

The long road back

Zags star Josh Heytvelt has devoted two years to 'winning back trust'

By Dale Grummert Of The Tribune

Tuesday, March 17, 2009



Associated Press

Josh Heytvelt takes the court for introductions on Senior Night at Gonzaga's McCarthy Athletic Center on March 3. Two years ago, it was easy to believe that Heytvelt would never make it this far in his Zags career.



Associated Press

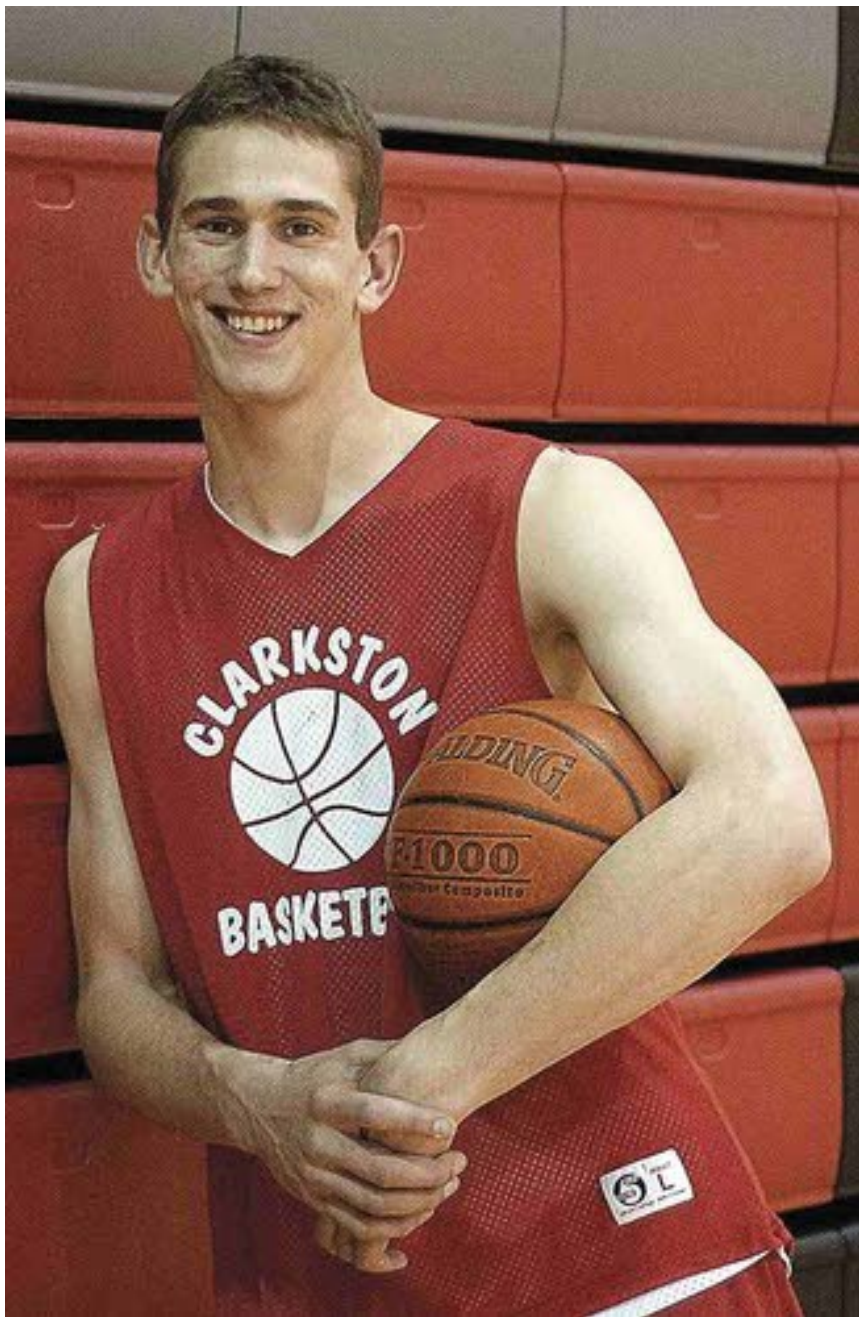
Heytvelt has become a more imposing defensive presence for the Zags this season, while averaging almost 15 points and seven rebounds a game.



Contributed photo

Josh Heytvelt signs an autograph at the Ronald McDonald House in Spokane for

Parker Brown, a young cancer patient from Omak, Wash. Much of Heytvelt's community service in 2007 was spent at the McDonald House.



Steve Hanks/ Lewiston Tribune

Smiles came a little more easily for Heytvelt during his carefree days as a Clarkston High star.

SPOKANE - If Josh Heytvelt had followed his original, now hard-to-imagine academic plan at Gonzaga - as a public-relations major - he would have been groomed to make fuller, more evocative speeches than the one he delivered recently on Senior Night at the McCarthey Athletic Center.

But his 28 words - a reporter for the student newspaper counted them - found a rapt audience.

"I have to thank everybody in this gym and in this community" - and he paused here - "for accepting me back and letting me do what I did over the last couple years."

Fans burst into applause, a television camera found Heytvelt's bearded father beaming in the crowd, and the 6-foot-11 athlete handed the microphone to the next, significantly less abashed senior.

The power of the speech was in the pause: an unscheduled 10-second limbo in which the Zags' leading scorer, smiling in spite of himself, tried to swallow his emotions and restore his customary stone-faced facade.

Early in his episodic five-year stay at Gonzaga, Heytvelt had fled public relations, as an academic major and perhaps as a general approach to life, not least because he was daunted by the thought of endless speech classes. He wound up getting a degree last May in sports management, and is now working on a master's in organizational leadership.

Little did he know public relations would be his fate regardless, thanks to a PR blunder of psychedelic vividness.

When news broke in February 2007 that Heytvelt and Gonzaga teammate Theo Davis had been arrested at Cheney, Wash., and charged with felony possession of a controlled substance, it was easy to fear the worst - not only for Gonzaga fans reluctant to lose a gifted big man, but for Heytvelt's friends and relatives in Clarkston.

The university he had chosen, after all, was a Catholic Jesuit school whose basketball program over the previous decade had become a national darling, and whose athletes in that sport had never seriously run afoul of the law.

On top of that, the police's prime discovery in Heytvelt's car that night wasn't mundane marijuana but hallucinogenic mushrooms, a substance sure to attract an extra measure of national wink-wink notoriety.

Gonzaga, not surprisingly, suspended the players for the rest of the basketball season amid speculation they would be set adrift for good - with unknown repercussions for Heytvelt's seemingly bright prospects for a pro career.

What happened over the next several months, according to those close to Heytvelt, was something of a personal transformation. Or maybe a restoration.

"I think through the course of everything he's been through," Gonzaga coach Mark Few said recently, "he's been able to open up. When you talk to him, you feel like he's listening. You feel like he's actually sharing some things. Whereas before it was never like that."

As a young athlete in the Lewiston-Clarkston Valley, however, Heytvelt had indeed been quiet but also personable and trusting, devoted to family and, as he became a star at Clarkston High, gracious to adoring young fans.

In a number of ways, he was a hemlock growing in a dogwood orchard - a basketball prodigy in an area that hadn't produced a top-tier men's talent in that sport in recent memory.

His well-spoken 6-foot-4 father, Rolin Heytvelt, a shift captain for the Clarkston Fire Department who has lived in the L-C Valley for three decades, could probably invent a yarn or two about past athletic glory if the notion struck him. But he says he shunned organized basketball in favor of YMCA pick-up games while growing up in the Seattle area.

Nor could the women in the Heytvelt family - Josh's 5-foot-8 mother, Michelle, an elementary-school teacher, and Josh's two older sisters, Heather and Amy - offer the family's youngest child much advice on avoiding the pitfalls of high-profile college sports.

"It was like he was blazing his own trail, if you will," Rolin Heytvelt said.

Certain pressures made the blazing more difficult. To name two: Heytvelt as a prep athlete found himself at the center of an NCAA scandal involving the University of Washington recruiting tactics. And three years ago he became a father, of a girl named Hailey Rose, who now lives with her mother in Vancouver, Wash.

"All those things have made him stronger," Michelle Heytvelt said. "He has learned lessons that sometimes it takes people 50 years to learn. He learned them in five."

In the meantime he was introduced to the considerable pressures of playing basketball for Gonzaga, which presented, among other things, a social diversity that Clarkston could never come close to mustering.

"There were maybe some insecurities, socially, maybe not having what he perceived as the same level of life experiences, or the same witty responses that kids at this age have," Few said. "And certainly the scrutiny that players are under here. Have a bad game, and sometimes it feels like they let everybody down."

Lately, that hasn't been an issue.

Liberated from a foot injury that Heytvelt and the Zags tried to keep under the public radar last season, the senior post is averaging 14.9 points and 6.7 rebounds this year, shooting 54 percent. Having arrived at Gonzaga in 2004 as a stinky 210-pounder, he is now listed at 260 and staying probably within 15 pounds of that weight here on the cusp of March Madness. The Zags (26-5), buoyed by a nine-game winning streak and their ninth West Coast Conference tournament title in 11 years, enter the NCAA tournament with a first-round game against Akron on Thursday at Portland, Ore.

Through it all, Heytvelt has retained the mobility and outside shooting touch that, combined with his burgeoning post skills, make him an intriguing NBA prospect. He has converted 42 percent of his 52 tries from 3-point range this season.

And how close he had come to being driven out of town.

By now, Spokane seems to have forgiven Heytvelt for his 2007 escapade, but he is forever reminded of it when the Zags hit the road.

"MUSH-rooms, MUSH-rooms," has become a standard chant of opposing fans when Heytvelt toes the foul line, while some of the more enterprising crowds break into, "PSYCH-uh-DEL-ics."

"I've heard it all," Heytvelt said. "I almost want to go to the crowd and ask if they have anything new."

From a legal standpoint, his big break came a few months after his arrest, when a judge granted Heytvelt's request, given his previously clean record, to be placed in a diversion program that could void the charges. He was the first person in Spokane County to be granted such a request in a drug-possession case.

The diversion program, in a sense, diverted him straight back into public relations - his own version of it, without the speech classes and without the glibness that sports fans have come to expect from penitent athletes.

"The exterior impression that people take is huge," said Heytvelt's former prep coach, Brendan Johnson of Clarkston High. "I think they see tattoos and they see he's sometimes not clean-shaven and they right away connect it to the incident. They continue to write him off."

Never mind that two of the tattoos are religious tributes to his aging grandparents, Louis and AnnaRuth Heytvelt, who have lived next door to the family's home in Clarkston for two decades.

In any case, Heytvelt performed perhaps 300 hours of community service over a period of months in 2007, far beyond the required 240 hours. He spent some of the time with AAU basketball teams and the huge Bloomsday road race, but spent most of it far outside the cheery realm of athletics.

Heytvelt's low-key personality, in fact, struck an appropriate chord at the Spokane chapter of the Ronald McDonald House, which provides reduced-rate housing for families of children receiving medical care.

This is where Heytvelt paid much of his debt, a towering local celebrity cleaning waiting-room tables, taking out the trash, chatting with parents in various stages of emotional upheaval.

But there were light moments. He played occasional one-on-one against an 8-year-old boy named Skylyer, who now, two years later, is in the final stages of his battle with cancer.

"Skylyer told me he beat Josh at basketball," reported Mike Forness, executive director of the charity. "We don't have any confirmation on that, but that's what Skylyer says.

"It was a great experience for Josh, from my perspective," Forness said. "He just kind of rolled up his sleeves and did what any volunteer would do. He did it eagerly, with excitement and passion."

Heytvelt, in fact, has been slow to sever ties. Last year he gave Gonzaga teammates a tour of the McDonald House, and two months ago he attended the organization's annual meeting.

The suffering he had witnessed there, he says, placed his own problems in perspective.

"I had the sense that I had screwed up, and that was something that was real hard in my life and really sucked for me," he said. "But to see how much hope those kids had. There were kids that made it, and kids that didn't make it. That was the big thing I learned from my experience. I got arrested and got in trouble - big whoop. These kids have life-threatening diseases and they're more happy than some person walking down the street."

Heytvelt's second big break came in October 2007, when Gonzaga athletic director Mike Roth, referring to the school as a "Jesuit Catholic, humanistic institution here to educate students," announced the reinstatement of Heytvelt and Davis to the

team (though the latter wound up transferring last year). Meanwhile, the school hedged its bets by administering periodic drug tests that Heytvelt estimated at one a month.

That's not counting court-ordered testing, for which he was required to contact an agency every weekday morning for 18 months to see if it was time to submit. Those tests could be as frequent as a few a month, and he apparently passed them all.

Charges were dropped a year ago. On some level, though, they reverberate still.

Shortly after the arrest two years ago, a Spokane television crew drove to the valley and interviewed a young man who said sympathetically that Heytvelt had been "caught with Clarkston in his pocket." Given the substance involved, it might be more accurate to say he was caught with a piece of the 1960s in his pocket. And he does, when pressed, espouse views that ring with '60s anti-materialism. He believes the world would be a better place if "everyone just settled down a little bit."

But the drugs, he said, were an experiment.

"Kind of like any college kid, I definitely did some things before the incident," he said. "But I don't do them anymore. Everybody has their own little time to experiment with things, and mine obviously came to an abrupt end a couple of years ago."

Few, the 10th-year Zags coach, has said he was initially opposed to leniency toward Heytvelt, who had broken one of his cardinal rules.

"I don't expect my guys to be perfect, but I do expect them to put the program first," he said. "I also stuck with him and believed in him that he could make a change. And he's done that, and I couldn't be more proud. I think it's one of the best success stories we've ever had at Gonzaga."

Through the entire episode, according to Heytvelt's father, the athlete had ardent supporters at the school.

"He couldn't have been in better hands, being at Gonzaga," Rolin Heytvelt said. "One of the priests who was counseling him said what he did was dumber than a box of rocks, but he said there are enough students at Gonzaga who have been as dumb, and if they were to expel all of them they wouldn't have many students left."

It wasn't just prosecutors and priests Heytvelt needed to please. His suspension had placed a pall over an already unmagical Gonzaga season in 2007, and teammates were resentful. In pick-up games that summer, Heytvelt sensed a chill.

"It was kind of my first time back with the guys and playing with them again, and some of the guys didn't want to pass me the ball - they didn't want to talk to me," he recalled. "We played, that was it. I was expecting the worst. It was just something I had to continue to work on. It took the whole summer to get everybody on a trust level where they knew I was fully committed to basketball and I wasn't going to do anything dumb again."

Here again, though, there's a sense that Heytvelt paid his debt with interest, beginning with that nine-game suspension in 2007.

"When the situation first happens, you look at it as a letdown," Gonzaga senior guard Jeremy Pargo said. "But if you really look, it hurt him a lot more than it hurt us - for him to sit there and watch us play, and not be a part of anything we were doing. One thing we wanted to do was to give him a second chance, and he's taking advantage of it right now."

His father isn't sure he could have paid the same price.

"Where he got the courage to do it, I don't know," he said. "I've reflected on it myself. Would I have had the courage to face what he's had to face? Oftentimes, if I've looked at myself honestly, I've said I probably would have run away."

His son's story evokes for him the Robert Frost poem that ends, "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference."

Yet it was a road with which Heytvelt was already familiar.

"A lot of my personality was hidden before," he said. "I had to come out and show everyone who I really am."

Some can see it, some can't. It helps to be close to the subject.

Rolin Heytvelt, sitting in the stands at Gonzaga during his son's senior speech two weeks ago, took particular note of a fan's comment, squeezed deftly into the silence left by the athlete's 10-second pause.

"It came from someone way in the back, one of the season-ticket holders, a lady," he said. "She goes, 'We love you, Josh,' at the top of her lungs."

"It was incredible," he said. "Absolutely incredible."

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