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Mason adept at teaching on court, in classroom

by TOM MAHON

A lot of coaches consider themselves teachers, including Bashir Mason.

But unlike his contemporaries, Mason, the head men's basketball coach at Wagner College in Staten Island, N.Y., actually spends time in a classroom.

Mason, the starting point guard at Drexel for four seasons (2003-2006) is a student teacher at the Petrides School, a 5-minute drive from Wagner.

He has been teaching first and fourth grades since Sept. 9. The stint will end on Dec. 13 when he completes the requirements for his master's in early childhood education.

"I'm actually looking forward to the end," said Mason, who at 29 is the youngest Division I men's hoops coach in the nation. "I get up at 6:30 every morning, then teach from 7:30 to 9:30, then hold practice [at Wagner] from 10 to 1, and then go back to school until 2:30."

You won't find John Calipari keeping that schedule.

The biggest difference between the court and classroom?

"My tolerance for my students," Mason said. "With my team, there's zero tolerance for lack of effort. But with my students I put the kid gloves on. My players say they want me to be that with them."

Mason became the Seahawks head coach in March of last year after serving as an assistant for two seasons.

The Seahawks went 19-12 last season and are 2-2 heading into tonight's game against visiting Vermont.

Mason, who is still in playing shape, is a hands-on coach who practices with the team every day.

On the court, he's a scream-machine, challenging his players to put forth their best efforts.

In the classroom, he's far more subdued.

On many days you can find him sitting in a rocking chair while reading a story to a group of wide-eyed youngsters.

"My teaching is all feel. Trial and error," he said. I make a lot of mistakes. But because of coaching, I'm comfortable working with kids. The situations are similar - I'm teaching.

"Every kid learns differently, they have different learning styles. On my team, I'm trying to reach 13 guys. In the classroom, I have 25 students in first grade and 35 in fourth. But in the classroom or on the court, when the kids actually get it, that's the greatest feeling: when you actually help someone."

Mason and his team come to town next month to play at Penn (Dec. 7) and La Salle (Dec. 19).

Bruiser Flint, his coach at Drexel, said he can't attend the Penn game because the Dragons are hosting Tennessee State that night. But, he's planning on being in the stands at the Tom Gola Arena for the La Salle tilt.

“[The entire staff will] all be there when he comes to town,” Flint said. “That’s the way we are. We support one another.

“He came to see us play at Rutgers [on Tuesday]. We talked at the game. We talk all the time.”

Flint said Mason displayed a penchant for coaching when he played for the Dragons.

“He was pretty much coaching while he was here,” Flint said. “He would try to get me to take players out of the game.

“I argued with him more than any player I’ve ever had. I used to tell him he wasn’t the coach.”

Flint said he went so far as to put a good-natured curse on Mason.

“I told him that someday I hope he gets a player just like he was,” the coach said with the laugh.”

When pressed, Flint turned serious about the seasons he shared with Mason.

“He was probably the toughest player I’ve ever had,” Flint said. “He would always ask me, ‘Why are we doing this? Why are we doing that?’ But he was unquestionably the leader of the team. And to this day he is the undisputed leader among all the guys who played with him.”

Flint said he isn’t shocked Mason became a coach, but is surprised he is still student-teaching.

“When he took the job [at Wagner] he was a graduate assistant so he had to go to school and they gave him student housing [as part of the deal]. When he was hired full-time, he could have quit, but he told me that he wanted to finish. I’m very proud of him for sticking with it.”

Ask Mason and he’ll tell you got his determination and drive from his mother, Kathy.

“I give her all the credit [for my success],” Mason said. “She worked three jobs. She was a home-health aide for 30 years. She worked at the post office at night and she volunteered at my grade school [St. Mary’s in Jersey City, N.J.] on the weekends so we could get reduced tuition.

“She sparked the fire in me to work hard.”

Looks like the coach/teacher learned from the best.