

2009 NCAA TOURNAMENT GUIDE

Harden named Pac-10 Player of Year

By: Doug Haller - Mar. 9, 2009, The Arizona Republic

James Harden, credited for helping reverse the basketball fortunes at Arizona State, was named the Pac-10's Player of the Year on Monday as voted by conference coaches.

Harden becomes the third ASU player to earn such an honor, joining Eddie House (2000) and Ike Diogu (2005).

"There are so many great players who came through this conference and set an example, obviously on the court and off the court," Harden told reporters after Monday's practice. "It's just a great accomplishment, a great honor, and just a great feeling to be a part of those players."

Harden is the third sophomore to win the award, joining California's Jason Kidd in 1994 and Arizona's Mike Bibby in 1998. "James is a special player, and (this is) a wonderful recognition," ASU coach Herb Sendek said.

ASU senior forward Jeff Pendergraph joined Harden on the All-Pac-10 team. Pendergraph averaged 14.4 points and 8.5 rebounds, shooting 66.5 percent. The first team also included two players from Arizona: forwards Jordan Hill and Chase Budinger.

"It feels good," Pendergraph said, "and to have James as Player of the Year on my team, too, that's awesome. To have the dynamic duo recognized, that's pretty cool."

Harden, a 6-foot-5 guard, led the Pac-10 in scoring at 20.8 points per game and shot 50.4 percent from the field. He also averaged 5.4 rebounds, 4.1 assists and 1.7 steals. Since the 1996-97 season, according to STATS LLC, only five other players in the nation have averaged at least 20 points, five rebounds, four assists and shot better than 50 percent.

The focal point of nearly every defense he faced, Harden posted 20 or more points 16 times this season, including a career-high 40 against Texas-El Paso in the 76 Classic. He also dished 10 or more assists three times, including a career-best 11 against UCLA on Feb. 12.

In two seasons, Harden has accumulated 1,229 points, helping ASU post consecutive 20-win seasons for the first time since 1981.

Harden had considered turning pro last year after one of the better freshman seasons in school history, one in which he averaged 17.8 points, 5.3 rebounds and a Pac-10-best 2.1 steals. But he returned to help ASU compete for the Pac-10 title and its first NCAA Tournament bid since 2003.

The Sun Devils (22-8, 11-7 in the Pac-10) didn't win the conference crown, finishing in a tie for third, but the Sun Devils are considered a lock for the tournament.

They play Arizona on Thursday in the Pac-10 Tournament in Los Angeles.

The Arizona Republic

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Posted on Wed, Mar. 18, 2009

Arizona State guard Harden no longer a secret

By DICK JERARDI
Philadelphia Daily News

jerardd@phillynews.com

JAMES HARDEN showed up unannounced at Artesia High. He would leave as a McDonald's All-American. This does not happen in Los Angeles, which has open enrollment and wide-open recruiting of players who just became teenagers.

Why?

"He wasn't good enough to be ranked or for other programs to be recruiting him," said Scott Pera, Harden's high-school coach and now an assistant at Arizona State, where Harden is a first-team All-America.

How Harden, a sophomore from Southern California, and Pera, from Hershey, ended up in Tempe is a classic basketball story. Pera, a 1989 Penn State Harrisburg grad who coached Elizabethtown College baseball while an undergrad, migrated west to be with his girlfriend-now-wife, Penn grad Alyssa Deaven. Before he went to LA, Pera coached Ann-ville-Cleona High to the 1999 Pennsylvania Class AA basketball championship.

Pera got himself involved in the LA hoop scene. A friend suggested he apply for the job at powerhouse Artesia after the school had been beset by a recruiting scandal. The young man from Hershey, now living with his new wife in Marina Del Rey, applied. And got the job at the perennial power.

A few years later, Harden walked into the gym.

"I had a lot of kids coming to Artesia," Pera said Monday night from Tempe. "His name never came up. He was nobody special. When he came, I said great. Tryouts are in September."

A few months later, Pera realized Harden was somebody special.

"He had instincts and basketball IQ that I had [rarely] seen before," Pera said.

Harden was a late bloomer, far from a finished product. But he grew. And he worked. By his junior year, Artesia, with senior point guard Derek Glasser, now the junior point guard at ASU, was the state champ.

Harden was no longer a secret. New ASU coach Herb Sendek offered Pera the director of basketball operations job. He liked Pera; loved Harden.

"The itch was there [to coach in college]," Pera said. "My problem was I didn't want to leave that team or leave him. I just went to him and said, 'I have an opportunity. If I do it, how would you feel?' He said, 'Coach, if you go to a major school, I'll come with you.' "

Pera was upfront with Sendek.

"Even when Herb hired me, I told Herb, 'I'm not holding a gun to his head on that statement.' I said, 'If you're taking me thinking you're getting him, you probably are, but I am not promising you and I'm not delivering him because I'm not going to hold a gun to a 16-year-old kid's head.' [Harden] gave me the ultimate compliment when he said that to me."

Artesia won another state title the next year under Pera's assistant. Harden went to ASU.

ASU was a Pacific-10 wasteland when Sendek left North Carolina State 3 years ago. The Sun Devils were 8-22 in his first season, but Sendek already had made the move that would get ASU back to the NCAA. He hired Pera, who brought Harden.

Harden is one of America's most versatile players. The 6-5 lefty, with the heavy beard, is a classic big guard with a power game. He averages 20.8 points, 5.5 rebounds, 4.2 assists and shoots 50.2 percent from the floor. He does not have to score to be effective. He understands the game.

"He was somebody who clearly stood out and distinguished himself every time you watched him play in high school," Sendek said Monday night from Tempe.

Nothing has changed in college. Harden, just 19, sort of got lost in last year's Pac-10 freshman hype for UCLA's Kevin Love and USC's O.J. Mayo. Harden was every bit as effective for a team that just missed the 2008 NAAs.

ASU was always going to be in this tournament. Friday afternoon in Miami, the Sun Devils play Temple.

The Pennsylvania guys, Pera and Sendek (from Pittsburgh), will be coaching against the Pennsylvania school with a tradition that goes back decades. And they will bring the young star from California with them.

"He's so easy to like and get along with," Sendek said. "He has a great sense of humor. He's easy to smile and quick to laugh, treats everybody with dignity and respect."

And he lives in Tempe.

"It's really nice out here today," Harden said yesterday afternoon. "And all the ladies are out."

And there is some NCAA Tournament basketball to be played.

"That's an experience that not everyone gets to have," Harden said. "That was the most important thing, just to be part of it. This is the stage that gets you ready for the next level. With all the attention that the NCAA Tournament gets, with all the TV time and all the great players in the tournament, it's great to be a part of it."

This could be a small window for this team and its star. The NBA beckons.

"That's my overall goal, to play in the NBA," Harden said. "If I have the talent, I'll definitely take the jump. That's the overall goal right now - just to play basketball, which I've been doing for a long time and is something I love."

Why not, Harden figures, "get paid for it?"

Pera will be right there for that decision.

"Right now, we are going to let him finish the year," Pera said. "We'll sit down and lay out all his options to him . . . Let's face it. If everybody tells me he's a top-eight pick, you know the answer."

Whether Harden stays or goes, Sendek understands what he means now and could mean in the future.

"We're not where we are without him," Sendek said. "He's helped establish some credibility. He has, in many ways, made it OK for really good players to come to Arizona State."

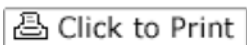
Sendek is one of America's most innovative coaches. He fits what he does to the personnel he has. He used many of the Princeton concepts at NC State, concepts he needed to compete in the ACC.

"We're not running the same offense, we're not playing the same defense," Sendek said. "I very much have tailored a great deal of what we do to James."

Friday afternoon, anybody with a TV in Philadelphia and anybody with a computer anywhere will get to see James Harden's game on display against the Owls. It will be well worth the time. *

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A Traveling Buddy Act

Chance encounters brought together two players and a coach at Artesia High. They followed one another to Arizona State, where star guard James Harden once again is vital to their title hopes

BY LUKE WINN

Photograph by John W. McDonough

THE FOURTH-FLOOR view of Tempe Town Lake would be splendid, but the shades are drawn because the glare from the descending desert sun makes Ping-Pong impossible. This glassy tower on the road snaking behind Arizona State's landmark "X" Mountain is no dorm—if the architecture doesn't give it away, the sign advertising luxury condos will—and inside it looks as if these college kids are crashing an investment banker's bachelor pad. But the resident of the two-bedroom unit is actually junior communications major Derek Glasser, the Sun Devil's starting point guard and son of premium jeans magnate Michael Glasser. Derek's volleying with sophomore shooting guard Ty Abbott as friends look on, heckling them.

To accommodate the table, several modern couches have been haphazardly pushed aside, and near one of them leans a large TV whose flat screen was broken by a flying Nintendo Wii remote. A giant Sharp Aquos has gone up in its place, and sophomore guard James Harden, an All-America candidate who leads the Pac-10 in scoring and is 10th in the nation, has fixed his gaze on the big screen as he plays *Mario Kart*, expertly steering Mario clear of a virtual abyss. He would

HARDEN ARRIVED at Arizona State in 2007 as a McDonald's All-American, but he was overshadowed by, among others, two fellow freshmen

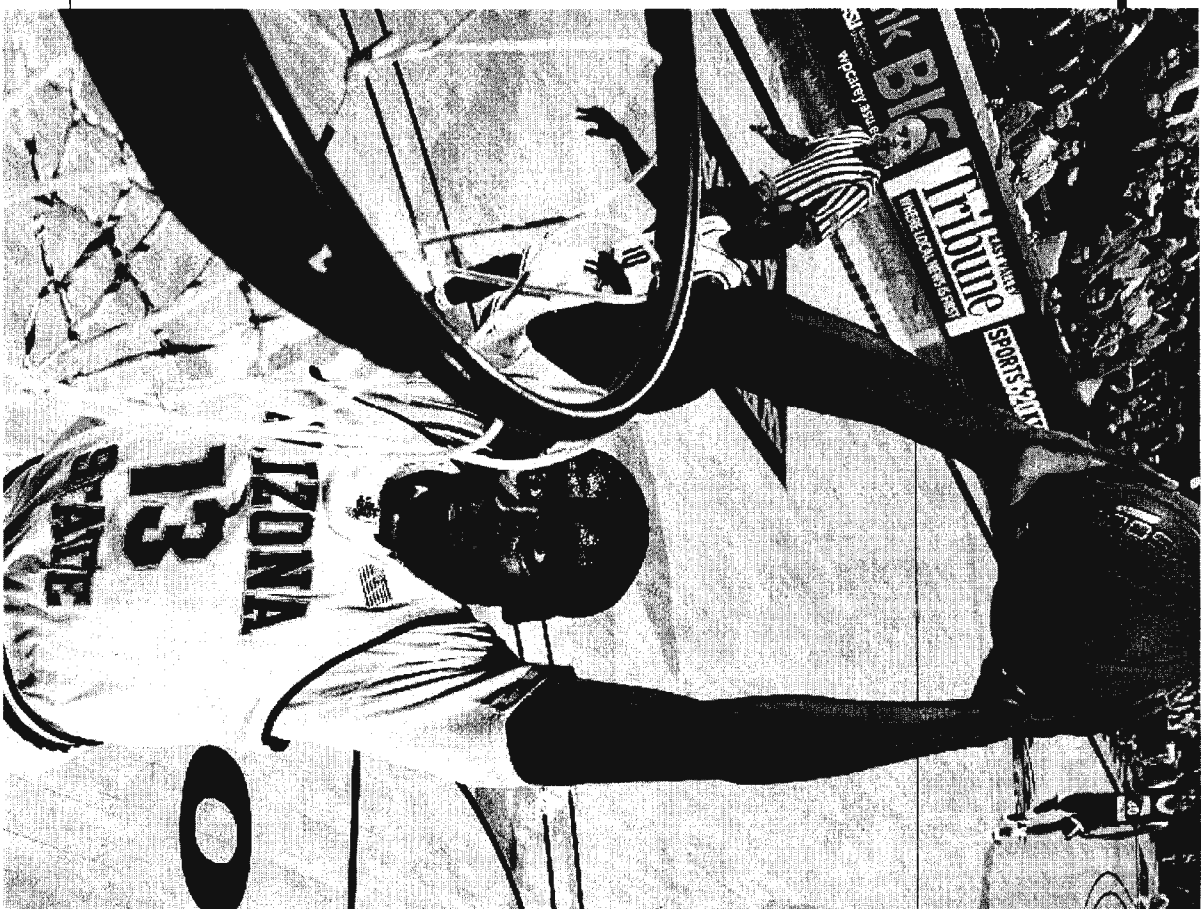


who went to L.A. instead of leaving it: USC's O.J. Mayo and UCLA's Kevin Love. This season, with Mayo and Love in the NBA, the 6'5", 218-pound Harden was averaging 23.4 points through Sunday, and the Sun Devils (12-2, 1-1 in the Pac-10) were ranked 20th in the latest AP poll. "Arizona State was terrible," he says of the program that has not produced a top 5 NBA pick since Byron Scott was chosen fourth by the San Diego Clippers in 1983. "But I wanted to go somewhere

that was different."

Harden is, by nature, unorthodox: Left-handed and bearded, he wears a number 13 jersey and a baggy T-shirt underneath. He's a bull moose of a wing player who can

GUARD DUTY With backcourt mate Glasser (12) feeding him, Harden was averaging a Pac-10 best 23.4 points through Sunday.



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JAMES HARDEN

get into the lane at will and shoot efficiently from NBA range, and he's expected to be a top 5 pick in June's NBA draft. His turning pro after this season is all but a foregone conclusion, but the Sun Devils are lucky to get him—as well as Glasser and their old mentor at Artesia. For it was a serendipitous chain of events that brought them to Tempe, of all places.

A STRUGGLING ACTOR and a cube of a high school coach have a chance meeting outside a UCLA gym that's the site of a basketball camp. It's July 1999, and in nine years the actor will be the assistant general manager of an NBA team and the coach will be on the staff of a Division I college program. But on this day they commiserate about the miserable hours of their low-level gig working the camp. The actor is keeping tabs on the mothers—one of whom, he says, is an ex-Playboy Playmate—dropping off the young coaches. He leaves with a number—the coach's.

The coach is Scott Pera, and he wouldn't be outside the gym if not for a woman, Alyssa Deaven. They met when he was coaching at Annville-Cleona High, in Lebanon County, Pa.—she was acquainted with one of his former players—but after graduating from Penn with a degree in English in '98, she followed friends and a screenwriting dream to L.A. Pera coached Annville-Cleona to the Pennsylvania Class AA title in March '99, then rendezvoused with Deaven in Las Vegas a month later and proposed to her there. Now



Olshey (left) had bit parts in SOAP OPERAS, but was having more success giving private hoops workouts when he met Pera.

Pera mockingly tells Olshey, "Yeah, and the North Carolina job's open too."

But it's worth a shot: Artesia wants to clean house after a recruiting scandal and is looking for a squeaky-clean outsider rather than a smooth L.A. operator. Olshey's prior connections at Artesia land Pera an interview. Deaven is an assistant at a production company on the Disney lot, and Scott uses her office to fax 30 pages of résumé information and newspaper clippings about his state title run in Pennsylvania. Artesia gives Pera the job.

Olshey's own good fortune will lead him to agent Arn Tellem's company, SFX, where in 2001 he's hired as director of player development. He's visiting her in L.A., and within a year he will quit his job at Annville-Cleona, they'll get married in Hershey, Pa., and then drive cross-country for good. He'll have only one other friend in California: the actor.

The actor is Neil Olshey, who had bit parts in two soap operas in New York before chasing stardom in Hollywood. A former high school player, he's having more success conducting private hoops workouts—his first client being Artesia High star (and future UCLA and NBA sharpshooter) Jason Kapono, whom Olshey met while serving as an assistant coach at Artesia in 1995. After Pera and his new bride get settled in Marina del Rey in fall 2008, the coach calls

Olshey to see if he wants to get together for a beer. Olshey tells Pera to apply for the head coach's job at Artesia. A 1,900-student school in suburban Lakewood that perennially has for Pera, Michael Glasser hires Olshey to pick up his sixth grader, Derek, after school and work with him on his game at a rec center in Santa Monica. A couple of years later the school coach who could help put Derek on a D-I track. Pera is 42–14 after two seasons at Artesia, and he lives near the Glassers. Soon he's the one picking up Derek—at 6:45 a.m., to drive him 40 minutes to Artesia, then back home each night after practice. They become close—"almost like a big brother I never had," Glasser says—and during one ride before the start of his sophomore season, he sadly notes that the team hasn't added any quality freshmen. "Just watch," Pera says. "There's something special about James Harden."

THIR GRAND After (top, from left) Harden, Pera and Glasser won a state title at Artesia in 2006, they got together again in Tempe.



velopment for pre-draft prospects, and then to the Clippers in '03 as their director of player development. But before all that, in '02, another Olshey connection will pay off for Pera. Michael Glasser hires Olshey to pick up his sixth grader, Derek, after school and work with him on his game at a rec center in Santa Monica. A couple of years later the school coach who could help put Derek on a D-I track. Pera is 42–14 after two seasons at Artesia, and he lives near the Glassers. Soon he's the one picking up Derek—at 6:45 a.m., to drive him 40 minutes to Artesia, then back home each night after practice. They become close—"almost like a big brother I never had," Glasser says—and during one ride before the start of his sophomore season, he sadly notes that the team hasn't added any quality freshmen. "Just watch," Pera says. "There's something special about James Harden."

MONJA WILLIS used to call him Lucky, because James was lucky just to make it into the world. He was born 14 years after his first child, Akili Robertson, and 10 years, two miscarriages and one procedure after her second, Amique Jelks. When James makes the varsity at UCLA as a freshman, Pera only has two jersey numbers left. Lucky picks number 13.

When Glasser calls Harden "fat" in one interview, it displeases Harden. So they agree on other terms that can be used to describe him, such as "lazy," "could barely

touch the backboard" and "shot only bloopers threes from the hip." A dozen games into the 2003–04 season Harden hits five out of five bloopers in a win over South Gate, whose star is UCLA-bound center Lorenzo Mata. "My first recruiting letter came in right after that," Harden says. "Handwritten, from UCLA."

To his father, a former Navy seaman whom Willis never married, he's the junior—James Harden is Pop's name too—but that nickname doesn't stick because Senior isn't around enough. "I was a knucklehead," the father will lament late in 2008, recalling how he went to prison twice on drug and other charges. By the time James reaches high school he has shut out his dad. "What's

the point of me talking to you if you keep going in and out of jail?" he says.

Pera just calls him James, and challenges him to play through his asthma, and changes shape, to craft his awkward hip shot into a textbook jumper, to become such a complete player that by 2006 he has become a five-star recruit. Artesia goes 33–1 and wins a state title in March '06, Harden's junior year, and a month later he and Pera are talking in the Artesia gym. "This is hard," Pera says, "but I'm thinking about leaving."

Harden gives Pera his blessing to pursue a college job, and something more—the promise that if Pera lands a high-major gig, Harden will "seriously consider" coming along. "Then here's the deal," Pera tells him. "Let's sacrifice one year together for hopefully being together four more after that."

HER SENDK heads west in April 2006, fleeing the ungratefuls at North Carolina State who cared less about his success (five straight NCAA tournament trips) than about his singular failure (not wrestling Tobacco Road and bragging rights from Duke and North Carolina). At Arizona State, a program that finished 11–17 and tied for eighth in the Pac-10 in 2005–06, Sendek, as coach, is starting from scratch. And he needs help.

It turns out Sendek, Olshey and Pera share a friend: ubiquitous sneaker-company executive Sonny Vaccaro, who lives in L.A., has employed Olshey and Pera as coaches at his ABCD camps and has seen Harden play. Vaccaro knows Pera is looking to jump; he knows how good Harden is; he knows how much Sendek could use Harden. So Vaccaro sets things in motion with a call to the new Sun Devils coach.

ASU's director of basketball operations job comes open in May 2006, when Pera just happens to be coaching Harden's AAU team in Tucson. Pera needs to get to Tempe for an interview with Sendek. On her way back to L.A., Willis happens to be going through Phoenix to check on a house she might retire to after she leaves AT&T, where she's worked as a maintenance administrator since 1981. Pera lurches a ride with her. The pieces keep coming to-

gether: Within days Pera joins the Sun Devils' staff; in July, Glasser, who had verbally committed to USC but was not feeling the same love from the Trojans, changes his mind and switches to ASU; in August, Harden, who was seriously considering Washington, verbally commits to the Sun Devils. That winter he wins another state title at Artesia, while Glasser starts at point guard for an

BIG LIFT With Harden's arrival, the Sun Devils jumped from eight wins in 2006–07 to 21 and an NIT appearance last season.



ASU team that finishes 2–16 in the Pac-10 (8–22 overall). "James" calls me from the airport after the McDonald's (All-American Game," Glasser says, "and is like, 'These guys are getting announced as Duke and North Carolina [recruits], and when they just happens to be coaching Harden's AAU team in Tucson. Pera needs to get to Tempe for an interview with Sendek. On her way back to L.A., Willis happens to be going through Phoenix to check on a house she might retire to after she leaves AT&T, where she's worked as a maintenance administrator since 1981. Pera lurches a ride with her. The pieces keep coming to-

AS A SOPHOMORE at ASU, Harden is a \$4.7% shooter who hits 43.8% of his three-point attempts and seems to start

plays from the right wing 90% of the time. From there his southpaw signature move, the hard-left first step, is particularly lethal, especially when a defender's momentum is carrying him in the opposite direction. Sendek changed his offense last season from the plodding Princeton-like system to a more fast-paced motion scheme, to put Harden in better position to score.

In the Sun Devils' possession Pera has cut up in his office, from a Dec. 7 rout of Nebraska. Harden encounters four Cornhuskers: The first two fly at him as he catches the ball in his favorite spot near the right sideline, then continue past him as he pump-fakes right and goes left; the second two come running but realize what Harden already knows: It's too late. Harden needs just one dribble to reach the lane, and one of the Nebraska players fouls him in an act of surrender.

"People ask me, 'Who is James like?'" Pera says. "He's similar to Brandon Roy or Paul Pierce. He's not super-quick, but if there's a place on the court he needs to get to, he gets there. That's what makes him so attractive to the NBA. Fifty million people watching could know, 'Don't let him go there, and yet he still goes there!'"

On the floor and on the shelves behind Pera lies documentation of where he and Harden have been together. There's a photo of Pera, Harden and Glasser outside Arco Arena in Sacramento after they won the state title in '06, and a newspaper story about Pera's and Harden's being named Southern California coach and player of the year, respectively. There's a box score from Arizona State's 88–58 win over UT-EP on Nov. 30, when Harden scored 40 points, and the statistical comparisons that Pera calculates to motivate his star player. This year it's Harden versus the nation's best wing players; last year it was Harden versus the nation's best freshmen; six years ago it was Harden versus the *Los Angeles Times's* top high school freshmen, a list from which he was excluded.

Pera stays committed to advancing their plot, because if it had never been set in motion, if it had never intersected and led to so many mutual benefits, then a pudgy hip-shooter and an unemployed coach might have forever been adrift.

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Rival recruiters told Harden that his skills would be wasted in the methodical offense Sendek used in his first season at ASU, when the Sun Devils had little scoring punch.

“When I heard he ran the Princeton offense, I kind of paused,” Harden said. “I was like, Oh, I don’t want to run that.”

Pera chuckled at the memory.

“Two years ago, James didn’t know the Princeton offense from the man in the moon,” Pera said. “All I told him was, ‘It’s a recruiting ploy, James. This is why they’re telling you this. If you come here, I’m telling you what’s going to happen. You have to trust me. What would the benefit be of bringing you here to not exploit your talents?’”

Harden signed with the Sun Devils. He was an unlikely catch for ASU, which has landed only five McDonald’s All-Americans.

Harden said he was lured by the chance to help build something, so he passed on the opportunity to follow Artesia High products Ed and Charles O’Bannon to UCLA.

“That’s how I’ve been raised, to take on the challenge and experience different things, to not always take the easy way,” Harden said. “Create my own path.”

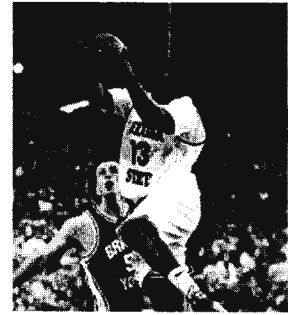
Harden made another outside-the-box decision when he spurned the NBA last summer after averaging 17.8 points per game as a freshman and earning a spot on the All-Pac-10 first team.

“I was still a young kid who wasn’t ready for that next level,” said Harden, who won’t say if this will be his last season. “The next level, it’s all basketball. You’re watched on what you do. It’s a business. I wasn’t ready for that. I was still young, I was still growing.”

The Sun Devils are growing too—thanks to their reluctant superstar.

The year before Harden arrived, Arizona State went 8-22 and lost a school-record 15 consecutive games. In his freshman year, the Sun Devils went 21-13, missed the NCAAs by a whisker and reached the third round of the NIT.

“From the time he committed and then signed, and all the way through this conversation today, he’s given us tremendous exposure,” Sendek said this week. “He’s improved our credibility. He’s helped promote our program in ways that would have been difficult to accomplish otherwise.”



ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

Harden brings big-time feel to ASU

By: Paola Boivin - Nov. 15, 2008, The Arizona Republic

For those of us who genuflect at the greatness that is John Wooden, who equate Mecca with a 65-team field and a *One Shining Moment* soundtrack, Friday night at Wells Fargo Arena felt . . . *different*.

It felt like the start of something special. It felt like a real college game with a bona fide superstar and some good old-fashioned atmosphere. If that doesn't sound like bountiful riches, then you don't appreciate how long it's been since those forces converged in Tempe.

Arizona State wasn't brilliant Friday night against Mississippi Valley State but it was promising. The Sun Devils revealed a team much further along in its season opening game than any ASU team in recent memory. It hinted of a team that - gasp, dare we say it - could contend for the Pac-10 title.

This is what you couldn't ignore during the 80-64 victory. ASU needs to do something special this season because the brilliance that is James Harden will be NBA-bound when it's done.

Sometime during the off-season, Harden morphed from a gifted freshman to a big-time college player. He revealed not only more endurance but more leadership. And it's clear all that work on his midrange game and right hand paid off.

More impressive than his 24 points, were his career-high 10 assists. He's a superstar who still embraces passing the ball.

Harden set the tone from the start Friday, scoring the first basket on a feed from Ty Abbott. He contributed to the second with an on-target pass to senior forward Jeff Pendergraph. They pointed to each other afterward and nodded heads, a "this is what we need to do to succeed this season" acknowledgement.

Then came a no-look pass to Rihards Kuksiks, who sank it from outside, and several dunks.

It wasn't just Harden. The team looked more refined. Jamelle McMillan played with more confidence, Abbott with more poise and Kuksiks with more knowledge.

The Sun Devils will face many teams tougher than the Delta Devils but the visitors shouldn't be dismissed either. They are an athletic bunch with three starters returning from a group that played in the NCAA Tournament's first round last season.

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Is an ASU program finally going to live up to the hype?

This group was ranked (15th) in the Associated Press preseason poll for the first time since the 1991-92 season. It's the second highest ranking in school history.

"It makes you feel somewhat bigger than being picked dead last in the conference or saying you have nothing to lose every single time you go out and play," McMillan said.

No one knows that better than Pendergraph. He lived through the half-empty arenas, through the team that went 8-22, through the utter lack of respect from the rest of the Pac-10 Conference.

During the process, he worked on his game and steadily improved each season. He earned the respect of his team by his accountability. He always made himself available after games to explain the team's struggles, never once letting the program's difficulties interfere with his development.

Coach Herb Sendek has longed praised the player's value to the team's steadiness in the face of adversity. The coach, too, deserves credit. He never let this group get too high or too low while perpetually tweaking the team to his liking.

The effort raised questions about this team's potential. Could it challenge for the Pac-10 title? Advance to the NCAA Tournament? Based on what the Sun Devils demonstrated Friday night at Wells Fargo Arena, those thoughts don't sound so farfetched anymore.

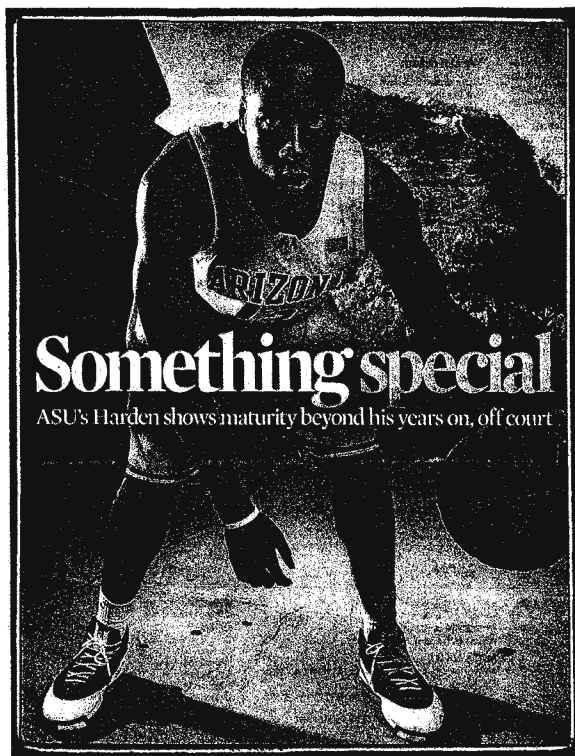
This team still has its skeptics, as it should. The programs at this school have done their share of heart-breaking, of being living and breathing examples of overhype and underachievement.

Harden won't let that happen. You should have seen him Friday, waving his arms at the crowd and smiling at every baby step the Sun Devils made. Although the arena still had empty seats in the upper level, it felt different.

Everything about the evening felt different.

The Arizona Republic

ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY



DAVID WALLACE/THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC
James Harden could have left ASU for the NBA last year, but he stayed, so he could mature as a person and player.

By then, college recruiters had taken notice of his skills, no one more than Washington coach Lorenzo Romar.

"Each time (I saw him) I thought, 'You'll become an instant contender (if) this kid joins your team,'" Romar said. "He knew how to play with the ball and without the ball. It was almost like he was a puppet master. He just fixes the game the way he wants it to be fixed. And he doesn't make it too obvious that he's in control."

Losing Harden to ASU "was one of the top two or three disappointments in recruiting that I've ever dealt with as a head coach or as an assistant coach," Romar said.

Even Harden acknowledges that his decision to attend ASU took time to grasp. At the McDonald's High School All-American game, he recalls looking at teammates, thinking, "You have guys who are going to the North Carolinas, the UConn's, then you have James Harden, Arizona State," a team that had won only eight games the previous year.

"To be honest, I really wasn't surprised," said Mayo, who left USC after his freshman season and became the NBA's third overall pick. "All summer prior to our freshman season, we worked out in LA together. We were really hanging tight, working out really hard. James is going to keep getting better. The sky's the limit for him."

Harden averaged 17.8 points and became the fifth freshman in history to lead the Pac-10 in steals. Everyone seemed to be amazed but him.

"He is so unselfish, he is so team-centered, you couldn't ask for a guy with his talent

quotient to be better in those areas," ASU coach Herb Sendek said.

Harden, 19, describes himself as "just kind of a smooth guy." On the court, he always seems to know what's coming. Off the court, however, that demeanor can work against him. His mother, Monja, wasn't too pleased to find out her son was going to be on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* the day before it hit newsstands.

"He called me as I was on my way home from work," she said. "He said, 'Mom, I'm going to be on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*?' I said, 'What?'" He had taken that photo like a month before, so he had known for a long time. For whatever reason, he just decided not to tell me."

Perhaps Harden does this to stay grounded. To keep distractions at a minimum. He knows what's at stake this season. Everyone is watching him. Everyone is looking for limitations — *His right hand! His midrange game!* — because that's what happens to the country's best players. They're dissected.

To Harden, none of that matters. He came to ASU to help revive the program, to help the Sun Devils contend for a Pac-10 title and return to the NCAA Tournament, where they haven't been in five seasons.

"I don't want to be one of those guys who just leave college, go to the NBA and never get to experience the tournament," Harden said. "The NBA is always going to be there. Just to get to the tournament would be a dream come true. That's what we're trying to do here."

Goal: NCAA Tournament

By Doug Haller
THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

He's not supposed to be here. Not after last year, when he led the Arizona State basketball team in scoring and the Pac-10 in steals. The trend says such a player cashes in. He enters the NBA draft.

James Harden stayed.

Everyone demands an explanation, which Harden finds puzzling. Truth is, he just didn't think he was ready, which means last season's youngest Pac-10 player made a decision that required maturity beyond his years.

"I didn't ask around; I just asked myself," Harden said. "You can only be truthful with yourself. I'm not saying I don't have the talent to go to the NBA, but there are a lot of things you need along with talent. I just thought I needed to come back to mature as a person and a player."

Harden's return has ASU poised for a breakout season its fans haven't experienced in years. Entering this

week's 76 Classic in Anaheim, the No. 14 Sun Devils are 3-0 behind their preseason All-American. Harden, a sophomore guard averaging 25 points and 6.7 rebounds, already has career highs in points and assists, and it appears he's just getting started.

Credit his determination. Assistant coach Lamont Smith, who joined the program in May, noticed that Harden was the last player remaining on the court, shooting with kids,

during a summer camp. Sophomore guard Jamelle McMillan once entered Wells Fargo Arena at night to get in extra shooting, only to find Harden, who has a key, there.

"James has a strong desire to want to be good," said ASU assistant coach Scott Pera, who coached Harden at Artesia High in Lakewood, Calif. "For him, what's interesting is he didn't walk in (to high school) athletic. He wasn't jumping around the gym, running a 4.4. He didn't rely on athletic ability back then. He relied on fundamentals."

Harden played varsity as a freshman. His confidence soared after nailing a 3-pointer at the buzzer to win a game in a holiday tournament, but he remained unselfish. He led the team in charges taken his freshman and sophomore seasons. The next year, in a game against Brook and Robin Lopez, both future NBA first-round draft picks, Harden took four.

2009 NCAA TOURNAMENT GUIDE

THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

NOVEMBER 12, 2008

5 MINUTES WITH ... JAMES HARDEN

Guard James Harden gave the Sun Devils a boost when he decided to hold off on the NBA and return for his sophomore season. Harden averaged 17.8 points, 5.3 rebounds and 2.2 steals last season.

Question: How hard was your decision to stay in school?

A: "I just knew I wasn't going to be ready. The NBA is such a big jump. The guys are grown men. I was just 18 years old. I told Coach (Herb Sendek) early that I was going to come back for my sophomore year, just to work on a couple things and mature as a person as well."

Q: How do all these expectations change your approach?

A: "We just have to be ready to go every single game. We can't be this sleeper team anymore. People know who we are now. They're going to want to beat this so-called ranked team."

Q: What was your focus in the off-season?

A: "My weak hand, my right hand, my mid-range game. Being able to play long periods of time without getting that tired. Improving my conditioning."

Q: Was conditioning a problem last season?

A: "Yeah, playing so many minutes in a college-basketball game, the court's bigger than high school. It was just the whole experience of getting used to it. But now there are no excuses. I have a year under my belt. It's time to just execute and play basketball."

Q: What kind of leader will you be?

A: "I've never been the vocal type. I just always go out and do. Like last year, I was still trying to find the whole college-basketball thing as a freshman. But this year I've been through it, so I know what to expect. ... Jeff Pendergraph's the one that yells and screams. I'm just right behind him, (saying,) 'Yeah, yeah.'"

— Doug Halle



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Greg Hansen : Harden will be a big task for Cats

Opinion by Greg Hansen

ARIZONA DAILY STAR

Arizona's Mysterious Mr. X, publicity-shy strategist Mike Dunlap, will draw the obligatory X's and O's on a grease board today and explain how the X's are to stop the O's.

The Wildcats will be the X's; there will be many of them. They will trap, harass, surround and out-number the single O on the board. That will be Arizona State's James Harden.

In the Pac-10, James Harden is the Big O.

As diagrammed by Mr. X, the scheme will appear to be a work of genius. It will sound good. It will look good. All of those X's against one O. Brilliant.

But it will not work.

Whenever James Harden needs to get from Point A to Point B tonight, he will get there. The X's will scatter and the O will find daylight — and probably draw a foul in the process.

It does not matter that Jim Livengood is paying the Mysterious Mr. X \$375,000 to do nothing more than draw X's and O's. It does not matter that tonight's game is a career challenge for Dunlap; the opportunity to create a hybrid defense to stop James Harden, even though UCLA's defensive master, Ben Howland, and a slew of Final Four-tested players could not do so.

In 30 seasons of Pac-10 basketball, James Harden is one of the three most difficult defensive matchups to step on the McKale Center court.

There was UCLA'S 6-foot-10-inch shooting machine, Don MacLean, who could not be guarded effectively by anyone in an Arizona uniform, not even by those Wildcats who wound up NBA multimillionaires.

There was Oregon State's 6-11 human layup, Steve Johnson, who waited patiently near the basket as two of Ralph Miller's Pac-10 champion screening machines worked backdoor cuts and put on passing clinics so well that Johnson shot .746 percent from the field in 1981-82.

Now comes Harden, who is a bull of a young man, 6-5 and maybe 225 pounds, a mixture of Khalid Reeves' full-speed-ahead strength and Chris Mills' size, versatility and go-to-the-hole instincts. The only thing Harden lacks is Sean Elliott's breakaway first step.

"Harden actually seems to seek contact; he plays better that way," says Tucson attorney Mike Redhair, a Sun Devils starting point guard from 1986 to 1990. "He's got a mean streak, a tough streak. He'll jump into you, leading with a shoulder or an elbow. Sometimes, he's unstoppable."

The four Sun Devils who start opposite Harden are willing role players, rooks and pawns to Harden's king. One of them, senior center Jeff Pendergraph, possibly has a future playing overseas pro basketball. The others are Joe the Plumber.

"He reminds me a lot of (ex-Sun Devil and NBA star) Lionel Hollins," says Tucson real estate executive Joe Nehls,

an Arizona All-Pac-10 guard in 1980. "They're both big shooting guards, lefties, aggressive guys who go to the basket."

Over the last 25 years, ASU has just three NCAA tournament teams. All of those, and several others, had superior personnel to this Sun Devils team. Yet because Harden is so dynamic, and coach Herb Sendek is so effective at getting the most out of limited resources, this ASU team has the look of one that could play on to the Sweet 16.

Much of that can be seen in Harden's 149 free throws. That's 54 more than Arizona's Jordan Hill, who seems to get fouled every time he touches the ball. That's a lot of easy points.

It's possible that Harden will shoot more than 300 free throws this year. Only one man in Pac-10 history, ex-Sun Devil center Ike Diogu (311), has done so. Stanford's marvelous Adam Keefe, who seemed to be shooting free throws all night, never topped 267 in a season.

Harden isn't infallible. He scored a mere four points against USC's Daniel Hackett a week ago. It wasn't unlike Arizona's Jerryd Bayless, who was limited to eight points by Hackett a year ago.

Alas, Arizona doesn't have a Daniel Hackett to guard Harden tonight.

"Harden presents a real predicament for Arizona's coaches," says Nehls. "If you put a big guy on him, he'll go around him. If you put a smaller guy out there, he'll post him up. Arizona doesn't have anyone to match up with him."

A year ago in Tempe, Harden scored 22 points in the second half, including an overtime-forcing drive to the bucket when everyone in the gym knew he was going to get the ball and drive to the basket.

The O's beat all the X's that night 64-59.

Now it's Arizona's move again.

Contact columnist Greg Hansen at ghansen@azstarnet.com or 573-4362.

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