

Spagrud holds court

Huskie player's remarkable basketball career has gone unnoticed nationally

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Star Phoenix (Saskatoon) Friday, February 8, 2008

Andrew Spagrud's run through the CIS basketball record books -- shoddy and shamefully incomplete as those books may be -- was a five-year effort from a quiet prankster.

Spagrud's scoring feats with the University of Saskatchewan Huskies have him poised to take the all-time Canada West conference scoring crown this weekend -- and possibly the national record -- though nobody seems to know who or what that latter mark is. Almost sounds like some kind of cosmic practical joke, something Spagrud might have pulled if he'd had the access.

"On the road, if there's lotion on your door handle or an ironing board hanging against the shower when you open it . . . he's the guy," says Spagrud's longtime teammate Jordan Harbidge. "But when he talks, you listen. He said what needs to be said and everyone listens, because they know it's important."

Spagrud's entire Huskie career was the perfect joining of athleticism, hard-eyed intensity, consistency and an ability to play well through pain.

He missed just one game his entire career -- a bad ankle kept him out of the lineup earlier this season, to his eternal regret -- and he did it all while pursuing a mechanical engineering degree.

He's 24 points off the Canada West record of 2,171 held by former Dino Richard Bohne. That may or may not be the national record, too -- nobody knows.

"It's a shame, if he does it, that he doesn't get the full national accolades because of the uncertainties," says Huskies' coach Greg Jockims. "Canada West is confident in what they have, but some of the schools and conferences out east aren't as polished in terms of their record keeping."

Spagrud says he's not worrying about the record's scale. He does think about the chase, however -- not always by choice.

"At this point, it's unavoidable. I seem to talk to somebody else about it every other hour," he said. "I'd be lying if I said I didn't think about it once in a while. But when it comes down to game time, it's the farthest thing from my mind. The most important thing when that time comes is winning the game."

Spagrud's record-breaking package includes a 6-foot-8 body with fast hands, an ability to read situations on the fly, deceptively explosive power and a competitive streak that stretches from kaiser to basketball.

Both parents were accomplished athletes. Mother Darcy excelled in several sports, including softball, where her outfield play featured a remarkable throwing arm. Father Marc -- who, ironically, coached former Huskies' standout Sarah Crooks during her high-school days in Rockglen -- was in many respects a smaller version of Andrew.

Darcy's brother, Kirk Jones, was a standout Huskie on the national-calibre hoops teams of the 1980s.

Jones watched Spagrud grow up and he remembers going to the gym when Andrew was in Grade 10. There was some good-natured trash talk between the two -- Spagrud wanting to dunk for Uncle Kirk, his uncle critiquing his efforts.

Spagrud tried and tried and tried, but he couldn't get one down. Jones offered up a few barbs -- "you sure you shouldn't be jumping off a stool?"

"Two weeks later," recounts Jones, "he's playing in a spring league game and I'm coaching with the Huskies. Jockims said 'there's this 6-foot-6 kid, maybe you should go watch him.' I was going anyway, because that's when Andrew's team was playing. I walked in the gym and Andrew's just throwing them down in warmup -- bang, bang, bang. He comes over and says 'what do you think?' I said OK, you can dunk in warmups.' But he hadn't done it in a game and anyone can dunk in warmups. They have the tip-off, it goes to Andrew, he goes down the floor and dunks right over top of the 6-foot-6 kid I'd come to watch.

"He skipped a whole stage. There's a stage (after a kid first learns to dunk) when they're trying to get a breakaway and they travel everytime they do. He went right to dunking in two weeks."

Spagrud followed that same learning curve when he got into CIS hoops. He started every game as a rookie and averaged 21.5 points per game in conference play while leading Canada West with 10.8 rebounds.

He earned national rookie-of-the-year honours that season.

He's twice put up numbers that could have led to national MVP status -- his second and fourth seasons -- but was nixed both times. Last year, coaches chose UBC guard Casey Archibald over Spagrud in conference voting, even though the Huskie forward led the nation in scoring and was second in rebounding. Because of that, he wasn't eligible for national MVP voting.

Those oversights bother Jockims.

"If he was in Toronto or Vancouver, one of those places, he certainly would have been a conference MVP, no question," Jockims said. "What he's meant to our team and our program, his statistical accomplishments . . . if those numbers were put up anywhere else, he would have been the national MVP.

"But when coaches are voting, and you have the B.C. conference with six coaches out there . . . I don't know the votes, but that's the way it goes, unfortunately. Sometimes, people in smaller regions tend not to get the accolades they deserve."

Spagrud's Huskie career is almost finished -- he plays his final regular-season games this weekend and will be faced with some hard decisions when the Huskies finish their playoff run and he exhausts his eligibility.

He needs one more semester to finish his engineering degree and will do that next fall. Then he has to decide if he wants to pursue professional hoops overseas or head straight into the workforce.

Either way, the end of his CIS career looms large.

"I don't think it'll set in until afterwards when I have all this extra time on my hands," Spagrud said. "This is probably the busiest I've been with basketball and school combined, so I don't have a lot of extra time to think about (the end). But when it's the end of March, school's coming to an end and basketball's done, I'll look back and go 'whoa -- what happened here?' Five years, up and gone. There's some sadness associated with it. It's been a lot of fun -- five years of ups and downs, an emotional roller-coaster. But it's not like I can play, go to school, do all this for a lot longer -- I feel it's probably about time."

SPAGRUD AT A GLANCE

- 2003-04: 21.5 ppg, 10.8 rpg

- 2004-05: 21.8 ppg, 10.7 rpg

- 2005-06: 18 ppg, 7.6 rpg

- 2006-07: 23.6 ppg, 10.6 rpg

- 2007-08: 21.3 ppg, 10.8 rpg

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