

BMCC: Esene aims to coach in major college basketball or NBA some day

Continued from 1B

on our team that were fresh out of high school, which is rare at the junior college level. The first couple games, guys were nervous, a group had to adjust to the physicality, the speed of the game, and now I feel like we've caught up to that and now it's about finding ways to not only get caught up, but to get wins at this speed."

Esene, 37, is the definition of a city guy. He was born in New York, raised in Los Angeles, went to college in Hilo, Hawaii, and then lived in Portland for a decade. So it was quite the change of scenery when he moved to Eastern Oregon, and Pendleton specifically, when he accepted the head coaching job at Blue Mountain last summer.

"The city's been good to me," Esene said. "This is definitely a change for me to adjust to, but it's been pretty easy because the town of Pendleton is so nice."

He comes to BMCC with a wealth of experience, coaching at all levels from his time in Portland, as well as playing experience. He earned Division-II All-American honors while playing at University of Hawaii at Hilo and was the Pac West Conference Player of the Year in 2004-2005. After graduating, he went on to play five seasons professionally in Germany for the Ludenscheid Baskets.

And on the sidelines as



Staff photo by Kathy Aney

BMCC head men's basketball coach Osa Esene watches the action during Wednesday night's game against Treasure Valley in Pendleton.

a coach, Esene started out simply giving private skills lessons to grade school kids and over time founded the AAU program Ball Out PDX before coaching at the junior varsity level at Westside Christian and Centennial High in Gresham.

Then from 2013-2017, Esene was the varsity head coach for Centennial, where he helped turn around the program that went 7-17 his first season to a 16-10 overall mark in his final season. He also helped Centennial to three playoff appearances in the Class 6A tournament.

Things were great in Portland and Esene was happy. However, when the BMCC job opened up after Gavin Burt resigned in April, Esene saw a great opportunity for himself in Eastern Oregon.

"You can't be choosy when you're looking for a good opportunity," Esene said, "and if you have to make some sacrifices to leave your comfort to come and grow and develop as a person and as a coach, then it's no big deal."

Esene also knows the life of a junior college athlete, which he hopes to use to his advantage.

Prior to his Hawaii-Hilo days, he spent a short time at the NWAC school Grays Harbor College as he tried to get his academics on track for a four-year college. Kids that are just like he was then are ones he's recruiting now to help get BMCC out of the cellar.

"Junior college basketball is what you make it," he said. "It can be a waste of time, or it can be a great time. I mean that not only athletically but in the classroom as well ... I wasn't the strongest academically, so when I went to junior college I had to really lock in

because I knew the basketball side would take care of itself."

Esene doesn't hide the notion that BMCC won't be a long-term job for himself. He has higher aspirations than coaching junior college basketball in Eastern Oregon. His goal is to work hard enough to coach in the NBA one day, or if not there at a solid four-year college.

The school knows it likely won't be a long-term arrangement, either.

"At the end of the day, Osa's a guy that wanted a college job and we hired him," former BMCC athletic director Brett Bryan said. "There is no expectation of him to be here forever. We hope he can take our basketball program and build it up into something good."

He wants to be with the Timberwolves long enough to get the program going, which starts with recruiting. Esene plans to utilize all of his connections in Portland as a major hub, as well as looking in places such as Seattle, Los Angeles and Las Vegas for players that can be the building blocks.

He is learning that selling kids to leave their urban bubbles to come to a rural area, like Pendleton, can be a challenge in itself. But he is trying to open their eyes to the area, much like his were before taking the job.

"I always let the kids know that this is temporary," he said. "I'm not telling you to come raise a family. I'm asking to come out here and

do two years of college and then move on with the rest of your life. I know you're full of energy and life right now at a young age, but you can sacrifice a little bit ... in any goals or dreams that you have you're going to have to let something go to get what you want.

"I think this is a great community to focus in and be a student-athlete and grow as a person."

As for the program growing, Esene says this program just needs a few of the talented athletes that wouldn't give BMCC a look to take a chance to be part of the foundation for a successful program.

"This program has a lot of upside. There's great facilities here, a great basketball court and a great athletic program with a lot of support," Esene said. "The potential for greatness is here, we just need to find some bodies that are going to be here to ride this out and build this up."

"I know everybody looks at the record and sees that we're struggling, but this is the beginning, the blueprint, of something big."

And for the current group of Timberwolves, they believe in Esene's vision for the program and are doing everything they can to be the first few of those necessary building blocks.

"He really wants to change this around," Landeros said. "He really wants to push and turn this around and he puts a lot of time and effort into it and I hope it pays off."

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