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Marc Axton
on his coach,
Ray Giacoletti



Jed Conklin/The Spokesman-Review

Ray Giacoletti led the Eastern Washington Eagles to their first Big Sky title.

Coach is master of deflection

EWU's Giacoletti wants spotlight on his players, not himself

By Jim Meehan
Staff writer

Ray Giacoletti probably won't like this article. The subject matter bothers him. "Can't you do something on one of the kids?" he asks a reporter.

Eastern Washington's fourth-year men's basketball coach is comfortable on the sideline, diagramming plays, breaking down tape, visiting a recruit's family, trading stories with coaching buddies, chatting in his office.

When the topic turns to Giacoletti, he squirms a bit and tries to deflect attention back toward his players.

That's typical, his players insist.

"He wants the team to be recognized more than himself," junior forward Marc Axton said. "He believes in us and wants the best for us. He wants the spotlight shined on us."

"But obviously he's the brains behind the operation."

EWU's operation is humming along quite nicely at present. The Eagles, outright regular-season champions for the first time, are poised to host the Big Sky tournament Tuesday and Wednesday at Reese Court.

Eastern will face fifth-seeded Weber State in the semifinals at approximately 8:15 Tuesday. No. 3 Idaho State meets No. 2 Northern Arizona at 6:05 p.m.

COMING UP

Big Sky Tournament

At Reese Court in Cheney

Semifinals, Tuesday

6:05: Northern Arizona vs. Idaho St.
8:15: Eastern Washington vs. Weber State

Championship, Wednesday

6:05: Semifinals winners (ESPN2)

EWU is searching for its first NCAA berth after three consecutive runner-up finishes in the Big Sky tournament.

Continued: **Giacoletti/C6**

Now it's Gonzaga's turn to carry conference, says **John Blanchette**.

WCC has always been top-heavy

The Spokesman-Review

SANTA CLARA, Calif. — There is something in the neighborhood of 1,600 Gonzaga loyalists in town for the West Coast Conference tournament. Some of them even brought a change of Kennel Club T-shirts just in case too much beverage gets spilled on the good one.

An eyeball estimate suggested there were as many as a thousand more in San Diego on this weekend a year ago. Which leads us to this obvious conclusion: The West Coast Conference had better truck its basketball tournament up to Spokane and be quick about it, before we lose interest completely.

Then again, maybe that's what the other schools are counting on.

If there is such a thing as an irrelevant errand, this tournament would seem to be it. Yes, there is a championship game to be played tonight with an automatic NCAA Tournament berth at stake, and perhaps one of the participants will even be Gonzaga, ranked fourth in the nation and the WCC's Rocky Marciano, if only basketball teams were allowed to retire undefeated.

But from a practical standpoint, it matters not.

The Bulldogs could stay in their hotel rooms and play Xbox if they so desired and their Bracketville reservation would still be honored, if not with the same suite. Likewise, if the Zags were to lose here, somebody else would get the trophy and the same respect accorded lottery winners.

And if the Zags win as expected, well, then it costs the conference a few hundred thousand in NCAA booty.

So, aside from those aforementioned 1,600, it's pretty obvious where the rooting interests are.

This is as it always is in the WCC, which seems to be most content hatching one terrific team to tow the rest of the members into the big picture. If it isn't USF of the 1950s or 1970s, it's a Santa Clara in the 1960s, a Loyola Marymount in the '80s or a Pepperdine in the '90s. And now GU.

On the rarest of occasions, there are two or three teams of relatively equal merit atop the standings and a conference tournament with some spontaneous drama.

Continued: **Blanchette/C5**



John Blanchette



Associated Press

President George W. Bush visited with NASCAR drivers before the start of the Daytona 500 on Feb. 15.

He's just one of the boys

President stokes regular-guy image with NASCAR, rodeo, other sports

By Jennifer Loven
Associated Press

CRAWFORD, Texas — Until last month, President Bush hadn't been to a NASCAR race since he was governor of Texas and running for president. On Monday, he goes to a rodeo and livestock exhibition in Houston — again, for the first time since he was governor.

Such appearances at sports events this election year help Bush shore up his standing with his core supporters: white men.

They also show him as a plain-talking boots-wearer with Middle America tastes — an image Bush has cultivated for years to counter his background as an Ivy Leaguer from an old, wealthy, New England-based

family. That comes in handy particularly this year, as the president will almost certainly face Democratic Sen. John Kerry, a wealthy Northeasterner the Bush campaign aims to paint as out of sync with much of the country.

Allan Lichtman, a political scientist at American University in Washington, said the events call attention to Bush as "both the macho guy and the regular guy."

"Despite all the charges that his administration is a giveaway to the rich, this shows President Bush as in touch with the concerns and the lives of ordinary Americans in all the ways the patrician, distant, former hippie war protester John Kerry isn't," Lichtman said.

A Republican official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said the stops at

sporting events reinforce the campaign's message that Bush identifies with regular folks in the places where they live and work and play.

An Associated Press poll taken last week showed Bush leading Kerry by almost 20 percent among white men.

But that doesn't mean the president has no work to do among that demographic. Increasing loyalty among core supporters early in the election season is a classic campaign strategy.

Furthermore, the entire election could turn on a small number of votes in states such as West Virginia and Missouri where white men are a key bloc and the election was very close in 2000, Lichtman said.

"He certainly isn't hurting with his base,

but he doesn't want to have to worry about his base either," Lichtman said.

Activities such as throwing out the first pitch at the World Series and hosting major sports champions at the White House are longtime presidential traditions that well predate Bush.

And Bush's credentials as a genuine sports fan, who would rather turn on a game than just about anything else and avidly reads sports pages, aren't in doubt. Early in his presidency, the former owner of the Texas Rangers baseball team even instituted a Sunday T-ball league on the South Lawn.

But recent months have seen an increased emphasis.

Last month, he made a high-profile appearance at NASCAR's most prestigious event, the Daytona 500, buzzing the crowd in Air Force One, looping the track in his

Continued: **Bush/C5**

Gonzaga women fall short

By Steve Bergum
Staff writer

Loyola Marymount captures WCC title, NCAA tourney berth

SANTA CLARA, Calif. — Loyola Marymount spared itself the indignity, Sunday afternoon, of becoming the last West Coast Conference women's basketball team to make it to the NCAA Tournament.

Instead, that unwanted distinction belongs to the Gonzaga Bulldogs.

In a WCC tournament final featuring the only two conference schools without a trip to the NAAs on their resumes, the top-seeded Lions knocked off the second-seeded Zags 61-58 in front of a Leavey Center crowd of 1,654.

The win gave LMU (24-5) the league's automatic

berth in this year's NCAA tournament, and left the Bulldogs (18-11) looking in from the outside once again.

Afterward, Gonzaga coach Kelly Graves said he was disappointed that his young team came up a win short of making the NAAs, but added he was still hoping there might still be some basketball left — like in the Women's National Invitation Tournament, perhaps.

"Listen, they're a great team," he said of the Lions, who have reeled off 15 consecutive wins since losing their WCC opener at Gonzaga back in early January. "I don't think we're going to get an NCAA bid, but I think we have a good shot of playing (in the WNIT). I would hope that's in our

Continued: **GU women/C5**



Brian Plonka/The Spokesman-Review

GU's Ashley Burke fouls LMU's Kate Murray, top.

Chiefs clinch playoff berth

PORTLAND — Bring on the playoffs.

Chad Klassen had his second career hat trick, and also added an assist, and the Spokane Chiefs clinched a Western Hockey League playoff berth with a 6-3 win over the Portland Winter Hawks on Sunday night.

The teams were tied at two goals each after the first period, but the Chiefs held a 4-2 lead after the second.

Jeff Kehler, Scott Lynch and Brad Schell also scored for Spokane (30-28-4-7), which moved to within two points of the Winter Hawks for third spot in the U.S. Division. Schell assisted on two goals.



Chiefs 6
Winter Hawks 3

Wednesday:
Kelowna at
Spokane, 7 p.m.

Klassen completed his hat trick with an empty net, short-handed goal with 31 seconds remaining.

Braydon Coburn, Darrell May and Kyle Bailey scored for Portland (32-28-6-3).

The Chiefs conclude the regular season this week with home games on Wednesday against Kelowna and Saturday against Kootenay, wrapped around a Friday date at Kootenay.