

Sophomores, coach say goodbye to friends

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Sports Editor

Two years ago, Karen Twain watched a quiet, 6'1" center play in her final game for West Linn High School.

Twain, the women's basketball head coach at Clackamas, had landed this young prospect as one of the team's top recruits. Her name ... Robbie Nix.

Nix was a standout in high school and had had some offers from four-year universities. Her grades, however, kept her from attending a larger school and that is when Nix decided to play for Coach Twain's Cougars to better herself both academically and as a player.

That is the case for most of the top community college players—to prepare themselves for bigger things. For Nix, Clackamas was a staging ground, a place to grow as a student and as a basketball player. It has prepared her for the life of a Portland State Viking. Nix signed her letter of intent to play at PSU last November.

While some use the community college level as a building block for their career, other players use it as a way to prolong their life in basketball.

Denise Bean, a loud-spirited player from Oregon City High School, joined the team two years ago as well. She saw limited action as a freshman but worked intensely over the summer to improve her game and it showed.

Bean was the leading scorer in a number of games throughout this past season and was a vital part of the Cougars' run for the Southern Division title. What had started out as an incoming freshman wanting to play more basketball became a solid player who had earned the right to continue her days as a basketball player. Recently, Bean has been contacted by a number of schools that are interested in her talent.

These two sophomore players are not alone. Six recruits from 1996 remain as Cougars. From the moment Lauren Mohan stepped onto the floor two winters ago, she was the team's starting point guard. She too, has received numerous offers to help teams of four-year schools.

Michelle McKinney, a San Diego State recruit chose not to attend the California school so she could raise her son. She spent the past two years in her hometown of Oregon City as a Cougar and now has the option once again to play for a bigger school.

Mattie Walsworth stepped in just before the regular season began last year and has been part of the team ever since. Walsworth, a standout volleyball player, plans to attend a university on a volleyball scholarship next fall.

Melissa Hollenbeck, known to her friends as Mo, was one of the league's top players as a freshman. She injured her knee playing for the volleyball team, however, and along with Krystal Nakamoto's grade ineligibility the two players were forced to miss the season.

While each of these six players have contributed countless hours for the success of the team, they created a special bond between one another.

"It's going to be really hard leaving this team," said Nix. "I know that I'm not going too far away and I know that many of [the freshmen] are coming back but these are great people and it's hard knowing that I'm not going to be part of that. All of the sophomores are going to do really well wherever they go. Both off and on the court, it's been a great season."

"It's like one big family," said Bean. "You play with them throughout the whole season and then it's over and now there's nothing left. Now it's like 'What do I do now?' I'm going to go to a new team and it's not going to be the same."

"I've been around Robbie, Mo and Krystal and everybody else for two years," said Mohan. "You live with these people, you see them every day for two straight years and then it's just 'Hey, see you later' and you go in your separate ways. It's hard."

"I'm glad I came here but the worst part is that it's just like starting over. It's hard to leave your friends. If I could, I'd play all four years at Clackamas with these girls."

When these ladies go in their own direction next fall, they will

create new bonds with their new teams.

"I'm a little bit scared because I don't know what to expect," said Mohan. "It's easier staying here because I'm around people that I know but it's making it easier knowing that Robbie's going to PSU and starting over and Michelle and everybody else is leaving. All of our sophomores are going somewhere new and starting over and so it's nice to know that they're going into the same thing that I am. I'm excited, but scared, but it's for the best because we all have to go on."

For some players, saying goodbye is harder for them than others. Hollenbeck has been with these players long as they've been with each other. Because of her injury, however, she still has her sophomore year of eligibility to play at Clackamas and will not move on with them.

"It's hard to see them go because we've been through a lot these past two years," said Hollenbeck. "They're such great players and athletes that I really missed playing with them this year and next year is going to be rough. We've got a good bunch of girls coming back so we should do okay."

Along with the departure of the sophomores, Clackamas Head Coach Karen Twain bids farewell to the Cougars.

After being head coach for the past five seasons, Twain's career in school administration has taken off in recent years and leaves little time for the joys of leading a team.

"It's going to be really tough to walk away from this team," said Twain. "There's a lot of things that I'm going to miss and some things that I'm not going to miss. One of the things that I definitely will miss will be the camaraderie of this team. I think that's what's made us win. I don't think the winning has caused the camaraderie, the camaraderie has caused the winning."

"The girls don't play with as much pressure when they're having fun. It doesn't make them think about how many wins and losses we have—it just makes them play and they play well. That's the hardest thing to leave about this team. It's not something that I choose to do, it's something that kind of necessitates itself just by the way things have gone with my career."

"I'm not going to be leaving right away," noted Twain. "I'm going to stick around through the spring and summer and help with recruiting and open gym and things."

Even after her departure, Coach Twain still plans to set time aside for her players.

"I've always promised my players that wherever they go, whether it's on the east coast or here, I'll go and watch at least one of their games. With Robbie going to PSU and a number of other players going to schools that are nearby, I'm sure that I'll still be going to a lot of games next year. Only next year it will be a little different. I'll be a fan."

Taking over the duties of head coach will be Jim Martineau. Martineau has been an assistant coach for the past four years and once played under men's basketball Head Coach Royce Kiser. Twain and the sophomores feel Martineau will fill the coaching position perfectly.

"I think Jim is going to be a great coach," said Bean. "He helped me so much as an assistant. I must say that it's sad to see Karen leave but she's given Jim the chance to do something that he's maybe wanted to do. She made the right decision to pass it on to him. They're just going to do awesome next year. I'm going to miss it because I wish he would have been my coach too."

"Jim and I have been working on the transition all year," noted Twain. "I'll still be around to help him with the transition this spring and he'll be ready to go in the fall. Jim's been a tremendous help to me over these past few years and now it's my turn to sort of



JOHN THORBURN / Clackamas Print

Karen Twain stepped down as head coach after the Cougars' season ended Friday. She leaves the team along with seven sophomores graduating this spring.

give some of that back. I've taught him some things since I've been here and he's taught me some things as well."

Since Twain's arrival five years ago, the women's basketball program has gone from mediocre to one of the top programs in the northwest, winning two regional championships and qualifying four times for the NWAACC tournament.

"There's some pressure coming in as the new head coach," said Martineau. "There's pressure because of what Karen has done to this program. She came in and really turned it around from pretty much nothing. We've got six or seven players coming back, Melissa Hollenbeck coming back, so there's a lot of pressure. I think more of it comes from me putting it on myself than anything else."

"Karen has been a great coach to work with. She's very open-minded to new ideas, she'll ask for your advice. She'll basically let you coach, she's not a control freak like some coaches are. I just hope that I don't turn out like those coaches."

Schools around the Southern Division also will see changes in coaching positions. Along with Twain, Dennis Melcher steps down at Chemeketa and Stephanie Carroll is leaving her position at Mt. Hood.

"This is probably the best time to do this," said Twain. "There's going to be a lot of changes around the league next year. I didn't want to leave when I had a so-so team. I wanted to leave when we were on top and that's where we are. With the talent that the team has coming back next year, they have a lot to look forward to."

"The biggest memory isn't going to be the wins and losses, but five years down the road if somebody asks me about this team, I'm going to say how much fun we had. It's a good way for me to go out."

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