



Ex-Buffs team up to coach Bighorns

By Ryan Thorburn
Saturday, April 11, 2009

BOULDER, Colo. — Today's young players aren't the only ones chasing the dream in the D-League.

Two of the all-time performers in the history of Colorado basketball -- Jay Humphries and Donnie Boyce -- are honing their coaching skills in the developmental league while waiting for a chance to get to the next level.

Humphries is the head coach of the Reno Bighorns and a strong candidate for D-League coach of the year. The expansion franchise got off to a 1-12 start but is now one game under .500 after winning four of its last five games. Reno hosts the Colorado 14ers in the regular season finale today.

During the middle of the season, Humphries brought in Boyce -- who was CU's all-time leading scorer for 13 years until Richard Roby passed him in 2008 -- as an assistant coach/protégé.

The D-League is all about getting an opportunity to prove yourself, on the court or the bench.

"I would classify it as enjoyable," Humphries, who played 11 seasons in the NBA after his brilliant career with the Buffs, said during a recent interview with the Camera. "The travel isn't what it was in the NBA, but it's bearable. I just love the game. I love running my ownshow. It has been very enjoyable."

When Boyce was a player at CU he had a chance to meet Humphries -- who averaged 11.1 points and 5.5 assists during his career with the Phoenix Suns, Milwaukee Bucks, Utah Jazz and Boston Celtics from 1984-95 -- and kept track of his career over the years.

It never hurts to know another Buff in the business.

"I first met Jay my freshman or sophomore year and I always teased him about how I was wanting to erase his records in the stat books," Boyce said. "I always followed what Jay was doing and knew he was on the bench with the Phoenix Suns. I thought I could learn a lot from him."

Humphries rejoined Alvin Gentry -- a former CU assistant who recruited him to Boulder -- in Phoenix as assistants under Mike D'Antoni during the 2007-8 season. This year Gentry was elevated to interim head coach when Terry Porter was fired.

Ironically, Humphries' first hire in Reno was Tom Abatemarco, a former CU assistant under Joe Harrington who recruited Boyce to Boulder.

All three ex-Buffs are now working the bench together in Reno.

"Tom and I had mutual friends. He had come through CU and had a lot of basketball experience. We've learned from each other. The pro game is different from the college game and I've learned a lot from him," Humphries said. "I didn't

know Donnie that well when I brought him in, but he was a Colorado guy and wanted to get into coaching. He went to NBA (coaching) seminars, and I wanted to see if I could help him."

The job of a D-League coach is to help players get somewhere else, whether it's the NBA or in a well-respected foreign league. Boyce -- who spent two seasons with the Atlanta Hawks before playing professionally in France, South America, Spain and China -- has been there (almost everywhere), done that.

"You want to play on the top level, and that should be everyone's goal as a player. That should be their No. 1 desire," Boyce said. "But sometimes it's not about the NBA, but having a chance to get paid well and experience a different culture. ...

"It's tough to get into the NBA. You have to work very hard and be committed and passionate. And you have to be humble. The toughest part, but it sounds so easy, is that you just have to have one team that likes you. But there are a million of guys trying to get in there."

There are also a lot of strong and well-qualified candidates whose dream job is to be a head coach in the NBA or at a major college program. Humphries' goal is to get one of those gigs some day.

"Everything is situational," Humphries, 45, said. "I've always thought my communication skills and basketball knowledge have been strong enough to run a program. I love the excitement of figuring out what needs to be done to get better. I'm definitely still looking to be the head coach for a college or an NBA head coach."

Humphries owned 16 CU records when he left for the NBA and he remains the program's career leader in assists (562), steals (309) and minutes played (3,864).

Boyce scored 1,995 points from 1991-95 while Humphries scored 1,306 points from 1981-84.

"It's definitely been a great experience to see how Jay handles the players," Boyce said. "If I was still a player I'd like to play for Jay because he wants to put you in the best position to be successful and he treats them as men and pros."



© 2006 Daily Camera and Boulder Publishing, LLC.