

The New York Times

Wednesday, March 28, 2012

AT WAGNER, A NEW COACH'S RAPID RISE

By ZACH SCHONBRUN

Bashir Mason's first call after he was hired as the Wagner's men's basketball coach Sunday night was to his mother, Kathy, in Jersey City.

He could barely contain his excitement. "Her response was, 'O.K.,' " Mason said with a laugh. "That was it. Then she started talking about something else."

His mother's nonchalance did not seem to surprise him — Kathy Mason, while always supportive of her only son, was also the calming influence who kept life's developments in perspective. As a single mother, she worked three jobs to support her three children, and basketball was rarely her focus.

For Bashir Mason, basketball has rapidly evolved from an activity to a pursuit to a career. On Tuesday, he was officially promoted to replace Dan Hurley at Wagner. Hurley left to become the coach at Rhode Island on March 20.

At 28, Mason becomes the youngest N.C.A.A. Division I basketball coach in the country — North Carolina-Greensboro's Wes Miller, 29, is next. Mason is five years removed from his senior season as Drexel's point guard and has had only one year of head-coaching experience — leading the 2007-8 boys' postgraduate team at St. Benedict's Prep in Newark.

His swift promotion is an eyebrow-raising development considering how Hurley's success raised the visibility of Wagner's program nationally and the stakes of the university making a sound hire. After a program-best 25-win season before losing to Robert Morris in the semifinals of the Northeast Conference tournament, the Seahawks have built momentum and now Mason — who was not Hurley's top assistant — has to sustain it.

"My goal in my life was to be a Division I head coach," Mason said. "Did I ever see it happening this quickly? Never. Not even in my dreams."

He added: "They took a huge chance on me. I want to make them look good because of it."

The name Bashir is Arabic for "one who leads," and some in Mason's extended family are Muslim, though he was raised Baptist in a three-bedroom house in the Greenville section of Jersey City. His father has been absent, Mason said, and Kathy Mason took care of him, his two sisters and their elderly aunt, Edna, who lived in the basement.

Kathy Mason worked full time as a home health aide, part time at the post office and on weekends at St. Mary's elementary school, earning enough to send Mason to the private Marist High School in Bayonne, N.J., and then St. Benedict's, where he met and played under Hurley.

As a 6-foot, 180-pound point guard, Mason was a defensive standout good enough to earn a scholarship to Drexel. Coach Bruiser Flint called Mason, a four-year starter, one of the most mature players he had ever coached.

Mason earned a momentary glimpse of national fame by banking in a one-handed, half-court shot at the buzzer to defeat Virginia Commonwealth as a sophomore in 2005, hopping onto the scorers' table in jubilation.

Few who saw the highlight knew that it was Mason's first play-calling experience: he told the inbounder, Danny Hinds, to change the play and pass to him instead of the team's leading scorer, Phil Goss.

"It was designed for me to, like, set a screen," Mason said. "But I called my own number."

After graduating from Drexel, Mason had offers to play for teams in Portugal, Mexico and the Czech Republic. But he held off, and discussed his future with Hurley, then at St. Benedict's. Sensing Mason's hesitation about playing overseas, Hurley told him he had a spot as the coach of the St. Benedict's postgraduate team.

"I said, 'O.K., I'll be the assistant coach for that,' " Mason said. "He said, 'No, you're the head coach.' I was like, 'But I've never coached a game.' "

That team went on to win the state title. Hurley hired Mason as his assistant at Wagner in 2010.

His promotion marks the second consecutive time that Wagner's athletic director, Walt Hameline, has hired someone with no Division I coaching experience.

This is also a team with four starters returning; a top prospect — the Michigan State transfer Dwaun Anderson — set to join; and a newfound buzz in the campus's 2,100-seat Spiro Center, all of which Mason is expected to maintain.

"There's more to it than just coaching a team," said Dereck Whittenburg, who coached Wagner to its only N.C.A.A. tournament appearance, in 2003. "It's a position of leadership. For a young man like him, he's just going to have to continue to learn those traits as he goes along. And at the same time, he has to win."

Hameline said he fielded "hundreds" of inquiries about the opening and said interest was higher than ever. But Mason, that mild-mannered young man from New Jersey who looks spry enough to still be banking in buzzer-beaters, seemed a risk worth taking.

"He's young," Hameline said. "He's enthusiastic. He cares. And he's going to be real good."