

# Great Expectations

BY CURTIS WEBB, FRESNO STATE MEDIA RELATIONS

■ **Imagine a frenzied crowd** of 18,000 fans in the hostile environment known as “The Pit” at the University Arena in Albuquerque, N.M. A daunting name for a daunting task, one might suppose, as Steve Cleveland sat on the bench in one of college basketball’s most intimidating arenas. He was about to lead BYU to one of the most improbable victories of the 1997-98 season, his first as the Cougars’ head coach.

The ‘97-98 campaign was also his first as a Division I basketball coach, having previously been at the helm of the Fresno City College and Clovis West High School programs. With the Cougars coming off a dismal 1-25 season the year prior, there was nowhere to go but up. So at that moment in the dark depths of “The Pit”, Cleveland and the Cougars quieted the Lobo faithful en route to an 83-62 victory over then 15th-ranked New Mexico.

“That was one of the most gratifying experiences I’ve had in coaching,” Cleveland reflects. “We finished the year with a record of 9-21, but those young men played to their full potential. To see that team improve significantly over the course of the year, win two games on the road and then qualify for the WAC tournament is something I’ll never forget.”

Now, imagine a crowd of 16,000 Valley locals, screaming and shouting as Ja’Vance Coleman throws down an incredible dunk that brings everyone in the building to their feet. Or maybe it will be



PHOTO BY JOSE GARZA

**Head coach Steve Cleveland is one of six Fresno State first-year head coaches to win seven of his first 10 games. While he is nearing the 150 career win plateau, he has directed the Bulldogs to a 7-1 home court record.**

a Hector Hernandez rejection of an opponent’s shot attempt that brings the Save Mart Center roof down. Whatever the scenario, Coach Cleveland does not expect the Bulldogs’ home court to be a pleasant atmosphere for visiting teams.

In his first season at Fresno State, Cleveland plans to put an exciting brand of basketball on the floor. The Bulldogs will play man-to-man defense in the half court. They will pressure

opponents following Fresno State baskets and free throws. Coming out of timeouts and in dead-ball situations the ‘Dogs will trap, look to cause havoc and shorten the shot clock for opposing squads. The defense will be very disruptive, paving the way for Fresno State’s offensive productivity.

“The foundation of this program is defense,” Cleveland exclaims. “Coaches want their teams to play with a certain tempo. We’re going to make sure that doesn’t happen. We want to take teams out of their rhythm. We can’t let the opposition just come down the floor, set up its offense, and do whatever it wants to do. Teams are going to be uncomfortable when they come to play us here.”

As the years progress, Fresno State fans may liken the Bulldogs to Cleveland’s teams at Fresno City College. Offensively, this edition of the men’s basketball team will spread the floor, running a four-player motion attack with one player in the post. Some basic strategies will include dribble penetration to the basket, feeding the post and being unselfish. With those principles in mind the ‘Dogs hope to be regulars at the free-throw line, find the open man by making the extra pass and take high percentage shots.

Although the x’s and o’s of basketball can determine the outcome of a game, Cleveland’s main focus is on his student-athletes. Cleveland believes in listening to his players and accepting feedback from them. If a coach has a good relationship with his or her athletes, those athletes will feel they can approach the coach with concerns or suggestions even in the heat of competition. Cleveland says this coach-player interaction can be extremely beneficial, sometimes being the difference-maker in a closely matched contest.

“Players want to have a relationship with their head coach,” Cleveland believes. “Young people want to be treated with respect. They even want to be disciplined. I’ve also learned that you can over-coach. So, I’m always open to listening to my team.”

Cleveland has been coaching for nearly 30 years. From the high school level to the four-year university plateau, the learning process continues. Every coach to come Cleveland’s way has impacted him greatly, whether as a student-athlete or as a fellow coach. Early in his career Cleveland often had the opportunity to observe former Fresno State coaches Boyd Grant and Ron Adams. More recently he has learned from the preparation and execution of former University of Utah head coach Rick Majerus. Cleveland understood that winning championships in the Mountain West Conference was predicated upon his team beating the Utes.

This year begins a new era of Fresno State basketball led by Cleveland. It is a professional challenge requiring every ounce of energy and patience that he possesses. The expectations of fielding an entertaining product, producing successful seasons and filling the Save Mart Center may be just as overwhelming as that epic night in “The Pit.”

But to Cleveland it is all worth it: “The most satisfying moments will come every afternoon when I can go onto that gym floor to coach and just enjoy the game.”