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How the Longhorns got hot

Texas hasn't always been a basketball power, but Horns are sure smoking now.

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As University of Texas basketball begins its 100th season, the program is thriving during an era marked by affiliations with an ambitious coach, a new conference and a mother who was determined that her gifted son become a Longhorn.

The Longhorns are regarded as NCAA Final Four material, but the view of Texas basketball was not always this appealing.

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Texas played basketball for 56 years between appearances in the Final Four, a streak that ended in 2003. Now, according to the preseason polls, they are a favorite to return.

Fans can thank the Longhorns' membership in the Big 12 Conference since 1996, the hiring of Coach Rick Barnes two years later, and the persistence of Mary Ford, who helped recruit her son, T.J., for the Longhorns.

Texas reached the NCAA round of 16 during three straight tournaments from 2002-04 (the first two with Ford at point guard), a claim only four other schools can make.

The Longhorns have made seven consecutive NCAA tournament appearances and put up six straight 20-victory seasons under Barnes, both school records. Barnes has a 9-7 record in NCAA tournament games.

"We're ahead of where I thought (we'd) be," said DeLoss Dodds, UT men's athletics director. "We've been to a Final Four, and

we may be a better team this year than the one that went to the Final Four."

Brad Buckman was a Longhorn fan raised in Westlake before he joined the team as a player. His parents attended the school — his father, Brent, was a member of two NCAA championship golf teams.

Brad Buckman, now a senior, never envisioned this kind of success. "Absolutely not," he said.

As a rule, Buckman said, when he was growing up, Texas was perhaps the second or third choice for the best high school players in the state.

But Ford, a McDonald's All-American, changed that when he signed on in 2001, becoming a beacon for other talented players.

"It's just been great to watch Texas expand and grow in basketball," Buckman said. "We're trying to make this a basketball and football place instead of just football."

The basketball program might never elicit passion commensurate with its success, like football does. But that does not diminish the recent results.

UT has been to three Final Fours since the NCAA tournament began in 1939. Two of those trips were in the 1940s, when the tournament field included eight teams and passage to the Final Four required a single victory.

The 1943 team that finished 19-7 was led by 6-foot-2-inch John Hargis, who scored 59 points in two NCAA games, his average of 29.5 leading the tournament. The coach, Bully Gilstrap, was furloughed while Jack Gray served in the Navy during World War II.

In 1947, Texas was something special, finishing 26-2, its defeats against Oklahoma State and Oklahoma by a total of two points. The loss to Oklahoma, 55-54, came in the semifinals of the NCAA tournament.

Gray, back on the bench as coach, had been a three-time All-America player for UT in the 1930s. He introduced the one-hand set shot to this region. Gray became head coach at age 25.

Hargis, also back from the war, earned second-team All-America honors in 1947. Guard Slater Martin was the T.J. Ford of his time, undersized but exceptionally quick. Martin, Al Madsen and Roy Cox were all 5-10 or shorter, stature that earned the Longhorns the nickname "Mighty Mice."

Despite that success in the 1940s, some fans figured that the school's landmark accomplishment before Barnes arrived was a 1978 National Invitation tournament championship under Abe Lemons. The NIT is consolation for schools not invited to the NCAA tournament, although the NIT was held in higher regard when Texas won it than it is now. The NCAA's field has expanded from 32 teams to 65 since 1978.

For others, UT's greatest success was winning three games to reach the NCAA Elite Eight in 1990, a surprising accomplishment engineered by Coach Tom Penders and guards Lance Blanks, Travis Mays and Joey Wright.

Hoops not always hot here

Texas is not the only school in this state that has struggled in basketball. Only one national champion has been produced in Texas — Texas Western (now Texas-El Paso) in 1966.

The University of Houston was successful for a good stretch, earning five trips to the Final Four under Coach Guy Lewis between 1967 and 1984.

Texas, meanwhile, was nothing much for a long time, making five trips to the NCAA tournament between its appearances in 1947 and 1989. The Longhorns went to the NIT four times during that span.

Richard Pennington, author of the history book "Longhorn Hoops," said the lack of a culture for the sport in Texas hurt. "Basketball was kind of a sideshow," Pennington said.

Even so, the Longhorns appeared on the verge of something big in 1982, when they began 14-0, earning a No. 5 ranking. Then star forward Mike Wacker suffered a season-ending knee injury, sending the program into a tailspin that did not end until late in the decade.

Texas lost 11 of 13 games without Wacker. Lemons was fired after the season.

New Coach Bob Weltlich, a former assistant to Bob Knight at Indiana, turned out to be a poor replacement, producing no NCAA tournament appearances in six seasons. So many players either jumped ship or were pushed overboard in the beginning that Weltlich once had a male cheerleader join the team. Weltlich was fired in 1988.

His replacement, Penders, brought energy, excitement and an NCAA tournament berth in 1989, the school's first in 10 years. Penders introduced fast-paced basketball, entertaining though sometimes lacking in fundamentals.

The Longhorns upset Georgia Tech before losing to Missouri in the second round of the 1989 tournament. A year later, they reached the Elite Eight and Penders became wildly popular.

Texas appeared in the NCAA tournament eight times in a 10-year period, winning 10 games. But Penders wore out his welcome, forced out in 1998 at least in part by players' complaints.

Into the job stepped Barnes, bringing the experience of somebody who had been a head coach in two major conferences, working at Providence in the Big East and Clemson in the Atlantic Coast.

Dodds, a former member of the NCAA men's Division I basketball committee, was impressed by Barnes when the future UT coach took Clemson to the Sweet 16 in San Antonio in 1997.

"I went to practice, sat on the bench," Dodds said. "You could tell the kids respected him, but they also had fun. When he talked, they listened."

At the time, Texas was only two years removed from the Southwest Conference, a lackluster basketball league. Many of the top high school players in Texas lived in a basketball culture that influenced them to leave the state for schools in more prestigious leagues.

But the Big 12, and Barnes, changed that for the Longhorns. The Big 12 gave Texas national television exposure and an affiliation with former Big Eight Conference schools known for basketball.

Barnes' first McDonald's All-American, Brian Boddicker, joined the team in 2000. But Ford, who arrived a year later, was clearly the catalyst who made Austin a popular destination. Barnes has signed five McDonald's All-Americans after Ford. Kevin Durant, who signed last week, should become the sixth.

"T.J.'s decision to come here changed a lot," Barnes said. "People started thinking coming here was a good thing to do, based on what he accomplished. He was the one who flipped it over."

Ford drove Longhorns' future

Ford, a pass-first point guard, handed out a lot of assists during two years in school before leaving for the NBA. But Barnes also received a big assist from Mary Ford.

When T.J. was playing at Willowridge High School, Mary Ford approached Rob Lanier, the Texas assistant coach who was recruiting T.J., during one of his games.

"I said, 'You need to get to know me,' " Mary Ford recalled.

For her son, Texas was on a list of potential schools that included Louisville and Cincinnati.

Mary Ford didn't know if T.J. would play in the NBA, so she figured an education from the University of Texas would help him gain future employment in the state.

"He heard me, and he didn't hear me," Mary Ford said. "He thought it was a lot of hot air. So I would check the Internet, and if something negative happened at another school he was looking at, I'd print it and tape it to his bedroom door."

Ford was the consensus national player of the year as a sophomore at Texas in 2003, and a first-round NBA draft pick by Milwaukee that June, No. 8 overall.

A year after Ford left school, Barnes introduced the No. 1-ranked recruiting class in the country, a group that includes current starters LaMarcus Aldridge and Daniel Gibson.

The Longhorns practice in the luxurious Cooley Pavilion, named for former Texas player Denton Cooley, the famous heart surgeon. They play in a building, the Erwin Center, that has undergone extensive renovations. The practice facility, which opened in October 2003, and alterations to the Erwin Center cost \$55 million.

For years coaches around the country, and others who work in basketball, considered Texas a school with fertile ground for sprouting a successful program. Why did it take so long?

Chris Plonsky works at Texas as women's athletics director and senior associate AD in the men's department. But during parts of the 1980s and early '90s, Plonsky watched UT basketball from a distance as public relations director and associate commissioner of the Big East.

Plonsky believes Texas suffered from its membership in the Southwest Conference during a time when ESPN was shining a spotlight on other leagues. The SWC "just wasn't as appealing as the Big Ten, the ACC or the Big East," Plonsky said. "It was very isolated, out of sight and out of mind."

Penders offered some resistance to this tide. "He deserves a lot of credit," Plonsky said. "He captured the imagination of Texas basketball fans in that era."

Eventually, Penders went down in flames. Barnes extinguished the fire and built something new, a program that is no longer the outpost it once was, but a place to flourish.

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