

Cunningham keeps faith on court

BY BRITTANY YOUNG
Staff Writer

Walk-on, Tyson Cunningham, earns a basketball scholarship through resilience and relentlessness.

Cunningham started his college journey on a band scholarship as a member of MSU's Famous Maroon Band. Although he was not recruited to play basketball for State, he said his heart led him to do whatever it took to be a part of the team.

He worked out at the Sanderson Recreation Center, lifted weights, played pick-up basketball and constantly tried to contact former head coach, Rick Stansbury. As a freshman, Cunningham was even a member of the Lady Bulldog scout team.

Once Cunningham finally reached Stansbury, the coach told him he would have to wait because there were not any open positions. However, the optimistic Cunningham was not discouraged. He said he believed he would make the team and God would open that door for him.

"I had a dream that I had actually made the team, and I was running down the court and gave Coach Stansbury a high-five," Cunningham said.

Cunningham continued to work hard, and his dream would soon become a reality when Stansbury gave him the opportunity to practice with the team during the summer of 2011 as the Bulldogs prepared for a tournament in Europe.

After practicing with the team for two weeks, Cunningham was officially a Bulldog.

"Coach told me I could hang up my band shoes because I had made the team. I was like, Wow!" Cunningham said. "After that day, I was excited and grateful that God opened the door for me."

Although Cunningham started as a walk-on, he was granted a scholarship during the spring semester of his sophomore year. A few months later, Stansbury resigned and Rick Ray became the head coach. Again, Cunningham had to start from scratch because he lost his scholarship due to a full roster.

Cunningham kept his faith and worked harder on the court and in the classroom. Once again, he was granted a full scholarship during the spring of 2013.

"I felt I worked pretty hard to gain the first scholarship and then to lose it, I felt I had to work much harder. Once I gained it again, I was so grateful to get it back," Cunningham said.

Ray said Cunningham has garnered the respect of his teammates because there is no difference between a walk-on and a scholarship player as far as Ray wants the team to go about its business and play.

"Tyson is a person you look forward to coaching because he comes in, he's always on time, he goes about his business the right way and he retains information well," Ray said. "If anybody wants to know who to hire on our team, it's Tyson. No matter the job or field, he is a guy who is going to be successful in life."

Cunningham's passion and drive has not only impacted his head coach, but his teammates as well. Freshman Gavin Ware said Cunningham presents himself as a man of God and he provides his teammates with confidence

when they are down.

“A lot of times I look to him and he tells me to continue to push. That gives the team and I the confidence we need to develop chemistry to get through tough times,” Ware said. “He’s always in the practice facility working on his game and doing the little things when no one else is watching. He’s always giving back to the team, and I applaud him for that.”

Ware also said Cunningham serves as a big brother influence for the players, providing them with a stable foundation and leading them in prayer.

Cunningham said his role on the team is being a vocal leader and bringing life to his surrounding environment.

“It’s my character to bring it as hard as I can, have high energy, sacrifice my body and do whatever I need to do for the team to be successful. That’s what I’m about and that’s how I approach things,” Cunningham said. “God didn’t place me on the team to just play ball, but to be a light as well. I feel like my teammates respect me and my approach of how I try to show the love of God to them.”

Not only is Cunningham’s faith evident on the court, but it is seen off the court as well. He has been a husband for almost six months after exchanging vows on Sept. 29, 2012. Cunningham said balancing being a student-athlete and a husband has not been a problem.

“I have a very supportive wife. We both have busy schedules but we spend time together during the evenings. We have an understanding, and we appreciate the time we do have together,” Cunningham said.

Bill Buckley, MSU Fellowship of Christian Athletes director, said Cunningham loves people, is easy to work with and has a great attitude.

“It’s obvious he loves the Lord. He is mature beyond his years and he has a great sense of respect and honoring people,” Buckley said. “He is focused and he has vision for his life. I love that about him.”

MSU softball players help fight cancer battle for friends, family

By Brittany Young

MSU softball players Jessica Cooley and Erin Nesbit both have friends or family who have battled cancer, pushing them to be active in increasing breast cancer awareness.

Cooley, a senior from Birmingham, Ala., donated her hair to “Locks of Love” (a non-profit organization that provides hairpieces to children suffering from long term medical hair loss from any diagnoses) in September 2012 after a friend of her family lost the cancer battle.

“Her name was Lynn Purfer and she was in her 50s. She and my mom worked together and I would always visit Lynn in her office. Lynn’s daughter and I also had sleepovers and hung out together,” Cooley said. “After the funeral, my sister and I decided to donate our hair in memory of Lynn; I donated about nine or 10 inches.”

Nesbit, a redshirt junior from Acworth, Ga., has a younger sister who beat Retinoblastoma, cancer that develops during early childhood in the retina of the eye. She is currently a manager on the softball team.

“My mom started noticing Megan’s eyes looking funny in pictures, so she would cover Meg’s eyes to see how she reacted; whenever my mom covered Meg’s left eye, she cried and swatted her hand away. We later found out the cancer had already taken her sight,” Nesbit said. “When she was three, Meg had surgery to make sure the cancer didn’t spread to her brain, but she lost her right eye. God definitely had his hand on Meg because we were blessed the doctors caught it in time. She’s been through a lot and still does everyday. She is one of the

strongest girls I know, and I'm lucky to call her my sister."

April 12 to 14, the Bulldogs hosted rival Ole Miss in a three-game conference clash. On Sunday, the Bulldogs wore pink to strike out cancer.

Nesbit said she played in honor of her best friend's mom.

"Her name is Kathryn Keller, and she was diagnosed with breast cancer earlier this year. Just like Megan, Ms. Keller is a fighter, and with God's help, she's going to beat this," Nesbit said. "She's one of the sweetest ladies I know, always looking to help those around her. I figured that honoring and playing for her was the least I could do for all she and her family has been through."

Cooley said the team wore face paint and stickers in the "pink" game to commemorate those affected by cancer.

"My sister, who played softball at MSU, had a teammate survive cancer. I have a close friend who survived cancer, and one of the softball coach's mom survived it as well," Cooley said. "So, we all wore face paint and stickers with initials in honor of people who have lost the battle and survived the disease."

Cooley and Nesbit are members of the M-Club at MSU, where they are able to give back to the Bulldog and Starkville community. On April 12, the softball team participated in the name sale for "Relay for Life," a walking event to fight back against cancer.

Nesbit said the athletic department raised roughly \$1,600 for the event.

"It was great to see our Bulldog family pull together for one specific cause," Nesbit said.

Cooley said the relay was a lot of fun, and she really enjoyed the event.

"Cancer touches everyone in some way, so it's good to get everyone together for a good cause," Cooley said.

Head coach Vann Stuedeman said both girls are passionate about anything they

put their minds to and they play softball with this same love and passion.

“They both are passionate warriors and make each moment count,” Stuedeman said. “I’m proud of them and the entire softball team for raising awareness and money to support those families who have been affected by the horrible disease.”

Cooley, Nesbit and the rest of the softball team return to action April 19 to 21 as the Bulldogs travel to Tuscaloosa for a three-game series against defending national champion, Alabama.