

UT's Tucker takes tips for rebounding

With adviser's help, UT's Tucker regains eligibility, perspective

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By **CHIP BROWN** / The Dallas Morning News

AUSTIN – Before P.J. Tucker, one of the best basketball players in the Big 12, could get to the point of talking honestly about a pattern of behavior that led to his being ruled academically ineligible last season, he had to bottom out.

The Longhorns' forward, now a junior, already had been humiliated and heartbroken while explaining to his younger brother and sisters he had failed to pass an NCAA-mandated minimum of six hours last fall and could no longer play basketball.

He broke down crying on his cellphone telling his mother and father, his two biggest fans back home in Raleigh, N.C., while on the bus trip home from Texas A&M last season. But Texas coach Rick Barnes still wasn't sure Tucker had taken responsibility for his situation. Barnes heard Tucker already had skipped a class – less than a week after a news conference announcing Tucker would be ineligible for the second half of the season.

Barnes called a team meeting.

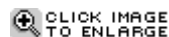
"Is everyone doing what they're supposed to be doing in the classroom?" Barnes asked, looking into the eyes of his players.

One player admitted he had skipped a class.

Another confessed to blowing off a study hall.

Tucker, however, said he had made every class.

Barnes went ballistic.



"You can't lie to yourself, P.J.!" Barnes shouted. "You can't lie to yourself!"

With that, Barnes kicked Tucker out of the meeting and banished him to the weight room to spend two hours on a Stairmaster – known to UT players as "the gauntlet."

"That was the turning point," said Tucker, whose departure as the team's leading scorer and rebounder last season led to a 6-8 finish, a fifth-place tie in the Big 12 and a first-round NCAA Tournament loss. "I

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was mad. He was mad. But it was also the time both of us opened up. We cried a lot that night."

With every step on the gauntlet, Tucker's rage increased. He was sick of people asking him if he was going to be all right. He was sick of the stares on campus. He blamed Barnes for not finding a way to keep him eligible. He had gotten calls from runners for agents saying he was ready for the NBA.

Barnes stormed into the weight room two hours later and asked Tucker, "What are you going to do now? You embarrassed? You should be."

Tucker said he was seriously considering turning pro.

Barnes told Tucker to call his mother, Aleshia, perhaps the most knowledgeable basketball fan in Tucker's family.

"My mom has never lied to me in my life," Tucker said. "And she said, 'You're not ready for the NBA.' "

An odd couple

After Tucker tearfully watched on TV as Texas played its first game without him, Barnes finally convinced him there was a plan for getting him back on the court. Her name was Randa Ryan.

In a recent shakeup in the athletic department, academic support of men's basketball and baseball had become the responsibility of Ryan, a senior associate athletics director who for 10 years had played the same role for women's athletics.

Tucker expected to come face to face with a drill sergeant who would ride him unmercifully. He was shocked.

"What I discovered was my second mom," Tucker said.

As Barnes said of Ryan, "She's not out to get guys doing something wrong, she's out to get them doing something right."

Ryan, a former assistant women's swim coach at Texas under Richard Quick, is an intense but bighearted advocate for students. Her smile lights up a room as quickly as her gregarious personality. She makes instant connections. She listens. And she's the mother of four boys – ages 30, 26, 19 and 13 – so you can't con her. She's seen and heard it all.

Ryan tries to make her office a fun, warm destination for athletes. There is always soft lighting, fresh flowers, a lit candle, a jar of candy, stuffed animals, toys such as Silly Putty, and a rubber band ball and squeeze objects to relieve stress.

"This has to be a positive place for student-athletes to come," Ryan said. "In my office, I don't care if you've made a poor grade or played a bad game. We're trying to help people – not be punitive."



ERICH SCHLEGEL/DMN

Randa Ryan, senior associate athletics director, teases P.J. Tucker before a study session on campus. Tucker credits her for his turnaround. "I've actually told her I love her," he says. "I can't tell you how much she means to me."

In sitting down with Tucker, Ryan didn't dictate. She asked questions. Foremost, she asked Tucker what he wanted to do with his life – after basketball.

Tucker's tattoos and scowling face make for an intimidating presence on the court, where he plays bigger than his 6-5 frame. But within minutes of meeting Ryan, Tucker was soul-searching with a middle-aged woman he hardly knew. He was suddenly as reflective as a sympathy card.

Tucker could tell that Ryan cared about him as a person – not as the latest star jock trying to regain his eligibility. Few had pressed Tucker to think about his future. If they had, Tucker always got stuck on basketball. Ryan didn't let him think that way.

"I've actually told her I love her," Tucker said. "I can't tell you how much she means to me."

No more denial

Tucker opened up. At Ryan's urging, he realized he wanted to operate a girls or boys club with after-school programs for at-risk kids. He set his mind on a degree in education and social work. And like any person confronting demons, Tucker owned up to a pattern of behavior that left him forever scraping by in the classroom.

In seventh grade, Tucker was suspended for two weeks for bad grades. In high school, Tucker dug himself such a huge hole academically, he had to take eight core classes his senior year – compared with the four or five most of his classmates took.

He also took two more classes online every day, just to get his transcript into shape to play college basketball. He took the SAT six times before he finally passed it.

"Those horrible study habits had been ingrained since sixth grade," Tucker said. "I was 6-foot-2 in eighth grade. Basketball became everything. I had teachers who looked out for me, and I just did enough to get by. Occasionally, I'd have a teacher who said, 'You're more than that,' and I worked hard for them. But the other teachers, I was like, 'Whatever.' "

Tucker was so taken with his newfound freedom at Texas, assistant coaches did everything short of walk him to class his freshman year. When he went to class, he hid in the back of lectures, listening to music on his headphones. Once he tried to make up lost ground with a professor by asking if there was extra work he could do to repair his grade. Then he skipped the class the next day. In short, he was lazy and irresponsible.

"I think P.J. thought he'd come in here and get by academically just long enough to get to the pros," Barnes said. "We've told our players, 'Don't let basketball use you.' We've told them to use basketball to get everything they want – starting with an education."

Last November, Tucker knew he was in trouble.

"I really started to get behind," he said. "Then I tried to brown-nose my way back, but I was in too deep."

A different future

Tucker is articulate and self-confident. Ryan is quick to say he's not in over his head at Texas. He

regained his eligibility after taking 15 hours last spring and one session of summer school. He said he posted the second-highest grade-point average on the team in the spring. Teammates said he boasted to them about good test scores the way he beats his chest after a dunk.

"He wasn't playing, so he had to show people he was excelling at something," laughed forward Brad Buckman.

If anything, Ryan said, Tucker just needed a game plan for how to study and a reason to believe it was important beyond basketball.

"P.J. has an inner drive to be successful, so once you get to know him, you're surprised he had any academic difficulty," she said.

Ryan made several changes. She had Tucker meet with all of his professors. She encouraged him to sit in the front of the class. She taught him how to manage his time, how to arrange a study-friendly class schedule around his demanding athletics calendar and how to work ahead instead of procrastinating.

Ryan also encouraged Barnes to move basketball practices to later in the afternoon so players could have study hall before being exhausted by the coach's grueling workouts and falling asleep in their books.

With every passing grade on a test or quiz, Tucker finds himself calling Ryan on her cellphone. Every time, she goes crazy with excitement.

"She makes me feel about my schoolwork like I had a 30-point and 15-rebound night while beating Oklahoma," Tucker said. "Before, if I got a C, I never cared. Now, if I get a C, I'm going to my tutor to work harder."

Asked if he's ever tempted to cut class these days, Tucker laughed and said, "That's like saying Christians don't get tempted by sin." Then he quickly added, "There are days I'm tired and don't want to go to class. But that only lasts about five seconds. Then the pain comes rushing back to me.

"Now, if I have a 10 o'clock class, I set the alarm for 8 o'clock because I'm going, and I'm going to have done the reading."

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P.J. TUCKER

School: Texas

Position: Forward

Class: Junior

Height, weight: 6-5, 225

Hometown: Raleigh, N.C.

Notable: Led Longhorns in scoring (13.7 ppg) and rebounding (8.0 rpg) before leaving the team. ... UT's unquestioned leader.

What others say: "Once P.J. began taking responsibility for his own actions, he became a different person. He became a man. He sees his future beyond basketball for the first time." – Rick Barnes, Texas coach

Guardians Classic: No. 2 Texas (2-0) vs. No. 14 West Virginia (2-0), 6 p.m. today (ESPN2)

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