



The Columbian

Passing up a Shot

Sunday, March 26, 2006 **By TIM PYLE** Columbian staff writer

Brad Lechtenberg had never seen a shot he wouldn't take.

That is until the man he considers his father needed a big assist.

The 24-year-old guard will play the fourth game of his professional career at tonight, when the Vancouver Volcanoes host the Seattle Mountaineers in International Basketball League action at Hudson's Bay High School.

That the 6-foot-2, 185-pound Lechtenberg, averaging a team-high 24.7 points per game, will even be on the court is a testament to his determination, as well as his skill.

The Vancouver resident has both perfected a sweet shooting stroke that made him the most accurate 3-point shooter in NCAA Division I as a University of San Diego senior in 2003-04, and overcome severe injuries that changed the way he plays.

Lechtenberg's pro basketball career should have started nearly two years ago when he was selected in the Continental Basketball League draft during the summer of 2004.

But his shot at a pro career would have to wait when Lechtenberg's legal guardian Dean Strawn, a Vancouver elementary school teacher, was diagnosed with Hodgkin's disease.

Lechtenberg, however, doesn't consider the aid to Strawn, 34, a heroic act. It was merely, in Lechtenberg's mind, a return pass after all the assists Strawn has given him.

Lechtenberg's metamorphosis into a shooting star began when he was a freshman at Northgate High School in Walnut Creek, Calif., just east of San Francisco.

But a visit with Strawn, then Northgate's basketball coach, didn't just kick-start Lechtenberg's basketball career. It also was the dawning of a father-son relationship that pervaded his entire life.

"Our relationship evolved through the needs that he had as a player first, and then the needs he had as a person," said Strawn, now a third-grade teacher at Image Elementary in Vancouver. "Over time, it ended up that I was raising him."

Lechtenberg didn't always get along with his birth parents, and Strawn filled the void.

"He's been my only parent for a lot of years," Lechtenberg said. "He became my legal guardian because I got hurt a couple times, we went to the hospital and I was under 18, so there were all (these problems). So we just went ahead, and he became my legal guardian."

But all that came after the first meeting between a hungry freshman and a willing coach.

"He came to me toward the middle of the season -- he wasn't playing a lot at the time -- and said what can he do to be a better shooter?" Strawn said. "I told him, 'Spend more hours in the gym.' From there as he grew up in high school and in college, we spent countless hours in the gym, going through shooting drills.

"He's not a natural athlete. He's a self-made athlete. He spent hours and hours and hours in the gym shooting hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of shots, until his shot was essentially perfected."

Lechtenberg recalls his humble beginnings in the sport.

"I wasn't any good when I first started playing," he said.

"(Strawn) was the one who taught me how to shoot. We put in countless hours of work. My freshman year, I was the last kid to make the team, and they didn't ever think I'd play varsity. In about that year, I became an outside shooter, worked on my game, and I was on varsity my sophomore year."

Sidelined senior

Lechtenberg's game blossomed even more as a junior when he broke the record for 3-pointers at Northgate and averaged 19 points per game.

Entering his senior year at Northgate, Lechtenberg's potential seemed endless, until a Labor Day Weekend boating accident changed all that.

Riding an inner tube at the end of a rope, Lechtenberg swung into the boat's propellers and suffered multiple lacerations to the left side of his body, including shoulder, forearm, hand and thigh.

"We were doing S-turns ... but there wasn't enough slack in the rope, so I actually came head on and went underneath the boat and then through the propellers," Lechtenberg said. "My hand got cut in half. Still can't fully move it. ... I was out for the year. Didn't play a minute my senior year."

Before the right-handed Lechtenberg could take a shot at college basketball, he had to adjust aspects of his game to account for the new physical limitations.

"He really had to re-teach himself a lot of the game," Strawn said. "His ability to catch the ball and ability to shoot off the dribble had to change, but his shooting form was the same.

"I encouraged him to at least try to play basketball again. Brad overcomes things in life and always has. So I knew if anybody could do it, I knew that he could."

College comeback

Unwilling to give up on his basketball career, Lechtenberg headed south to Grossmont Junior College in San Diego.

He still was recovering from his injuries at the start of the 1999-2000 season, but finished strong.

As a sophomore, Lechtenberg scored 15.2 points per game, ninth in the conference. He also finished No. 1 in 3-pointers per game (3.2), second in 3-point percentage (.437, 80 for 183) and second in free-throw percentage (.866, 58 of 67).

"That's when I started to get looks," said Lechtenberg, who garnered interest from Northern Arizona and Montana and considered walking on at Portland or Portland State.

San Diego entered the picture late, and Lechtenberg accepted the Toreros offer to walk on.

He redshirted the 2001-02 season, then served as a long-distance shooting specialist off the bench in 2002-03.

Lechtenberg's 74 shots for the season included 61 attempts from 3-point range, of which he made 24 (39.3 percent). He averaged 4.1 points in 8.2 minutes per game.

San Diego -- led by center Jason Beau Keep, who is slated to join the Volcanoes in April -- won the West Coast Conference tournament and advanced to the 2003 NCAA Tournament for the first time in 16 years. The Toreros lost in the first round to Stanford, 77-69.

"I didn't play much, but it was a great experience just to be there, in the NCAA Tournament," Lechtenberg said.

As a senior, Lechtenberg was granted a scholarship, then averaged 10.6 points per game, largely on the strength of his nation-best 3-point marksmanship (71 of 139 for 51.1 percent). He also contributed 2.1 rebounds and 1.8 assists for a San Diego team that suffered through a 4-26 campaign.

In September 2004, the Dakota Wizards made Lechtenberg the 48th and final pick in the CBA draft, but his pro career would have to wait.

Providing care

While Lechtenberg was at San Diego, Strawn, a coach since age 14, decided he needed a career change. He moved in 2002 to Vancouver, where his parents and sisters already had relocated to, and pursued a master's degree.

In the fall of 2004, however, Strawn was diagnosed with Hodgkin's disease, a form of lymphatic cancer.

From December 2004 through June 2005, Strawn would go through a series of treatments -- with Lechtenberg at his side.

"He shelved his dreams there of pursuing any kind of basketball career to just kind of stay home and help me out," Strawn said. "It was a key component for me and my recovery."

To Lechtenberg, who now bartends at Macaroni's Grill in downtown Portland, the choice to move to Vancouver and care for Strawn was a simple one.

"I was thinking about going and playing (in the CBA), but then he got sick and I decided not to do that," Lechtenberg said. "I decided just to stay home and take care of him, and then I also had one semester of school, one class, that I took up here to finish my college degree."

Lechtenberg didn't completely stop playing basketball, but his time on the court was limited. He attended one practice with the Volcanoes during the 2005 season, but didn't continue.

For the time being, life outside the gym took precedence.

Back in rhythm

While sharpening his hoops skills last fall, Lechtenberg kept in

touch with Volcanoes co-owner Terrance Dickens.

Lechtenberg eventually would impress the Vancouver brass enough to earn a one-year contract that he signed in December.

"He didn't catch our eye back (in the 2005 season)," Dickens said. "He kept talking to me, and we brought him out and took a look at him in a scrimmage, and he just shined."

Dickens has not been the only one impressed.

"I've only known him for a month, but he's got to be one of the top three shooters I've ever seen personally," Vancouver guard Alto Virgil said. "The only person that can stop him is himself -- I really believe that."

"Brad is just a consummate shooter, man," Volcanoes wing Porter Troupe said. "You can't give him any space at all. You saw in that little (exhibition March 7 at Clark College), I got probably 15 assists just giving him open shots. He's not gonna miss those."

"He's an excellent shooter, but you know what? The more I've watched him play, there's more parts to his game than that," said Dave Waldow, Vancouver's former coach. "He's a tough player. He's not afraid to go out there and defend. A lot of times that pure shooter is kind of soft, and they have a hard time defending. He played in the (West Coast Conference) going against some pretty good players, and you can tell he's got some toughness in him."

The IBL's up-tempo pace and college/high school 3-point line seem a perfect fit for Lechtenberg.

"It's a scoring league, so I think it tailors definitely to my game," he said.

Lechtenberg has shown as much through three games, culminating in a 39-point eruption in a loss at Central Oregon on March 18 that marks the top total in the IBL's young season.

But more than anything, Lechtenberg is showing once again that given a shot, he will take it.

"I've had different periods of time in my life where I've had to give up basketball," he said. "But I mean, it's never completely gone.

"It's either something that you have to do or you don't. And I guess I have to do it."