



Moving forward

Saturday, June 16, 2007

BY BRIAN T. SMITH

Porter Troupe was down. Down, but not out.

For as long as he could remember, Troupe's dreams had revolved around the game of basketball.

And Troupe had dreamed big.

"Basketball's been my life, for better or worse," said Troupe, a 6-foot-5, 205-pound guard for the Vancouver Volcanoes. "I was fortunate to be blessed with some talent to play it. So, ever since I was a kid, it's been a part of me. It's what I do. I dreamed long and hard of the NBA like everyone else."

Early on, Troupe's dreams had the feel of magic.

A standout career at La Jolla High School near San Diego, Calif., peaked when Troupe averaged 19.1 points, eight rebounds and seven assists as a senior and was nominated for the McDonald's High School All-American game.

The big numbers translated into a full-ride scholarship to play basketball at the University of Portland.

It was the fall of 2001, and Troupe was on the fast track.

"I was ready to tear it up," Troupe said. "I had a lot of natural talent and I was still learning the game, getting confident. UP seemed like the right place for me. It seemed like a good fit."

It wasn't.

Troupe immediately butted heads with first-year coach Michael Holton.

Soon, the star-in-the-making found himself shining pine.

Highly intelligent - Troupe possessed a 3.75 grade-point average at one point while attending UP - Troupe never quite figured out why he ended up in Holton's doghouse.

It didn't matter.

By the time his freshman season was up, Troupe knew things needed to change.

More importantly, his love and passion for the game was quickly drying up.

"It was hard, man," he said. "I knew I could play. I'd proved that in high school. It started to eat away at me. It was depressing. The whole thing was depressing. And it just started to build and build and ..."

By the end of his sophomore year, Troupe was no longer a Pilot.

The star-in-the-making was adrift, suddenly lost in a sky of untold thousands of other destined-to-play-in-the-National-Basketball-Association kids who never quite made it.

Searching for answers

After dropping out of Portland, Troupe, 24, knew he wanted to still play basketball. He just didn't know where, or how.

"I was lost for a while," he said. "I really was."

Troupe made plans to attend Warner Pacific University and play for the Knights.

The plans fell through.

He took classes at Warner Pacific, but a summer-course load of 20 hours - prescribed by faculty so Troupe could catch up on classes he'd missed after dropping out of UP - left Troupe mentally exhausted.

Unable to keep up with his schooling, Troupe never officially took the court for the Knights.

"It was a shame," said Volcanoes coach Theo Evans, who attended Warner Pacific at the same time as Troupe and played for the Knights. "He would've killed that league. You could see it the second he got out there. Porter's special. He's probably more talented than any kid in the IBL. He just couldn't get a break back then."

Unable to hold on with the Knights, Troupe's dream of playing basketball again began to waver.

Furthermore, he got the feeling that college life might not be his gig.

The realization carried heavy issues.

Troupe's father had taught at Columbia University. And Troupe and his father had moved to San Diego when Troupe was a child, solely to get Troupe off of the city streets of Harlem, N.Y., and into a creative, supportive, more university-oriented atmosphere.

"When I dropped out of college, my parents were, like, 'OK. It's your call. But you gotta be a man. You've gotta get a job and support yourself. We're not paying for anything, anymore.' And I was, like, OK. I understand. I get it."

Three years prior, Troupe was one of the elite basketball prospects in the country. By 2004, his dream had been deferred. He'd lost his full-ride, dropped out of college all together, and was just another regular Joe, looking for the first job he could get.

"I learned fast," he said. "Once it's gone, it's gone."

A new beginning

As Troupe worked odd jobs, college and the NBA drifted farther and farther away from his sights.

Then, in early 2006, a friend mentioned an open tryout the Volcanoes were having.

Troupe decided to give it a go.

His first impression of the Volcanoes and the International Basketball League were less than kind.

"I'll be honest," he said. "There were different owners and coaches then, but still, it was weak. I was, like, 'Who are these guys? What is this thing?'"

But Troupe stuck with it. He wanted to play ball. He knew he still had the talent to impress and draw eyes. He wanted one last shot.

So Troupe set a timetable. Two, maybe three years. Give it everything. See what happens.

The initial results were distressing.

The Volcanoes' first-year coaches had Troupe playing as a big. He had played nothing but point guard in high school and in college.

Something was wrong.

"That kind of said everything," Troupe said. "They just had no idea what I was about. They had me playing as a four. It was crazy."

Evans agreed.

"I even told them so," Evans said. "I told them (Porter) was a guard, a legitimate big-time guard. They didn't know what they had."

Yet Troupe found a way to use the situation to his advantage. While Vancouver's coaches figured out where to play him and how to best use his abilities, he could work on and regain the form he'd lost in the three years he'd been away from competitive basketball.

The plan worked.

By the end of the 2006 season, Troupe had become the Volcanoes' top offensive threat.

He had his game back.

Looking forward

The 2007 IBL season has been one of constant upheaval and change for the Volcanoes.

Since their season began on March 11, 31 different names have been printed on Vancouver's game-day rosters.

The only constant for the Volcanoes has been Troupe.

He scored 22 points and handed out 11 assists in Vancouver's 139-120 season-opening loss to the Portland Chinooks.

And on June 9, Troupe scored a season and game-high 35 points on 13-of-18 shooting and grabbed eight rebounds in a 139-133 defeat to the Central Oregon Hotshots.

"He was on fire that game," Volcanoes assistant coach John Phillips said. "He was really giving

it his all."

Averaging a team-leading 19.3 points with 4.5 rebounds and 3.5 assists a game, Troupe has been a rock for the Volcanoes this season, the lone constant in the chaos that has surrounded Vancouver.

"I'm proud to have him as a teammate," said Volcanoes guard Brad Lechtenberg. "Even though he puts up big numbers, he's not your typical shoot-first guy. He's always looking to pass and find the open player and help the team out. His potential is sky-high. He can go a long way if he keeps this up."

Evans concurs.

"All he needs is a break," Evans said. "Someone to notice him and see his ability. He's got an amazing wingspan, he can shoot, he's great off the dribble and he's probably the best defender in the IBL."

According to Troupe and Evans, that break may come soon.

Troupe was ranked first out of all participants in a recent showcase camp in Utah, and he plans to tryout for the NBA Developmental League during the Volcanoes' offseason. He also has pending offers to play ball in Europe next season.

"I feel like I'm ready to move on," he said. "It's time. I'm going to give this everything I have for a few more years and just see where it takes me."

Did you know?

Vancouver guard Porter Troupe scored a season-high 35 points and grabbed 11 rebounds in a Volcanoes loss on June 9.

Stats:

Porter Troupe

Age: 24

Height: 6-foot-5

Weight: 205 pounds

College: Attended the University of Portland 2001-03.

Season averages: 19.3 points, 4.5 rebounds, 3.5 assists.