

ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

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Pendergraph leaving ASU as a leader

By Scott Bordow
Tribune Columnist

Where to start with Jeff Pendergraph?

California at ASU Gameday [<http://www.eastvalleytribune.com/story/136341>]

The game where he was so upset during a timeout he couldn't breathe and started coughing up blood?

Or perhaps his first few months at Arizona State, when he was so shy he prayed that no one would approach him to talk?

How about the fact he graduated in 3½ years with a degree in economics?

No, let's begin a few years back, in Rob Evans' Tempe home. Pendergraph and Sylvester Seay, another recruit, have just finished a meal cooked by Evans' wife, Carolyn, and are about to head out for the evening with ASU's players.

Before they go, however, Evans asks them to come into his office. He shuts the door, then attempts to close the deal.

Are they ready to become Sun Devils?

Seay immediately says yes. Pendergraph won't commit himself. Evans pushes. Pendergraph still won't tell him what he wants to hear.

Finally, Evans relents and lets the two players go. He's not happy, but he also sees something valuable in Pendergraph, a character trait that eventually will define Pendergraph's college career.

"He knows what he wants," Evans says. "He has his priorities straight."

Pendergraph can't believe this is the end, the final home game of his college career. When he stepped foot on campus in August of 2005, he thought four years would last "forever."

Instead, forever seemed to tick away as quickly as a 35-second shot clock.

"It kind of hit me real hard (Monday)," Pendergraph said. "I was sitting at home thinking about it ... I'm about to be done. I'm a senior. There's no coming back. College basketball is over."

Pendergraph has been in the public eye for so long now — he'll leave ASU as the all-time leader in career starts — that we think we've gotten to know him.

He's 6-foot-9, athletic, emotional, he owned a couple of snakes as pets and he drives a 1996 Impala with 119,000 miles.

But there's so much more. Pendergraph embodies what the collegiate experience should be about. He's grown both as a player and as a person, and when he does move on, both he and ASU will be better off for their partnership.

"He's been a tremendous person in the community and for our program, and he has represented Arizona State University with flying colors," coach Herb Sendek said.

It hasn't always been easy for Pendergraph. His college career was nearly derailed before it started, when a preseason physical before his freshman year revealed a tumor behind his left knee. Pendergraph underwent surgery and had to wait for nearly 10 hours before learning the tumor was benign.

Then, after his freshman year, Evans was fired. A devastated Pendergraph thought seriously about transferring — he planned to attend a junior college for one year so he wouldn't have to sit out; then move to another Division I-A school — but he stuck it out even though he had never heard of Sendek.

"He wanted to be a cornerstone of ASU basketball," Evans said.

To do that, Pendergraph had to grow up. Stories about his volcanic emotions are legendary. Like that UCLA game, when Pendergraph was so enraged about ASU letting a lead slip away that he completely lost control during a timeout.

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"I go back to the huddle and I start snapping," he said. "I couldn't breathe. I'm coughing up blood, yelling at my teammates. Oh my goodness, it was like an out-of-body experience. After the game, like a week later, guys were like, 'Jeff, you were tripping.'"

Pendergraph still isn't a good loser. Most players will be able to shrug off a defeat after a few minutes and commiserate with family and friends. Not Pendergraph. Those trespassing on his personal space do so at their own risk.

"He's old school," Evans said.

Pendergraph can't even stand losing at the video game, "Call of Duty."

"I'm kind of good so I really talk crazy," he said. "I tell people how bad they are, there's no chance of them playing against me, they should just quit and throw the game away. If I start to get my butt kicked, I just turn it off."

What Pendergraph has been able to do — at least on the basketball court — is channel those emotions the right way. He had at least four fouls in 13 of ASU's 34 games last year, primarily because he didn't play under control. This year, he's collected four fouls or more in just nine of 28 games while playing four more minutes per contest.

Just as importantly, he's learned how to be a leader rather than a screamer. When he was contemplating an early entry into the NBA last summer, he consulted former coach Doug Collins, who told him that he needed to mature and not be on edge all the time.

Pendergraph still isn't shy about getting on teammates, but he's done a better job of calming down and composing himself so the volcano doesn't erupt.

"People are seeing how I react to stuff. If my teammates see me going bananas all the time, it kind of spooks them," Pendergraph said. "If I lose it, I know my team is going to lose it. If my whole team loses it, we're not going to win."

Two other things you should know about Pendergraph:

1. Even when ASU was losing 15 games in a row two seasons ago, Pendergraph never ducked his media responsibilities. This from a player who, as a freshman, was terrified at the prospect of having to talk to reporters. Now, he's so open and quotable that he jokes the media will miss him.

"You guys are going to be stuck with coach Sendek," he said with a laugh.

2. Pendergraph is on the student-athlete advisory committee, he's always willing to spend time with visitors after practice, and, according to ASU officials, he's never been in trouble, either in the classroom or the community.

"That's just who he is," Sendek said. "It comes naturally."

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Evans has two plaques in his house. One lists the 26 players who graduated under his watch at the University of Mississippi. The other lists the 25 players he either recruited or coached at ASU who received their degrees.

Generally, Evans waits for the player to graduate before putting his name and picture on the plaque. But he made an exception for Pendergraph. His picture went up before he got his diploma.

"I just knew it was going to happen," Evans said. "When Jeff sets his mind to something, it gets done. He was as grounded a young man as I ever recruited."

Pendergraph isn't sure if he'll be able to control his emotions this afternoon. He's been looking forward to Senior Day all season. Now that it's upon him, the anticipation has turned to reflection.

"I'm definitely glad I came here," he said. "I accomplished a lot of what I wanted to do. I got my degree early; I played a lot of basketball, now I have the opportunity to make history for the school (by making a deep run in the NCAA Tournament) and then I'll try to go to the NBA. A lot of stuff is happening that I didn't think would be possible when I first got here."

Where to end with Jeff Pendergraph? Simple.

The basketball team will miss him. So will the university.

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Pendergraph set for home finale

By: Doug Haller - Mar. 6, 2009, The Arizona Republic

Looking back, Jeff Pendergraph is slightly embarrassed. But something within him snapped that day two years ago at Pauley Pavilion. He could sense another win starting to slip away, and he didn't hold back.

"I go back to the huddle . . . I couldn't breathe," Pendergraph said. "I got my mouthpiece in. I'm coughing up blood, yelling at my teammates. Oh, my goodness, it was like an out-of-body experience."

That was always the knock on Arizona State's senior forward. Pressure him, shake him, and he'll explode like a can of soda. It was a reason former NBA coach Doug Collins, a friend of ASU coach Herb Sendek, cited when telling Pendergraph it would be best to return for his senior season.

It was about maturity. Learning how to play with passion and not emotion. And as his final regular-season game unfolds Saturday against California, it's an obstacle Pendergraph has cleared, a major reason ASU, despite a three-game losing streak, likely is headed for its first NCAA Tournament since 2003.

"It's definitely going to be an emotional weekend, not only for what he means to our team but for what he means to our school," junior guard Derek Glasser said. "He's kind of the face of our program and ASU athletics."

Preseason All-American James Harden deservedly gets much of the credit for ASU's reversal. But it's Pendergraph who has experienced the movement from irrelevance to relevance, from eight wins to the Top 25. He's expected to break the school record for career starts Saturday, hurdling the 114 set by former sharpshooter Eddie House. Over the next few weeks, Pendergraph also will finish among the school's career rebounding leaders.

This season, Pendergraph is averaging 14 points and 8.4 rebounds. He is shooting at 66.2 percent, which ranks as the best in the country and would set a school record if the season ended today. But his coaches and teammates seldom talk about statistics when discussing the four-year starter.

"Jeff and I talked when I first came in April a couple years ago, and I asked him not only to lead us on the court but to be a great ambassador for our program," Sendek said. "And I think he certainly has done that for us. Academically, he already has his degree. He's been a tremendous person in the community and for our program. He really has represented Arizona State with flying colors."

At times, Pendergraph's journey has been trying, to say the least. A few months before his freshman season, he had a benign tumor removed from his left leg. Less than a year later, ASU fired coach Rob Evans, replacing him with Sendek, a name Pendergraph didn't recognize. He considered transferring, and even formed a plan, thinking he would enroll in junior college so he wouldn't have to miss a season.

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Instead, he stayed, starting 92 of 93 games under Sendek, blossoming into one of the Pac-10's premier post players and learning to control his outbursts in the process. In a few months, that might improve his NBA stock. But for now, it simply has put ASU into position to post one of the better seasons in program history.

"All the great success my teammates have had, that I've had, it's just kind of surreal that things are working out the way they are," Pendergraph said. "They (haven't) worked out perfectly like I planned, but they're still a lot better than what anybody would've predicted three or four years ago."

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Pendergraph appreciates ASU success

By Paola Boivin – The Arizona Republic
Feb. 21, 2009

Jeff Pendergraph has gone through eight cars since arriving at Arizona State - "all beaters," he said - probably from navigating a college basketball career filled with metaphorical potholes.

No one on ASU's basketball team appreciates its success this season more than the senior forward. For three seasons, he played the role of crash-test dummy until the Sun Devils found the right parts to drive them to the doorstep of the NCAA Tournament.

"It doesn't seem like I've been here that long, but then I think, 'Man, that's a lot of stuff,' " Pendergraph said. "I had a lot of stuff happen to me in four years."

If you're looking for someone to get behind in Sunday night's ASU-Arizona meeting at Wells Fargo Arena, make it Pendergraph. He has weathered a program that is just the second in the Pac-10's 31-year history to lose 20 games one year and win at least 20 the next two seasons.

Now here he is, just four games short of Eddie House's school record for career starts. He leads the nation in field-goal percentage (66.5) and averages 12.4 points and 6.4 rebounds on a 20-5 team ranked 14th in the nation.

This season is what he envisioned for ASU, you know, once he decided to come here. He took visits to Oregon and Oregon State but favored UCLA before visiting Tempe with close friend and AAU teammate Sylvester Seay. The two hoped to attend the same school.

"I remember having both of them in my home and Sylvester commits," said former ASU coach Rob Evans, now an assistant at Arkansas. "Jeff couldn't. I spoke with his mom and she says, 'Let me talk to him, Coach.' The next morning at breakfast, he told me he was coming."

Not long after the 6-foot-9 Pendergraph arrived on campus, he was experiencing mild pain in his left knee. He didn't think much about it until a preseason physical revealed a tumor. He immediately returned to Los Angeles for tests. Evans met Pendergraph and his mom at the hospital at 5 a.m., and they waited "something like 10 hours," Evans said, before the player underwent surgery and learned his tumor was benign.

He was relieved but disappointed because the surgery and subsequent rehabilitation required him to miss most of preseason practice. He still managed to start 22 of 27 games as a freshman.

He survived one challenge, only to find another waiting around the corner.

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Evans, with whom he had forged a close relationship, was fired after the season. Doubt continued to haunt Pendergraph when his sophomore stint ended with an 8-22 record. He connected with Herb Sendek, the new coach, but still wondered when this roller-coaster ride would stop. It didn't help that his friend, Seay, transferred to Fresno State.

ASU improved dramatically the next season, but Pendergraph was tested again. The Sun Devils brought in a high-profile recruit, James Harden, and Pendergraph found he no longer was the go-to-guy, the leading scorer like the season before.

"I can be second place to a guy who's a cool person, and that's the thing about James, he wasn't a jerk about it," Pendergraph said. "It wasn't like, 'I'm the best player now, so everybody else get the ball to me.' He was cool about it."

Ultimately, Pendergraph longed to win; having Harden aboard, a player he truly liked, would help accomplish that goal.

Although the Sun Devils finished 21-13, they weren't invited to the NCAA Tournament. It was another tough blow for Pendergraph. He had an off-season to reflect on what he wanted out of his senior season and how he could help ASU advance to the tournament.

Leadership was key. Being vocal wasn't the problem.

"I used to yell at everybody," Pendergraph said, "other teams, coaches, teammates, I spared nobody. . . . It wasn't a disrespect thing, it's just how it came out."

He remembers once getting into it in practice with teammate Eric Boateng, "and he threatened me," Pendergraph said, laughing. "And then it was over."

He talked with his coaches about how to use his emotions positively and within the framework of leadership.

"We would like Jeff's energy to be manifested in a passionate way, rather than an emotional way, and he has made great progress in that area," Sendek said.

When his college career is over, emotions won't be what define Pendergraph. He has been a solid representative for the university, graduating in 3 1/2 years and staying under the radar off the court. He's been a steadying influence when the program needed one and "as grounded a person as you'll meet," Evans said.

Simply, he's a player who deserves a happy ending.