

Born-to-coach Pastner's a 20-year veteran at age 36

By Michael Cohen

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In the underbelly of FedExForum, Kendrick Perkins applies body lotion while sitting beside his locker. It's a Tuesday evening in January, and the visiting Thunder are preparing for a game against the Grizzlies that will tip in about an hour.

A reporter approaches Perkins, the hulking, eternally scowling center, and asks for a few minutes of his time.

The reporter explains the premise of the story — an article looking back at Josh Pastner's involvement in Houston Hoops, the same AAU program that incubated Perkins and facilitated his jump directly from high school to the NBA — and a grin flashes across the 29-year-old's face.

"I know Josh and Hal Pastner," Perkins says. "They're both close friends of mine. Came and got me out of Beaumont, Texas, to come play on their team. It was definitely a blessing."

For the next five minutes Perkins shares animated responses about Josh and Hal Pastner, the father-son duo that founded, grew and managed one of the most successful AAU programs in the nation. It was in this setting that the first and arguably most important chapters of the Josh Pastner story were penned, as the prodigy explored his ambition with Houston Hoops as the vessel.

By 14 he was making recruiting visits, by 16 he was coaching games, and each year his 50-page Josh Pastner Scouting Report floored college coaches across the country. An unbridled and unrivaled passion for the sport placed him on a fast track toward national success.

Now 36, Pastner is among the youngest head coaches in the country, and his clean-shaven face conceals whether or not he is capable of growing a full beard. Yet Pastner is also two decades removed from his first head coaching experience, a remarkable fact for someone still on the south side of 40. It's been 20 years since Pastner made his debut on the Houston Hoops sideline, and from that first game there was never any doubt he would achieve success.

Said Perkins: "You could tell he had it in him."

'How he got known'

Before there were national championships, before there were cross-country flights and recruiting visits and endless drives through Texas, there was a man and his son, just as it was so many decades before.

Hal Pastner grew up playing youth baseball, and his father served as coach. So when young Josh embarked on basketball, Hal happily did the same.

By the time Josh reached middle school, basketball consumed him. He told his father he was going to be in basketball for the rest of his life. And Hal thought, Who am I to tell him no?

So together Hal and Josh formed their own youth team, the Houston Hoops, that would compete year-round to eliminate the offseason gap that tormented young Josh. Phone calls to neighborhood parents helped populate a roster, and the Hoops slowly branched out from Houston to San Antonio to Dallas and beyond.

As their footprint expanded, so too did their recruiting efforts, spearheaded by the adolescent wunderkind with a keen eye for talent. Josh had become a basketball junkie, wanting nothing more than to spend his weekends in the gym. Equipped with a pad and pen he would evaluate every player from every game he watched, identifying those whom the Hoops should recruit while simultaneously forming a rich database to draw on when he relayed scouting reports to his teammates in hotel conference rooms.

The first player Josh recruited was Stephen Jackson, a swingman who went on to have a lengthy NBA career. At 14 years old, Josh picked up the phone and dialed Stephen's mother, Judy. And after a bit of clarification from Hal, Josh got his man.

So thorough was Josh's analysis of players that he had it typed up in the form of a 50-page booklet known as the Josh Pastner Scouting Report. Each summer it was sent to college coaches around the country, and the coaches often called back asking how they could permanently subscribe. Hal Pastner had to explain that the service was free, written by his teenage son.

"He would talk to every coach, pick their brains, sit with them, meet everybody in the industry," Hal Pastner said. "That's how he got known."

His basketball acumen grew so quickly that Hal soon found himself deferring to Josh on the court. He recalls a championship game in Lafayette, Ind., on the campus of Purdue, where Josh told him what plays to run and which lineups to use in every huddle.

Soon, parents joked that Josh should run the team. Before long, he did.

Hal gave Josh full control of the Hoops at age 16. It was up to Josh to formulate a schedule, arrange flights and hotels for the players, pack bags, monitor curfews, provide wake-up calls and organize meals. All while serving as a player-coach.

The only assistance he needed was an adult or two to rent and drive the vans.

“Josh handled everything,” Hal Pastner said.

'Kind of a bulldog'

Jim Rosborough first met Josh in the summer of 1995. He was an assistant on Lute Olson's staff at Arizona, a longtime recipient of the Josh Pastner Scouting Report.

The Wildcats were interested in both Josh and Stephen Jackson as potential recruits, the former for his character and basketball IQ, the latter for what he could do with a basketball. Rosborough told Josh to stay in touch throughout his senior year of high school, and that he could call the coach on Sunday evenings at 7 p.m. if he felt like chatting.

From September through graduation Josh called every single week. And in the fall he joined the Arizona program.

“That's why he's a good recruiter,” said Rosborough, who is now retired. “He's kind of a bulldog on stuff.”

For the next three years Josh attached himself to Rosborough. He absorbed every bit of knowledge he could, bringing things back to the Hoops each summer while inching closer to the ultimate goal of coaching his own college or pro team.

They lived in the film room. Coach and pupil were holed up at all hours of the day and night breaking down tape of practice and scouting future opponents. On road trips, Josh would knock on Rosborough's hotel room door every morning at 5:30 a.m. to talk basketball, read the newspaper and watch more tape. On weekends, the Rosboroughs would look up from their dinner table to see Josh at the window, stopping by for a snack of red licorice and grapes, basketball discussion on the side.

“My first thoughts about him were here's a guy that knows what he wants long term,” said Olson, the head coach at Arizona. “And he's going to do whatever he has to do to get to that point.”

His 24-hour mentality rubbed off on a talent-rich team that won the 1997 national championship. Josh, a freshman, made himself available around the clock for veteran leaders Mike Bibby, Michael Dickerson and Miles Simon, happy to rebound and teach while they launched thousands of jump shots. He started a New Year's Eve tradition with Dickerson in which they shot past midnight in the McKale Center.

Josh saw the court sparingly for the Wildcats, appearing only in blowout victories and averaging less than a point per game. Instead it was his presence and passion that Olson and his staff coveted, for in many ways Josh was a player-coach once more.

“Probably three things helped us win the national title in 1997,” Rosborough said. “Jason Terry went to Lute Olson and said he would be the sixth man. We had eight guys that played (in the rotation), which was good. And then Josh was in the gym.”

'This young cat'

Fresh from Baton Rouge, La., Marcus Spears entered the gym in Houston and couldn't believe what he saw. Spears had traveled all this way to play with the fabled Houston Hoops, and standing before him was a scrawny college kid for a coach.

“I was like, ‘Man, we don't have a chance, ’” said Spears, who pursued football in college and played a decade in the NFL. “Then Josh started coaching, and you would hear his basketball acumen. You would know that he knew the game a lot more than a lot of guys did.”

It was no coincidence that Josh's greatest coaching success with the Hoops coincided with his time at Arizona, a product of his uncountable hours in the gym and film room. By that point the organization had blossomed into one of the best in the country, and the 6-foot-5 Spears was the newest addition to a team already loaded with talent.

On a squad that featured a starting lineup of Spears (NFL), Emeka Okafor (NBA), T.J. Ford (NBA), Lawrence Roberts (NBA) and Carlos Hurt (Division I), Pastner installed a fast-break offense that emphasized gang rebounding and a relentless pace. He preached quick ball movement in the half court, encouraging the first open man to take a shot.

But what set Josh's coaching apart, Spears said, was an ability to shrewdly teach the details. Spears recalls lessons on body positioning that helped him box out taller players like Tyson Chandler and Darius Miles. There were also tips on how to create space off the dribble and how to lay the ball up on the backboard rather than letting go early and allowing a defender to block it away.

Josh guided the team to the 1999 Nike National Summer Championship in San Diego, then added a Global World Championship at Nike headquarters in Oregon the following year. The Hoops defeated Playground Warrior AAU in the title game on a buzzer-beating jump shot by Hurt, the point guard.

The winning basket came off an out-of-bounds play drawn up by Josh.

“You saw him immediately gain the respect of his peers,” Spears said. “And not necessarily peers by age, but other coaches started taking notice of this young cat that's coaching this basketball team full of black guys that all could probably beat him up. But they respect him, and they want to play hard for him.”

'It was my fault'

Nobody respected Josh more than his sister.

Courtney Pastner is three and a half years younger and “idolized” her older brother, Hal Pastner said. When she attended Texas Tech to play basketball, she listed Josh as her role model on an athletic department questionnaire.

Courtney, though, was a star in her own right. She took 1,000 jump shots per day growing up and became the Gatorade Player of the Year in the state of Texas. She was the centerpiece around which the girls’ Houston Hoops team was created.

Josh, of course, was the coach.

Only this time the success eluded him, and in its place was a series of painful coaching lessons. The Hoops were the best team in the country for the 16 and under division, according to Josh, and their lineup boasted four future WNBA draft picks to accompany Courtney.

But he neglected to practice full-court basketball leading up to the AAU national championship, opting instead for hours and hours of half-court scenarios that allowed him to micromanage. He was a control freak, and the team practiced four or five days per week. They never made it out of pool play.

“I was so controlling that it actually cost us a chance to win the championship,” Josh said.

He remembers another game in which the Hoops held the lead in the final seconds, needing only to inbound the ball successfully to preserve a victory. Josh gave instructions in the huddle, but the play went awry. The opposing team stole the ball, made a layup and won the game at the buzzer. Josh was physically ill.

A few years later, he saw a documentary on Sun Tzu that explained the importance of clear and repeated instructions. Immediately, Josh realized his flaw.

“I remembered that timeout,” Josh said. “My objectives were so unclear that it wasn’t the troops’ fault, it was my fault. And that’s why I repeat myself a lot in everything I do.

“I can remember some vital mistakes I made in coaching during that time. I thought I made more mistakes with the girls that helped me today as a head coach.”

'If I'm not mistaken'

Fifteen years after the mistakes, the championships and the famed Scouting Report, Kendrick Perkins is discussing the maturation of Josh Pastner. He is sitting in the visiting locker room in the building where Josh is a head coach, more than 500 miles from Houston but still surrounded by the legacy of his Hoops.

After his playing career at Arizona, Josh remained with the program as video and recruiting coordinator before being promoted to a full-time assistant. He worked under Olson and alongside Rosborough from 2002-08, and then a call from a certain John Calipari lured him to Memphis.

Perkins says Pastner has the same mentality now as he did during his days as a prodigy way back when. The key traits — a dogged work ethic and an uncanny ability to “get guys to buy into the system and what you believe in” — still remain, Perkins explains, and he says that’s why Pastner is recognized as one of the best young coaches in the country.

After a few minutes, Perkins rises to his feet and prepares to take the court for pregame warm-ups. He removes his earrings, stows them away in his locker and replaces the body lotion. Then he turns back to face the reporter.

“If I’m not mistaken,” Perkins says, “Memphis is having a pretty good start this year, right?”



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