



by Jan Winslow, Fresno State Media Relations

A Passionate Return

When Steve Cleveland got the call about the Fresno State head men's basketball coaching vacancy all he could do was ponder questions yet dream out loud.

How can I come back home and key the Bulldogs' renaissance? How do I bring a renewed passion and commitment to a program that desperately wants to thrive? How can I change the perception and showcase a cultural change? What can be done to take a beloved program that I watched growing up become one of the top

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respected programs of the future? Despite professional challenges what can I give back to a community that gave me so much?

While thoughts raced through his mind, Cleveland stayed focused on one thing – his heart.

Building Brigham Young University back into a national basketball power was a roll-up-the-sleeves and get-back-to-basics type of job. What resulted was a Mountain West Conference Coach of the Year honor, two NBA draftees, three MWC titles, four 20-win seasons and five postseason appearances in eight seasons as the Cougars head coach. What was left behind, however, was working with a great group of young men, playing in one of the toughest college basketball arenas in the country, unwavering support and treasured friendships.

Why leave a program that was built from scratch and why leave a comfortable environment?

“This was an occasion to re-associate

with friends and family, but more importantly, an opportunity to be involved in a program that I grew up watching and supporting my entire life,” says Cleveland, who played baseball and basketball locally at Hoover High School. “From watching Boyd Grant coaching on the sidelines, this community has demonstrated its faithfulness and loyalty. They're passionate about their teams. To write a new chapter but, most importantly, to change the perception about this community in some small way would be one of the most worthwhile contributions I could give back.

“I always envisioned having this type of opportunity,” adds Cleveland, who originally attended Fresno State on a basketball scholarship before going on to play collegiate ball at UC Irvine via Fresno City College. “The first thing I tell a prospect is that the people here are passionate about

the game, about the players and the coaches. The community is willing to travel and willing to be there and support you. Until you come here, until you live here, until you're around the people and have associations you don't realize what a special place this is and how special the people are in the Valley.”

Drawing upon early lessons from a hard earned dollar during the summer days of a family lawn care business to serving a mission in England, Cleveland's trek to the college coaching ranks nearly took a lawful turn.

Ready to take the LSAT, Cleveland talked seriously about going to law school. With a draw to political science and government he entered the coaching ranks only because he had the opportunity to pursue his first love via the sidelines.

“After playing college ball I had offers to coach as well as play

professionally in Europe,” says Cleveland who didn't start playing basketball until late in high school after growing up on a deep love for baseball. “That didn't interest me. It wasn't until I got a phone call from Manny Fagundes, who was at the time the head coach at Roosevelt High School. He said ‘Hey, we're going to open a new school in Clovis, come up and help. Come get your degrees (teaching and masters) and have a chance to start a program.’ And, that's what I did. I came back, got my teaching credential, my masters and went on to coach at Clovis West High School for 12 years before going on to coach at Fresno City College for eight.”

The transition from athlete to teacher to coach was a natural progression for Cleveland. Those who influenced him during his journey surely do not realize what was gleaned from an ambitious student. Constantly watching, constantly learning, constantly looking for that cutting edge and constantly looking for new ways to teach and motivate keeps his adrenaline flowing.

One thing is for sure, Cleveland is willing to come back home and put everything on the line.



PHOTO BY JOSE GARZA

Fresno State Head Coach Steve Cleveland