

# Like father, like son: Phil and Mac Hopson have established an Idaho basketball legacy

By Sandra Kelly, Daily News staff writer

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Mac Hopson has had a brilliant career at Idaho.

Last year he became the first Idaho player to earn top Western Athletic Conference team honors when he made the all-WAC team and the all-Newcomer team. He was also the first Idaho player since the 1999-2000 season to earn all-conference honors.

He, along with seniors Kashif Watson, Marvin Jefferson and Luciano de Souza, were the building blocks of the Don Verlin Vandals, a group designated early on as Idaho's "Return to Glory" team.

The glory refers to Idaho's tremendous run during the early 1980s. During that span the Vandals went 89-26, and during the magical 1981-82 season, they went to the Sweet 16 round of the NCAA Tournament.

Hopson is directly linked to that team through his dad, Phil, and returning Idaho to its fabled past was a big reason Mac decided to come to Idaho.

It was a bittersweet journey for both Hopsons.

Mac was a standout high school player at Jefferson High in Portland. He expected to go to a Division I school right off the bat, but he didn't receive offers.

"Out of high school nobody wanted to take a chance on me at D-I, and that hurt my heart. I knew I was good enough," he said. "All my teammates went D-I, and on the starting five I was the leading scorer and leading assist man. And I was probably up there in rebounds, too. We were playing against the No. 1 team in the country and I get player of the game and we lost. There were so many scouts there. We lost by three points. I can't believe I didn't go D-I."

It was gut-wrenching for the younger Hopson, but he made the most of the situation and headed to North Idaho College, where he was a standout player for two years.

He caught the eye of former Washington State coach Tony Bennett, and Hopson, who grew up loving the Vandals, ended up eight miles away from his dad's alma mater in 2006-07.

Phil said he understood the draw of playing in the Pac-10, but having his son opt for the crimson and grey was tough.

"Every kid that grows up on the West Coast wants to play Pac-10 ball, so I couldn't fault him for it," Phil said. "But it was tough 'cause it was the Cougars, and when we played here, they were our biggest rivals outside of the Big Sky teams. So it was pretty hard, but I didn't fight it."

Mac had success at WSU early, but by midseason he wasn't getting a lot of playing time. The longer he languished on the bench the more he realized he needed a chance of venue, and the silver and gold of Idaho beckoned him.

"God blessed me. I think He had a plan for me the whole time," Mac said. "He sent me (to WSU) and I got so much better overall. I got stronger, and knowing what I had to do to get better, knowing what competition looks like and knowing what the top level looks

like. At one point we played the No. 1 team in the country, UCLA, taking last shots against them. It was a great experience."

The following year, Hopson came to Idaho, where he had to redshirt because of transfer rules. Practicing without being able to play, all while the Cougars were making a Sweet 16 run, was tough to watch.

"Going there made me a stronger man, a stronger individual," Mac said. "I wanted to stay there. I loved the school, it was really hard (to leave). Then I'm seven miles away and sitting out and listening to how good Washington State is. A top-15 team in the country. It was very difficult, but sometimes you got to do what you got to do for yourself."

## **Idaho**

At the end of Mac's redshirt season, Idaho coach George Pfeifer was replaced by Verlin, and Mac made an immediate impression on the first-year coach. He was promptly put in as Idaho's point guard, and his impact was sudden and direct.

Last season, Idaho had a terrific run. It finished .500 overall and ended up third in the WAC as it headed into the conference tournament.

A poor showing against Louisiana Tech in their tourney opener seemingly ended the Vandals' season, but the Collegeinsider.com tournament came knocking at Idaho's door, and Idaho was granted new life.

It ended up defeating Drake in the tourney opener in front of a boisterous Memorial Gym crowd, and then went to Pacific, where it lost, ending its season.

That season sparked a newfound interest in Idaho hoops, one that was reminiscent of Phil's old teams.

"It was great," Phil said. "I know one of Mac's goals was to come here and help turn the program around. He always talked about, 'Dad, we're going to have a team like yours back in the '80s. The Dome is going to be packed again.' I'd always tease him, 'You guys have to do a miracle to do as well as we did. ... More power to ya, and I'll be here rooting you on. I'll be your biggest fan.' "

## **2010 season**

Expectations were high when the Vandals opened play this year, but things quickly went south.

Idaho never put things together and hovered around .500 ball for most of the year. When conference play began, many thought Idaho would make a great run. Instead, it went on a six-game losing streak, all the hype dissipated, and Hopson and the rest of the Vandals were struggling.

"The chemistry didn't all fall into place when we needed it to," Mac said. "It's there now, I think, but when we needed it in the beginning. ... We didn't have any problems, but our chemistry wasn't there."

Oddly, Mac said the team began to come together during the six-game skid. Suddenly everyone began playing hard every game, every practice, and as the outside world began to criticize them, the team drew together.

"We trust each other," he said. "We know we just have to go out and play hard every day. I think that's where we went wrong. Some games everybody didn't play hard every game, and that really hurt us. When everybody is playing hard we're a tough team to beat."

It was also tough for Phil to watch his son struggle.

"It's hard when they had such high expectations coming in this year and to feel the emotion and feel his pain," Phil said. "We talked about just keeping his head up and not giving up. Fighting to the bitter end.

"Some things I remember when I played. Coach (Don) Monson would never say there was a team better than us. We always had a chance to beat a team whether it was Pac-10, Big-10, no matter who we were playing. He always taught us and coached us that there was an opportunity to win. Those are the kinds of things I try to share with him. It's not over until you hear that horn."

### **Looking back**

This week will likely mark the end of a journey for the Hopsons. Today the Vandals open the WAC Tournament against Nevada, and if the Vandals are going to advance to the NCAAs, they'll have to win the WAC tourney in Reno. Not impossible, but unlikely.

Both Mac and Phil said these past two years have been great, regardless of what happens this week in Reno.

For Mac, getting the opportunity to play on a big stage under the same lights his dad had such success under has been an experience of a lifetime.

"For sure. I have a lot of good memories," Mac said. "Beating BSU - I don't think there's another rivalry in the WAC that's like that. It's the best rivalry by far. I'll always remember BSU and the CIT, and winning that first game. Then going to Pacific.

"We broke a lot of records. ... A lot of things happened that haven't happened in a long time."

For Phil, coming back to Moscow and enjoying the campus and Vandal Nation was something he didn't expect.

"It's been fun to come back. It's a good feeling. It brings back a lot of memories," he said. "I see a lot of people I haven't seen. And you know, that was 25 years ago. They remind me of things that happened that I forgot about. I see some faces and it reminds me of things that I had forgotten, so it's been a great experience. And having my son out there playing and having my wife and daughter come and be a part of it. It's a special, special deal."

**Phil's run** Phil has a lot of Idaho basketball memories of his own. He was part of the trio of Brian Kellerman and Kenny Owens that took the Big Sky - and the nation - by storm.

They had a near-perfect Big Sky season during the 1981-82 season, going 13-1. That was the year they beat Iowa in the NCAA tournament in Pullman, and eventually lost to Oregon State in Provo, Utah.

"Making it to the Sweet 16 and playing in Pullman and filling that place up. Playing Iowa over there and having them the same colors as us. That was really exciting," Phil said. "The large crowds we had here, it was always a packed house. Our record. I was talking to Brian Kellerman a couple of weekends ago, and between our freshman and senior year, we only lost two home games - to Boise State our freshman year and Montana our senior year. Those are some things I remember."

Following his Idaho career - a career that has him on nine Top 10 Idaho lists - Phil went overseas to play basketball, and then returned to Moscow to finish his degree. He brought his wife, Lauren, and Mac (sister Channell wasn't born yet), but until Mac began playing for the Vandals, he rarely returned again.

Over the last two years, Phil has returned often. He can't come back to Moscow without being reminded of the glory days, but he said he doesn't mind.

"It brings back a lot of memories, and I feel really a part of the university through my son and through some of the things our team and me, myself, were able to accomplish here. It's been a great experience coming back here the last couple of years and being a part of Vandal Nation again. It won't be another 25 years before I start coming again."

### **Always a Vandal**

Even though Mac's senior season didn't end the way he envisioned, both he and his dad have enjoyed the ride at Idaho.

"I love being here," Mac said. "I love being a Vandal. I will always be a Vandal. And, I'll be back."

For Phil, getting a chance to watch his son play in a building that provided so many wonderful memories has been gratifying in numerous ways.

"This has been like a dream come true," Phil said. "From the time he was a little kid I always kind of dreamed and hoped that he'd be a Vandal one day. It took a while, and he went at it in a roundabout way, but I think this is where he should have been from the beginning, and this is very special to me. I'm very proud of him." **Sandra Kelly** can be reached at (208) 882-5561, ext. 231, or by e-mail at [skelly@dnews.com](mailto:skelly@dnews.com)