

Beaver: Benjamin scored 36 points against ASU

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erhouse Fontana High School, where he led the team to three straight 20-plus win seasons.

After graduation, Corey Benjamin was named a McDonald's All-American, a second-team All-American by both USA Today and Parade Magazine, and player of the year in California by Cal-Hi Magazine for averaging 27.6 points and 11.5 rebounds as senior.

Benjamin also carried the burden of being Oregon State's most heralded recruit ever, a label that would intimidate even the most confident player.

But not Benjamin.

"There wasn't any pressure," he says of coming to a program that hadn't had a winning season since 1990. "I was just trying to improve myself as a basketball player. I wasn't thinking about anything else."

Benjamin went to work immediately on those improvements, which included both on- and off-court effort. He says his all-around game has improved because of those efforts, but his maturation off the court, as well as gaining bulk through weight

lifting, is equally important.

Those improvements become immediately obvious when the performances of both Benjamin and the team this season are contrasted with those from 1996-97.

The Beavers finished 7-20 last season, but surpassed that mark just 10 games into the 1997-98 season.

While Benjamin was the Beavers' top returning scorer from last season with 14.9 points per game, he is third in the Pac-10 in both scoring and steals this season, with 19 points and more than two steals per contest.

Benjamin admits it was hard to perform night in and night out on a team that was struggling, but he was able to put that behind him for one simple reason.

"I love to play," he says. "I just go out and play hard and hope everybody else behind me plays hard."

While that is not a difficult expectation in the ultra-competitive world of the Pac-10, there is a distinct difference between playing hard and winning. But Benjamin is convinced the Beavers have what it takes to be successful.

"Players here want to win," he says. "They know what it takes to win, and we are capable of being a winning program. We just put everything on the table and do whatever it takes."

But there have been nights when putting everything on the table isn't enough, and it's on those nights that Benjamin shows his true abilities.

"He went down and single-handedly beat Arizona State," Oregon's Henry Madden says of Benjamin's 36-point effort in Oregon State's win over the Sun Devils last Sunday. "He's living up to the hype and showing people some things."

Benjamin avoids any personal recognition, preferring instead to talk about the team.

"We're just trying to get more wins than we had last year and be the most improved team we can be," Benjamin says. "You can't stop wanting to be better, and I just want to be better."

If Benjamin continues to improve at such an astounding rate, the inevitable question of his entry into the NBA draft becomes even more pressing.

"I've thought about it, and I'm

still thinking about it," he says. "I'm sure everybody wants to go there, and I have the opportunity to think about it, but right now I'm trying to focus on what I have to do right now."

Not only does he have the opportunity to think about it, Benjamin is considered by some to be one of the top five NBA prospects in the Pac-10.

With that kind of potential, every game becomes less of an opportunity to perform and more of a need to avoid a career-threatening injury, which Benjamin cannot ignore.

"It comes to mind, but it happens to everybody," he says.

"Everyone gets hurt that one time. You just deal with that in your own way."

"If I do get injured, I'll deal with it. If I don't, I'll take [basketball] as far as it's going to take me."

If basketball does indeed take him as far as the scouts believe, that journey from Compton to Corvallis will seem like a small step in the giant leap that represents not only one of Benjamin's thunderous dunks, but his career as well.

SPORTS BRIEFS

Martin gets support from Capitol Hill

WASHINGTON — Disabled Eugene golfer Casey Martin won support from Bob Dole on Capitol Hill Wednesday in his bid to ride a golf cart during PGA tournaments.

"PGA does not mean 'Please go away,'" said Dole, who applauded Martin with a right hand that is withered from a war injury. "He's here to play."

The former presidential candidate appeared at the Capitol with Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa. The two sponsored the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Martin is using the legislation as the basis of his challenge against the PGA Tour. His case goes to trial Monday in Eugene.

Dole said he hoped for a compromise, but Martin does not anticipate a settlement.

— from the Associated Press



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