

BMCC's recruiting battle

The life and times of a community college recruiter



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— Christy Martin, Blue Mountain women's basketball coach

By AJ MAZZOLINI
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Kim Pickett had never seen a horse before, much less climbed into the saddle. But here she was, sitting atop the big brown animal as it ambled down a rural road.

Because she'd never ridden a horse, she hadn't known what to wear. In hindsight, though, sweatpants and flip flops probably weren't the correct attire for equestrianism.

The Los Angeles native stood out on her ride near Touchet, Wash., though her dirt road could have been any meandering through the farm lands outside of Pendleton. The country homes were spread far enough apart to render the term neighbors obsolete, the once-green fields in each direction were beginning to fade under the August sun and some kind of little dog was happily trotting along side the horses' clopping hooves.

But she wasn't focusing on any of those sights. It was another sense that captivated her.

"It didn't smell as bad as I thought it would," she said of her four-legged ride.

Pickett was enthralled by the experience. When she and Blue Mountain Community College women's basketball coach Christy Martin returned to the family home of Zoe Weaver, a former BMCC player, Pickett had made her decision.

She wanted to be a Timberwolf.

See RECRUIT/2B



ABOVE: Players run down the court during a women's basketball game at Blue Mountain's Mosby Court earlier this year. Timberwolves' coaches have an uphill battle each season in the recruiting war with larger schools.

AT LEFT: BMCC's Kim Pickett shoots against Spokane's Jorden Brons in a Timberwolves' victory in February in Pendleton.

Staff photos by E.J. Harris

RECRUIT: Coach's work not finished just because Letter of Intent signed

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The name of the game

Christy Martin has had "recruiter" in her title since she was 21 years old and stopped playing basketball herself. She started as an assistant for Bobbi Hazeltime at Walla Walla Community College before working from the other side as a coach at three high schools in the Spokane, Wash., area, continuing to funnel girls into Hazeltime's program.

Then she got the head basketball coaching job at Blue Mountain five years ago and became responsible for her own program. That's when she realized the humbling nature of recruiting at the junior college level.

Add onto that Pendleton's remote location and short history of success on the court and Martin found herself with a true battle. Even getting locals into the T-Wolves' blues and whites seemed impossible.

"They laughed at me. I had kids fake speak Spanish to me when I'd call them on the phone," Martin said.

So she tried to get creative.

It was through some resourcefulness that Martin and BMCC bagged Kim Pickett, the program's top recruit in last year's class. Pickett, a freshman this season who finished fifth in scoring in the NWAACC with 19.7 points per game, came to Pendleton from Narbonne High School in Los Angeles, a school with about 3,500 students on its campus each day — more than are enrolled at BMCC's Pendleton location.

"Kids in Pendleton want to get out of Pendleton, kids in L.A. want to get out of L.A.," Martin said. "They all just want to go to something opposite."

The tactic proved true in Pickett's case. The 5-foot-2 point guard with powerful legs and corn rows in her hair was drawn in by the small-town lifestyle — but also by Martin.

"It was kind of different because it was the head coach (talking to me), and when it's the head coach you know the school really wants you to come out and play," Pickett said of her recruitment. She'd been in conversations with other schools, both Division I and junior college, but none as serious as with Blue Mountain.

The personal touch can make a difference, Martin said. She wouldn't just sell the program — the school, its athletics and its academics — she'd try and sell herself.

Yet even when a recruit signs on to become a Timberwolf, the fight still continues. When the BMCC women started fall camp last season, three potential starters were among the group of no-shows. Despite letters of intent with names inked on them, Martin found herself with empty jerseys and an altered outlook for the season.

Each year a prospect or two can be expected to change his or her mind, often with little or no warning, but 2012's exodus left the team reeling. After its first postseason appearance in program history the season before, the T-Wolves regressed and finished second-to-last in their league.

"Sometimes you have to recruit a football squad to get enough kids to show up and stick with it," Martin said. "It's kind of the name of the game."

There's sharks out there

Recruiting is a year-round job for the coaches at BMCC though their positions are only part time with the school. Most are employed elsewhere. Martin runs a fitness studio in Walla Walla, Wash.; volleyball coach Dave Baty is a lieutenant with the Pendleton Fire Department.

But to put a quality roster together, it takes a full-time work ethic.

"You've got to keep digging, digging. There's kids everywhere, you just have to dig," Martin said.

"There's a lot of sharks out there, you've just got to keep fishing," BMCC men's basketball coach Adam Ellis said. "That's the biggest thing, just keep putting the hook in the water and you'll snag a couple out of there."

College athletics is a hierarchy. The blue-chippers, the top prep athletes in the country, are drawn to the Division I programs with the big names and bigger budgets. Below that are Divisions II and III. Then comes NAIA schools, two divisions worth there. Then there's the National Junior College Athletic Association, the highest level of JuCo play.

Then — finally — comes the community college ranks that Blue Mountain call home. That's a lot of older siblings to fend off while fighting for biscuits at the dinner table.

"You've kind of got to adjust your talent schemes," Ellis said. "The level of talent I've been looking for has been a little bit higher than what we've had fall toward us, but I don't think that's a bad thing at all."

"You kind of get the guys who are left over, the guys that get passed over, which isn't always bad because a lot of times they're hungry, a lot more motivated to do things than if they'd had the easy way."

Fruit on the tree?

There's one near failsafe cure for the hardships of community college recruiting: winning.

In 2008, coach Dave Baty made the short jump across U.S. Highway 37 from Pendleton High School to Blue Mountain Community College. He left a Buckaroo program that had made the state playoffs three times in his four seasons and inherited a Timberwolves team that was coming off a last-place finish in the NWAACC-East.

What Ellis found in the years since are two NWAACC championships and a reputation.

"I used to have (Division I) coaches call and say, 'Hey Dave, I need a middle

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**— Adam Ellis
Blue Mountain men's
basketball coach**

(blocker) or hey Dave, I need a setter.' Now I have coaches saying, 'Hey Dave, I need players,' which is kind of an indicator that we haven't just arrived in the northeast (of Oregon), we've arrived in the whole Northwest," Baty said.

Baty went through the same tribulations as any coach while making the adjustments to the college game. The first time on the recruiting trail yields as many lessons for the future as players for the program.

Each season's recruiting carries over the tweaks from the years before, he said, but the approach remains static. They're still stones he's mining for, Baty said. He's just "trying to add diamonds and rubies rather than rocks to a gravel driveway."

The volleyball program's combination of recruiting finds and tenacity resulted in its first NWAACC title in 2010. From there, the search for players became a little easier for BMCC. They started to come to Baty.

Letters, highlight tapes and calls from around the region arrived at his office with inquiries. The radius has expanded even further after a second NWAACC championship that capped the T-Wolves' 43-4 season in 2012. Baty received a commitment from a high school outside hitter from California this offseason and is in conversations with another player from Hawaii.

Success breeds success, Baty acknowledged, but complacency can cultivate failure.

"But I'm never going to (rely on that)," he said. "I'm not going to sit back and just hope that there's fruit growing on my tree. I'm going to presume every year that if I don't do everything I can, there won't be fruit on my tree. Because then you're not being a good coach or a good steward for the program."

Just school and basketball

For all the troubles and the obstacles that Blue Mountain's coaches encounter while attempting to bring in fresh talent each year, recruiting for a two-year institute has its benefits.

Namely, cost.

BMCC charges \$85 per credit for its in-state students with the 12-credit mark the line for a full-time student. The in-state designation is misleading, though. Along with residents of Oregon falling under that umbrella, in-state students include those from Washington, Idaho, California, Nevada and Montana — the chief recruiting zones for Timberwolves athletics as well.

Out-of-state credits run \$255 each.

JuCo athletic teams may offer their recruits scholarships to help pay their way as well. Both BMCC basketball teams, as well as the volleyball squad, receive 24 total terms of tuition waivers to be broken up by the coaches' choosing. For baseball and softball, with their larger rosters, 33 tuition waivers are granted.

A cheap start to a student's education is one of the best hands community college coaches can play, Baty said.

"As moms and dads, what we want to see our kids do, ... we want to see them graduate with their bachelor's degree in hand and not have this massive pile of debt behind them that they have to drag around for the next five, six, seven years," he said. "We don't want them making \$550 per month student loan payments, we want them making \$550 per month house payments."

Of course Blue Mountain is only the first step on that path for student athletes, as any community college would be. Coach Ellis said he pitches the school as a two-year growing grounds before BMCC can spin its athletes on to four-year universities.

"What I tell kids is, 'Hey, we're not trying to make this your home right now, we're trying to make this your stepping stone,'" Ellis said. "'We try to get you in here and get you focused here for a year or two years, whatever we can to get you moved on to the next level. While you're here we want you to be as committed as possible.'"

"... My main focus is to get them out of here as soon as we can. As soon as we can find them a place where we can get their education paid for, we're going to send them that way."

For as difficult as it can be to sell to a recruit a small school that few outside of Eastern Oregon may have heard of, that fact can actually work in Blue Mountain's favor as well.

It puts a parent's mind at ease knowing there's less trouble for their newly liberated 18-year-old to rustle up, Ellis said. When they're in Pendleton, they're there for a reason.

"It's a destination school," he said. "You actually have to move here, not like a city. Their main focus is the task at hand — just school and basketball."

Coach Martin echoed that sentiment.

"People always say, 'You must be lying to them,'" she said. "No, we tell them the brutal truth. There's nothing to do here. It's boring, it's quiet. You're not going to get bored."

"That the community is phenomenal; They're great and they're going to love you."

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