are looked at as a dumping grounds - 'Oh, you weren't good enough to get into someplace, so you came here.'

"The majority of our group are young males of color. It's a shame for them to play a year and get so far behind the eight ball academically, they never regain their eligibility status. Clearly a problem, not just here but throughout the country. We've got tough kids, kids who clearly have some academic shortfalls, then you throw in the social problems that a lot of them have, the economic crisis that has affected a lot of their families. For them to show up every day says a lot.

"My signature story is a young man names Jose Zayas. Jose has two young children, has his own apartment, and was captain of our basketball team. He worked on campus at the fitness center 20 hours a week at school, then from midnight to 6 a.m. he worked at a gas station in Mattapan. Still, he was a 3.0 student and president of the student government. He played at UMass-Boston this year. So when my kids come in and complain about anything, I don't want to hear it. That kid is my hero.

"I grew up in Mission Hill. I'd walk outside and there'd be garbage and abandoned cars and dirt. But you see it every day and you think that's how life is. Then somebody takes me to the country and you're like, 'Oh, there's green grass.' These kids' world view isn't as broad as a lot of kids. They're not thinking in terms of economic structure of the world. They're thinking about the immediacy of 'Can I get through today? Can I get through next week?' "

"I call this a grind because you grind it out," says Gibbons. "You have to work harder than the next guy because you don't have everything. At first, I felt like people were looking down on me for being here. But now I love it. I felt like I got better. I have a great coach that has assisted me getting better and right now I feel like I'm ready to go play and do major things."

Like win a national championship.

In the name of Massachusetts.

Massachusetts Bay Community College.

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