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colorado classics

A big man who was not shy to play big

Reporter Irv Moss writes about stars from the past

By Irv Moss
The Denver Post

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Shaun Vandiver had 1,876 points and 962 rebounds at the University of Colorado. (Associated Press file photo)

Go ahead and call Shaun Vandiver's game old-fashioned.

Even today, as an assistant basketball coach at the University of Wyoming, he doesn't mind being

connected to a time when playing center meant you were "the man."

"When I played, it was about being physical under the basket," the former University of Colorado star said. "You had to be the biggest and baddest dog on the block."

Vandiver fit his description perfectly in his time at CU (1988-91). At 6-feet-10, 240 pounds, he commanded respect. He led the Buffs in scoring and rebounding each of his three varsity seasons, his junior season being the best when he averaged 22.3 points and 11.2 rebounds.

"I still believe that games are won or lost by the play in the low post," Vandiver said. "But you have to be willing to stick your nose in there and get a little dirty. You had to have the philosophy that you were going to get every rebound, and it was you against the nine other players on the floor. How many times do you see two players from the same team give up on a rebound when they think their teammate has it?"

Vandiver played with his back to the basket, as did most centers at the time.

"Today's players at the center spot seem more comfortable stepping away from the basket," Vandiver said. "They don't embrace posting up and like to play more on the perimeter. I was a throwback to a more structured game, but I also knew where my bread was buttered."

Vandiver scored 1,876 points and grabbed 962

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rebounds at CU, and he also helped leave another coveted mark on the program. The Buffs went 19-14 during his senior season under first-year coach Joe Harrington and made it to the final four of the NIT, becoming the only CU team in the past 35 years to win its final game.

The Buffaloes lost 88-78 to Oklahoma in the semifinals of the tournament but came back for a 98-91 victory over Massachusetts for third place.

"The postseason is a great time of the year for any college basketball player," Vandiver said. "Everyone wants to keep each season going as long as they can. You never know if you'll get another shot."

He remembers the Buffaloes arriving in New York City for the semifinals in a postseason frame of mind.

"You've learned just how critical each possession in a game is and the margin for error is very slim," Vandiver said. "Most of the time it's win or go home."

Vandiver said there's no secret to making postseason play. You need top recruits.

"You have to get three or four players who are difference-makers and a strong supporting group together at the same time," Vandiver said. "My senior year at CU, my numbers were down, but we had a better team."

After he left CU, Vandiver thought he would play in the NBA. The Golden State Warriors selected him in the first round of the 1991 NBA draft. However, he and the Warriors couldn't agree on a contract, and he opted to play in Europe.

"It was memorable to hear David Stern (the NBA commissioner) call my name in the first round," Vandiver said. "It was a transition to play in Europe. The lifestyle and the games were slower. I have no regrets."

Vandiver isn't the only member of his family making a difference for Wyoming's basketball program. Aubrey Vandiver, his oldest daughter, just completed her junior season on the women's team. She reached the career 1,000-point level this past season and was a key contributor in the Cowgirls' winning the 2007 WNIT title, making the NCAA field in 2008 and getting into the WNIT this year.

"I wasn't blessed with great athleticism," Vandiver said. "I had to work all the time on my footwork, and I had knee problems. Basketball was a choreographed dance in my mind. It was being in the right place at the right time."

This time of the year, being at the dance is the right place at the right time.

Vandiver bio

Born: June 15, 1968, in Chicago.

High school: Romeoville (Ill.) High School.

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College: Colorado.

Family: Wife Danielle; daughters Aubrey, Amber, Alessandra; sons Garin, Gage.

Hobbies: No time for anything but basketball.

Future: Becoming a head coach and leading a program to victory.

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