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Really sweet for UW star's Port family of fans

For the second year in a row, Joan and Pat Gasser of Port Washington will watch their son Josh play in the Sweet 16 round of the NCAA basketball tournament.

Despite being sick, Josh, a sophomore guard on the University of Wisconsin Badgers team and former Port Washington High School standout, played 24 minutes Saturday and helped nail the 60-57 win over Vanderbilt by grabbing a rebound with 2.3 seconds left.

His parents, sister Becky Plier and brother-in-law Randy Plier of Wauwatosa were in the stands and groaned when Josh missed the front end of a bonus free throw after being fouled on the play.

But the Badgers' efforts were enough to place them among the top 16 teams in the nation for the second consecutive year. The team made it to the Sweet 16 last year also, but lost to Davidson University.

This time, the Gassers hope the ride continues longer. The Badgers will play top-seeded Syracuse at 6 p.m. Thursday, March 22, in Boston.

The Gassers and the Pliers ordered their airline tickets when they saw the bracket the Badgers were in, betting the Badgers would get that far.

However, when they learned Saturday that Josh had been up all night with a virus and was getting intravenous fluids up to two hours before Saturday's game, they wondered if he would play.

Josh wasn't alone in his misery. His father, sister, another teammate, some UW band members, cheerleaders and other guests at the Embassy Suites in Albuquerque, N. M., became ill Friday night.

"They don't know what it was. If it was in the air or what," Mr. Gasser said. "They had him on IVs to get fluids and he slept a little Saturday. He didn't go to practice and we didn't know if he would play."

"That was a little nerve wracking," Mrs. Gasser said. "We felt bad for him. Mrs. Ryan (coach Bo Ryan's wife) missed the game and her two daughters were sick."

The team trainer called the Gassers that morning and kept them abreast of what they were doing for Josh.

Josh, who averages 37 minutes per game and has started 63 of the 67 games in his Badger career, isn't one to let a bug keep him down. He was determined to play and started the game.

His parents aren't surprised that Josh ignored how he felt and played. They've seen him do that many times as he grew into the player he is — polished and mature enough to be a starter and leader as a freshman player, a rarity in Division I college basketball.

In his first college game, Josh came off the bench to score 21 points and get nine rebounds. That impressed the coach and he's started most games since then.

Josh said he's living his dream.

"I always was a Wisconsin fan," he said Monday, still feeling a little queasy. "I never thought I would have an opportunity to play with Wisconsin. It was more a dream until my senior year in high school when Wisconsin came around.

"Coach Ryan has been an awesome coach to play under, and I try to take advantage of him (his knowledge) as much as I can."

The Gassers go to every home game and as many away games as possible. This year, one or both have been to every game.

Mr. Gasser works for a company that has locations in Ohio and Indiana, so he goes to Badger games there.

The parents of the players are like a family, he said.

"You may see them only once or twice during the season because they live far away, but everybody gets together after the game at the Nitty Gritty and takes the boys out to dinner," Mr. Gasser said. "The boys are great and Josh loves them."

Mr. and Mrs. Gasser, who is a Uselding, grew up in Port Washington. Her large family either attends or gathers together to watch the games on television.

The Gassers said they knew their son would be a basketball player when he started dribbling a ball at age 3. Some parents may have told their child to stop, but the Gassers encouraged him.

"He would dribble all around the house," Mr. Gasser said.

Soon Josh was making baskets and dunking on a Little Tyke court in the basement.

Josh has three sisters, who are five to 10 years older and played basketball. He would go to their games.

Becky, a UW grad, played basketball in high school and follows her brother's career closely, as do his sisters Carrie Knepprath of Port and Lauren Gasser of Sheboygan Falls. Carrie's 5-year-old daughter Kaylee is also a big fan and likes to go games in Madison.

Josh said he had to do something to get away from his sisters "who pretty much controlled me" when he was young.

"I loved sports — basketball, football, baseball. My dad would play sports with me and my mom would play catch. That made me enjoy it more," he said.

"They definitely encouraged me, but they didn't push me. I love playing sports and they let me do it."

When Josh was in third grade, Mr. Gasser and another father started a tournament basketball team that they coached. The team stayed together through eighth grade, spending almost every weekend at tournaments in Milwaukee and surrounding areas.

The boys and families developed friendships that continue today.

Mr. Gasser was a member of a Port High committee to help choose a new coach for the boys varsity basketball team when Josh was a freshman.

When John Bunyan was hired, he asked Mr. Gasser to be his assistant coach. Coaching his own son in high school was a job he didn't want initially, Mr. Gasser said, but .

"My biggest fear was it would make it hard on Josh, and kids would say, 'You're on the team because your dad's a coach,'" Mr. Gasser said. "I encouraged him to find somebody else, but he said he wouldn't take it unless I was his assistant."

Father and son saw the Port High basketball team go to the state tournament in Josh's freshman year and later win a share of the North Shore Conference title.

When Josh graduated, he was Port's career leader in scoring and rebounding.

Josh said he liked having his father as an assistant coach.

"He did a good job," Josh said. "Coach Bunyan and my dad did a pretty good job of turning it around, and I'm proud I was a part of that, too."

Josh said he has the largest contingent of fans at UW games and is always asking teammates for tickets. Each player gets four tickets.

"I have the biggest crowd of all the players," Josh said. "It's cool that they're taking time out of

their lives to watch us. When I go home in the summer for a few weeks, it's just crazy how many people stop to talk. Sometimes, it's the same on campus.

"People congratulate me and wish me luck. It makes it much more fun knowing you have so much support behind you and people want to see you succeed."

Image Information: FAMILY FANS who attended a Purdue University game at Mackey Arena last season were (from left) aunt Jill Lackovic, uncle Mark Lackovic, mother Joan Gasser, Josh, cousin Katy Schueller, uncle Paul Schueller, aunt Jan Schueller and father Pat Gasser.