



Coaching *the* Lessons of Life

Ernie Kent's Self-Improvement Program helps his players find success on and off the court



BY CHRIS HANSEN
Assistant Sports Editor

Ten years ago, having just been hired as an assistant basketball coach at Colorado State, Ernie Kent brought his family home to the United States after seven years in Saudi Arabia.

He didn't like what he saw.

Things in America had changed. Society had changed. To be successful, or just the opportunity to be successful, young men and women had so many more obstacles to overcome. Violence, drugs, AIDS, a divorce rate so high that nearly half the children in America were being raised in single-family homes.

"I looked at our society and saw how much it had changed and how many negative things there were and....," Kent says, slightly shrugging his shoulders.

And? And he went to work, beginning with the players on the Colorado State team. Kent created what is known as the Self-Improvement Program.

It starts at the bottom and works its way up, educating players on everything from proper eating etiquette, how to dress for success, how to conduct oneself in an interview and résumé writing. It educates the players on subjects such as AIDS, relationships, date rape and conduct befitting an adult male.

Kent has brought in police officers, taken his team to career fairs dressed in suit and tie, had a husband and wife team come in to talk about re-

lationships, etc.

And then he just educates. Stressing the importance of academics and taking advantage of all the opportunities that come with a college education and a college diploma.

The program blossomed at Saint Mary's, where Kent coached from 1991-97, before taking the Oregon job in April of last year. When he arrived at Saint Mary's, the team's combined GPA was 1.9 and in his first season the Gaels went 13-17. When Kent left the team after last season, the team's GPA was hovering around 3.0, six players made the dean's list, the team went 23-8 and received a berth in the NCAA Tournament.

That is the type of improvement Kent, along with assistant coaches Greg Graham, Jay John and Mark Hudson, hopes to make at Oregon.

"We're kind of at the same level here as we were at Saint Mary's in terms of guys being scattered in their academics and scattered in their lives," Kent says. "They have really missed the boat in terms of what college athletics and the college experience is suppose to be about. We are trying to bring all that back into focus. If they continue to buy into it, they will be very successful here."

The struggle is getting the team, particularly a new team stuck in old ways, to buy into the program. After all, the first eight weeks of the program begin before the season starts and takes up most of the players' Saturdays and Sundays.

"At first I thought it would just bore me," Oregon forward Henry Madden admits. "But once

we got in there and listened to people talk and started to participate, we were able to see how this would help us grow."

Even if the players didn't accept the program with open arms, too bad, Kent says, it is something they need to know. As it happened, though, the program was welcomed by the players.

"Anytime you institute any type of change," Kent says, "it's difficult for everybody. Basketball is basketball. It doesn't change. You don't let them score, beat them on the boards, then go to the other end and play offense. Where we make the biggest difference as a staff is the accountability and the caring that takes place off the floor."

"Academics are a huge concern of mine and something I personally take responsibility for. I think these guys are shocked to see how much time we monitor them academically to make sure they are on course and where they should be."

But it's more than academics. Kent, acting as a male role model, makes sure the players are on track to become responsible, successful men, also.

"I would probably say that 70 percent of this basketball team is from single-parent backgrounds," Kent says. "In most cases, that is with no dad. Not having that in your life is just huge. They have missed out on a lot, and they aren't even aware of what they've missed out on. We are able to reintroduce that into their lives and strengthen them as men and it will make them better husbands and fathers down the road when they leave the Universi-

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