

EMBRACING NEW EXPERIENCES

by Eddie Hughes

It was 103 degrees outside — and not much cooler inside the stuffy gymnasium — as Fresno State wrapped up its second women's basketball practice with new coach Jaime White. The players gathered in a circle, sitting on the court still regaining their breath after an intense intrasquad scrimmage.

Senior guard Raven Fox stood up and pulled out a folded up piece of paper.

“A mind that is stretched by a new experience can never go back to its old dimensions,” Fox said, reciting a quote by Oliver Wendell Homes Jr.

The quote related to the team's preseason Australian tour that allowed them to start practice earlier in the summer and bond with the new coaching staff and teammates. But the quote resonated much deeper than that for a program that's faced a revolving door of new experiences the past four years and, through it all, keeps hanging championship banners from the rafters.

This is Fresno State basketball — home of seven straight conference titles and seven straight NCAA tournament appearances.

But this is also Fresno State basketball — home of three different coaches in the past four years.

“We just started doing this new tradition with our players choosing a quote to share with their teammates,” White says. “It gives our kids a chance to express their feelings, lead the team and have a voice. I love it.”

Raven Fox





Jaime White

EXPERIENCE WITH CHANGE

Leading is the top priority for Fox and fellow seniors Alex Sheedy, Alex Furr and Robin Draper. They've been through a coaching change before — just two years ago — and won Mountain West tournament championships in Fresno State's first two years in the conference.

This year, with another coaching change, the goals are no different. Win the Mountain West. Win the Mountain West tournament. Make it to the NCAA tournament.

How does that happen? How did a Fresno State women's basketball program that had never — NEVER — been to the NCAA tournament in school history just eight years ago suddenly make it the norm?

Former coach Adrian Wiggins started the trend in the 2007-08 season and ran off a string of five straight trips to the beloved tournament known as March Madness. Then Raegan Pebley took over as coach without a hiccup and added two more tournament berths. Now, it's White's turn to maintain the momentum.

"With each coach you learn something different," says Furr, a fifth-year guard who has overcome two knee injuries and is now working on her master's degree in sports psychology. "A lot of people see the coaching changes as a disadvantage because you have to learn a whole new offense, but in a lot of ways I think it's a really good opportunity to have so many coaches because you learn different lessons from each one of them."

White is putting her own spin on the Bulldogs' game plan this summer, installing principles of the triangle offense and more on-ball screens. White met with Stanford coach Tara Vandermeer, the master of the triangle offense at the college level, and hired one of Stanford's volunteer assistants to join the Bulldogs staff.

White says the team will still run in transition, but she wants to put the post players inside more than they have been in the past to give them a chance to score at a higher percentage. For Sheedy, an Australia native and Fresno State's returning all-conference forward, that means some adjustments.

"In Australia, we got new coaches nearly every year, so I'm pretty used to it, but I was definitely not expecting it when I came here," Sheedy says. "It's been a bit weird, honestly, because you get so used to one style of play and then it's constantly changing. But I think it's good — it's good for everyone to develop their game."

CONSISTENCY AMIDST INCONSISTENCY

Obviously, the coaches have changed. And as is protocol in the college game, the players have changed too. From Chantella Perera and Amy Parish, to Jaleesa Ross and Tierre Wilson, to Ki-Ki Moore and Emma Andrews — star players have come and gone. And now, Sheedy and the other seniors are tasked with leading the program into a new era.

To do that successfully, this year's team will have to find consistency in inconsistent surroundings — again.

"It's tradition now. You don't want to break that," Furr says. "You don't want to be the team that comes in and messes it all up. It's a really high standard, so we have to uphold it."

With that high of a standard, comes pressure and expectations. And that's part of what attracted White to take the job. She knows this program is a proven winner.

"When you start that, it's tough to stop," White says. "The kids have bought into winning. It's an expectation I don't even have to say. They want to keep it alive and keep the tradition they've built. It wasn't easy to build that, it was a lot of hard work, and they have pride in that."

The challenge, as some of the star players prepare to graduate and move on, is to find new talent and then insert those new pieces into the team without disrupting its rhythm.

The two previous coaches duplicated that formula. Now, it's White's turn.

"We don't want to change the direction and expectation of winning," White says. "We have to make it our own and add to the team that we already have. My goal is to make the transition seamless for the kids who have had three coaches in four years."

White plans to do that by leaning on her most experienced players while working to develop the younger ones. In the coming years, she wants to focus on recruiting athletic players. She'll continue to explore the Bulldogs recruiting pipeline in Australia, but also focus heavily on California prospects, specifically in the Central Valley.

Draper, a fourth-year pre-med (anthropology) student from San Joaquin Memorial High in Fresno, believes the recruiting foundation is solid.

"Because we're winning championships, we get good recruits," Draper says. "And because we get good recruits, we keep becoming a winning team. Good players equals a good team."

If history is an indicator, there's no reason to doubt Fresno State will again have a good team. The question is always, how good?

Through all the success and all the postseason appearances the past seven years, the Bulldogs still haven't won a game in the NCAA tournament.

Rewind to that early-season practice, where Fox stood and read aloud to her teammates: "A mind that is stretched by a new experience can never go back to its old dimensions."

Neither can this basketball program.