

Sanchez has special feeling again

Written by Jim Ecker

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Adam Sanchez sat on the bench as a graduate assistant coach at Drake University five years ago when the Bulldogs had their magical 28-5 season, cracked the national rankings and reached the NCAA tournament for the first time in eons.

The rookie head coach had that special feeling again Monday night after his upstart Washington Warriors clipped Kennedy, 48-42, in the quarterfinals of the Class 4A substate tournament at Kennedy.

The Warriors (7-15) did not win a single game last season, but they're feeling good about themselves heading into Friday's encounter with No.3 Western Dubuque (21-0) in the semifinals at Epworth.

Sanchez remembers how good it felt when Drake breezed through the Missouri Valley Conference during the 2007-08 campaign and went to the Big Dance as the feel-good story in the country that year.

"I thought at the moment it might be the best professional moment I ever have, but this is going to top it this year. It really is," he said after the Warriors won a postseason game and beat the Cougars for the third time this season.

Washington lost 14 of its first 15 contests this season, but the Warriors have won six of their last seven games and keep improving.

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They celebrated Monday's victory like they had just won the state tournament.

"It kind of feels like it," said Heath Clark, who helped spark the victory with two clutch 3-pointers. "We're slowly getting there."

Sanchez, 29, spent one year as a graduate assistant for Tom Davis at Drake, then served in the same capacity when Davis retired and his son Keno Davis succeeded him as head coach for that stunning 2007-08 campaign.

Sanchez said he learned valuable lessons from Tom Davis, who had successful stints at Boston College, Stanford, Iowa and Drake. Sanchez tried to emulate Davis when he accepted the rebuilding job at Washington. Davis had to rebuild Drake when he took the job, and Sanchez had to rebuild the Warriors.

"You've got to treat kids with respect, you have to give them the confidence and the belief that you can play," he said. "He (Davis) gave guys some freedom, he gave them confidence and just continued to build them up."

"He was such a positive person to the kids and a positive person to be around," said Sanchez. "I knew if I had a chance, it's what I wanted to do with our kids and give them hope so they can go out and get a win like we did tonight."

Washington enjoyed an edge the entire game and never trailed in the contest. Kennedy (11-10) chopped a 34-24 deficit to 44-42 on a 3-pointer by John Koelling with 65 seconds left, but the Warriors claimed the victory despite missing 10 of 16 free throws in the final three minutes.

Washington guard Austin Bergstrom hit two foul shots with 53.7 seconds left for a 46-42 lead to help stem the tide. Kennedy did not score again.

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"This feels great right now. It's awesome," said Bergstrom, who led Washington with 11 points.

Bergstrom, a senior who endured the 0-and-M-21 campaign last season, remembers the first time he met Sanchez last summer before they all went to work.

"I knew I liked him," Washington's lanky point guard remarked. "He just seemed like a good guy. He's good with the kids. It's been fun playing for him."

Clark had similar feelings about the new coach last summer.

"Great guy," said Clark. "He walked in the gym and you could just tell, there was a new feeling. He was excited for us, ready for it. And now it's paying off here."

Sanchez has been delighted with his team's attitude, even when they began the season with that 1-and-14 record.

"I couldn't be more proud of a group of kids," he said. "They bought into a young coach with a really small resume. They believed in what I was trying to teach them and sell them early in the summer.

"Fortunately for them and for all of us, it's starting to result in some wins."

Sanchez knew he faced a rebuilding job, but was encouraged when the players reported for practice last summer.

"I knew there was a lot of work to be done, but I was excited because they all showed up on that first day and they were eager to work," he said. "And all summer long they continued to show up.

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"We talked about it all season: Sometimes you just have to continue to show up and continue to fight. And they did it."

Their attitude never wavered, he said.

"I remember the Prairie game was the lowest of the low this season when we lost in overtime. To see the dejection in their faces and how sad they were after that loss, I knew they were hungry and they still wanted to win and they wanted to compete."

Kennedy Coach Bob Fontana had a queasy feeling when the game began Monday. The Cougars took three long shots to begin the contest and missed them all, contrary to the game-plan.

Meanwhile, the Warriors attacked the basket for three layups and a 6-0 lead.

"What we were supposed to do, they did," he said. "We thought we had a great game plan, but I'll call it like it is: We had guys that didn't follow the game-plan, especially early in the game."

Kennedy bolted to a 9-3 record in its first 12 games this season, but lost seven of its last nine games against stiffer competition. Fontana never found a consistent lineup and regularly shuffled players in and out.

He was happy with the 9-3 start, but unhappy with the 2-7 finish. "I just told them, when we were 9-and-3 I thought we'd win 13 or 14 ballgames," he said.

Conversely, the Warriors had an extremely slow start this season and have gained momentum.

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"We've been fighting all year," said Bergstrom. "It's just keeping the belief in the team and making sure we worked hard all year. Keep with it and keep working hard."

The Warriors will face a daunting task Friday night at Western Dubuque, which is ranked No.3 in the state and hasn't lost all season.

"It will be tough, but I think we have it in us," said Bergstrom. "If we go out there and play hard, I think anything can happen."

Koelling led Kennedy with 15 points.

WASHINGTON (48): Anderson 0 0-0 0, Bergstrom 3 5-7 11, Butterfield 1 4-4 6, Taylor 0 1-2 1, Rosenthal 3 1-2 7, Holmes 2 3-6 7, Oney 1 1-6 3, Kramer 1 2-5 5, Clark 3 0-0 8. Totals 14 17-32 48.

KENNEDY (42): Oltmann 0 0-0 0, Murdock 1 1-2 3, Carter 2 0-0 5, Fuller 0 0-0 0, Bardsley 2 0-1 5, Buck 2 0-0 5, Martin 0 2-2 2, Koelling 7 0-0 15, Holzer 1 0-1 2, Heitland 1 1-1 3, Struss 0 2-2 2. Totals 16 6-9 42.

Halftime - Washington 23, Kennedy 17. 3-point goals - Washington 3 (Clark 2, Kramer 1), Kennedy 4 (Carter 1, Bardsley 1, Buck 1, Koelling 1). Fouled out - Murdock.