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Eric Hays

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MISSOULA--

There are a lot of things to be said about Eric Hays.

He is a persistent individual, having been a walk-on basketball prospect at two different major universities.

He is a modest young man who credits team and crowd support for his personal accomplishments.

He is a person of tremendous drive and determination who has survived at a basketball position dominated by much taller individuals.

Eric Hays, a 6-3 junior forward for the University of Montana Grizzlies, is also Big Sky Player of the Week.

"Eric does not possess good size, speed or shooting ability, but he has that intangible knack for being where the ball is and he gets the job done with his desire, hustle and intensity," UM coach Jud Heathcote states.

It is Heathcote's appreciation of Hays' special qualities that landed the 1970 graduate of Junction City (Ore.) High School in Missoula.

A walk-on at Washington State University in the fall of 1970, Hays became a starter for Heathcote's Cougar freshman team and wound up the second leading scorer as the team compiled a 20-2 record.

The following fall, Hays' bid for a berth on the Cougar varsity was cut short-- extremely short.

Hays smiles when he describes what happened, but it is obvious some bitterness remains. "About 25 of us had been running and weightlifting prior to the first day of practice, and then when practice began the squad was reduced to 13 members after only two brief workouts," Hays said. "No one had a chance to prove themselves."

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As he had when he walked-on at WSU, Hays passed over scholarship offers at a number of small schools and enrolled at UM.

"I wanted to play major college basketball, not NAIA basketball," Hays said. "I knew coach Heathcote was aware of what I could do and I was certain he would give me a chance to make the team."

Another reason for Hays' transfer to UM is one Heathcote is not proud of. "I saw the Grizzlies play a very poor game against WSU that fall and felt I could play for them," Hays comments.

Heathcote remembers the game, a 73-55 loss, as "one of our worst efforts." Montana gained revenge with a 72-49 win last year.

It would now be fitting to say that things have been rosy since, but such is not the case.

Hays does not possess the necessary quickness to play guard, but there he was, a starter at guard, when he became eligible in January of the 1972-73 season. "With Robin Selvig injured, we tried six different players as Mike Murray's running mate at guard," Heathcote said. "About all that did was confuse six guys and we never did find the right combination."

"We tried Eric at guard and then switched him back to forward. He lost confidence in his ability and became frustrated at both positions," Heathcote commented. "This year we told him he would be a forward and that he would serve as our sixth man."

Tim Stambaugh, a 6-7 sophomore, was injured in UM's fourth game and Hays had a starting berth that he has not relinquished.

Being 6-3 causes some problems for Hays. "My height doesn't work to much disadvantage rebounding because I have learned to cut out my man, but defense has been a bit of a problem," Hays states. "Some teams try to take me inside and let the taller players shoot over the top of me. My only answer is to try and keep the ball away from my man."

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The B+ student in mathematics comes up with a lot of steals. "The steals happen because I am concentrating on keeping the ball away from my man," Hays said. "This often sets me up for a chance at a steal."

Hays, who is married, said the team's good defensive play helps him out. "I can gamble once in awhile because of the help I will get from my teammates," he said.

One of three UM players averaging in double figures, Hays credits crowd response for the Grizzlies current winning streak. "A big crowd makes a team play much better. We had a great crowd Saturday night and that helped the team," he said. "I hope to see big crowds this weekend, especially for Weber State Saturday night."

The crowd, no matter what size, is sure to appreciate the hustle, desire and determination of Eric Hays.

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