

NEXT MAN UP

Tony Stubblefield steps in as DePaul’s fourth head coach in 16 years, looking to revive the program

Stubbs’ resume

1993-95: Assistant at Nebraska-Omaha
1996-96: Assistant at Texas-San Antonio
1996-00: Assistant at Texas-Arlington
2000-05: Assistant at New Mexico State
2005: Interim head coach at New Mexico State
2006-10: Assistant at Cincinnati
2010-21: Assistant at Oregon



By Lawrence Kreymer
Editor-in-Chief

Growing up in Clinton, Iowa, Tony Stubblefield would always try to watch as much college basketball as possible. Basketball has always been a part of Stubblefield’s life — and it started when he was a little kid.

But back in the ‘70s and ‘80s there were only a select few games to watch on television. The one team, however, that would be on a lot — and the one that caught Stubblefield’s eye — was the DePaul men’s basketball team.

“So, everybody knew DePaul basketball,” he said. “It was big. It’s always a program I’ve kept my eyes on, that I’ve followed.”

Led by head coach Ray Meyer and players like Mark Aguirre and Rod Strickland, DePaul had a television deal with WGN, was Chicago’s premier college basketball team and was a national brand.

In the ‘70s and ‘80s, DePaul basketball mattered to people from Lincoln Park to other parts of the country.

“They were recruiting good players,” Stubblefield said. “They had very good players and guys that were fortunate enough to go on to play at the next level in the NBA. I think that helped attract other top players.”

But the team that Stubblefield grew up watching — one that reached its peak in 1979 with a Final Four appearance — is not nearly the same one he’s getting ready to coach.

DePaul has seen better and brighter days. Since 2004, the Blue Demons have made no NCAA Tournament ap-

pearances, recorded only two winning seasons and have finished in last place in the Big East 11 times.

Three coaches in the past 16 years — Jerry Wainwright (2005-09), Oliver Purnell (2010-15) and Dave Leitao (2015-21) — have all been given a chance to try to revive the program. All three failed.

Stubblefield, 51, now has the opportunity to bring back a once proud program back to the national map.

“It’s been very exciting for me, and I’m just very happy and fortunate to have this opportunity to try to get this program back to the top,” he said.

“Tony is a worker”

On March 28, Oregon was getting ready to play the University of Southern California (USC) in the Sweet 16 of the NCAA Tournament.

DePaul, on the other hand, was almost two weeks into its search for a new men’s basketball head coach after athletic director DeWayne Peevy made the decision to fire Dave Leitao 13 days earlier.

What both Stubblefield and Peevy didn’t know on the 28th was that Oregon’s loss to USC, 82-68, would result in both sides discussing a potential deal to bring Stubblefield to DePaul.

One day following Oregon’s season-ending loss to USC, Stubblefield was on a plane to Chicago to meet with Peevy and DePaul representatives. Less than two weeks later, Stubblefield was named the Blue Demons’ next head coach.

“I didn’t want Oregon to lose to be the reason we are here today, but it gave me an opportunity because, say Oregon got to the Final Four, I don’t know if we are here

today because I don’t know if I could have waited enough to not know what the situation was going forward,” Peevy said during Stubblefield’s introductory press conference on April 7.

Stubblefield’s journey as an assistant coach for 28 years led him to this point. He spent four years (2006-10) as an assistant at the University of Cincinnati under Mick Cronin, now the head coach at UCLA, where they helped revive the program.

In 2010, however, Stubblefield joined Dana Altman’s staff at Oregon. At the time, the Ducks were coming off of two mediocre seasons. In 11 years together in Eugene, Altman and Stubblefield helped guide the Ducks to seven NCAA Tournament appearances and one Final Four berth.

“Tony is a worker,” Altman said. “He’s a very good evaluator of talent. He will put his own stamp on it at DePaul, and I’m sure he will be a great evaluator of people and players that he wants in his program.”

It’s now Stubblefield’s turn to be the head coach in a rebuilding environment — one that he has had success in as an assistant coach.

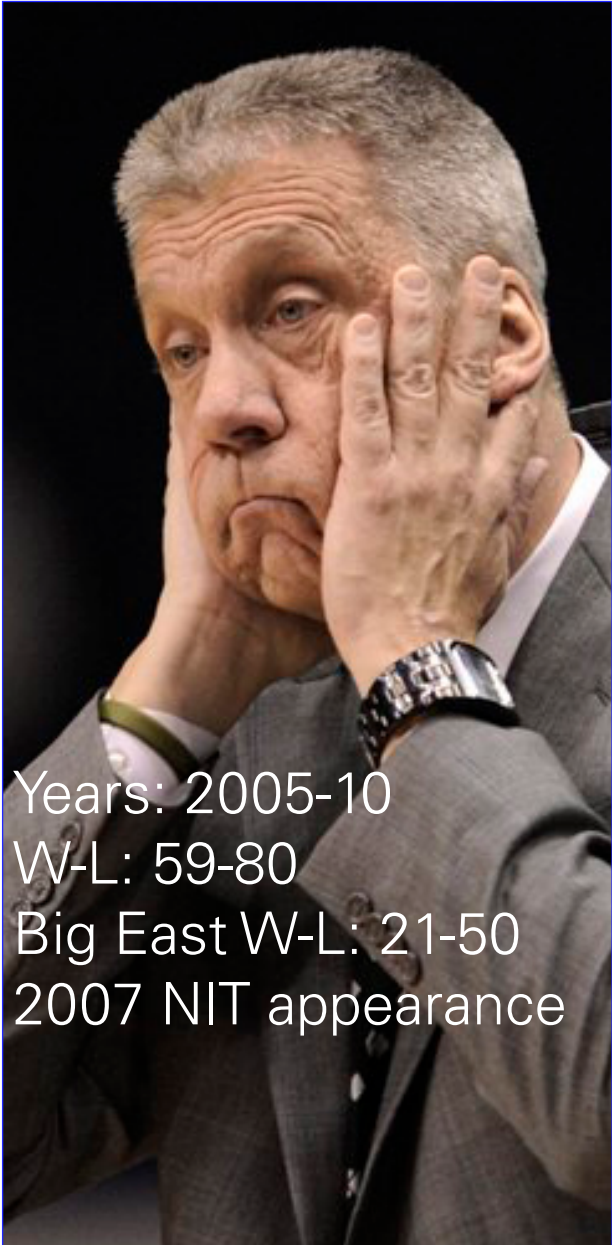
“Well, I would like to think those experiences I had at the University of Cincinnati, at the University of Oregon, have helped prepare me to try to get this program back on track,” Stubblefield said.

“I want to help DePaul get there”

Amidst all the losing that DePaul has experienced in the past 16 years, there have been moments of hope. They weren’t long-lived, but there were times that DePaul looked like it was beginning to turn a corner, only for its

Ghosts of DePaul’s past

Jerry Wainright



Years: 2005-10
W-L: 59-80
Big East W-L: 21-50
2007 NIT appearance

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Oliver Purnell



Years: 2010-15
W-L: 54-105
Big East W-L: 15-75
No postseason appearance

PHOTO COURTESY OF ASSOCIATED PRESS

Dave Leitao



Years: 2015-21
W-L: 69-112
Big East W-L: 21-84
2019 CBI appearance

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About That Rebuild

It’s been 17 years since DePaul made the NCAA tournament (2003-04).

Least of the East

2015-16 was the last time DePaul finished better than last in the Big East

season to come to a crashing halt.

In their only second season in the Big East, the Blue Demons recorded a 9-7 conference record — their only winning record in the Big East to this point — only to follow that season up by winning a combined eight conference games the next three seasons.

To begin the 2014-15 conference season, DePaul — coached by Oliver Purnell at the time — started by winning its first three games. The Blue Demons finished the year winning only three more games and ended up in ninth place.

And then came the 2019-20 season. DePaul got off to its best start in over two decades, going 12-1 in the non-conference slate, but the season spiraled out of control and the team only managed to claim three Big East wins.

Each coach in the last 16 years had some positive moments, but the majority of their tenure was filled with losing. Stubblefield’s job is to make DePaul into a consistent winner.

“I don’t know necessarily if it’s a benchmark in terms of wins and losses, but just being very competitive, a team that’s going to go out and compete every time they step on the floor,” Stubblefield said regarding expectations for his first season.

Rebuilding a program requires more than just one person leading the charge. It takes an entire athletic department — and, frankly, the entire university — to put its effort behind getting the men’s basketball program back to the top.

“Everybody can see development; I see the direc-

tion [the program] is going,” Peevy said. “I want to help DePaul get there. How do you help us build this foundation where you know you are part of creating this into a success?”

The makings of a great program requires to have an identity on the court. For Stubblefield’s DePaul, that means playing with “a lot of energy” and to “leave it all on the line.”

“To share the basketball, make plays for one another, be a tough, hard-nosed team defensively that finishes the play with the rebound,” he said.

“It’s something that I’m really looking forward to”

On Wednesday, when DePaul begins its season by hosting Coppin State at Wintrust Arena, Stubblefield will no longer be sitting on the bench as one of the assistants. He will be leading the bench.

“It’s something that I’m really looking forward to, it will be a very exciting time for me,” he said. “I worked hard over the course of the last 28 years to get prepared for this opportunity.”

Stubblefield is going to have to lean in on those 28 years of assistant coaching experience when the season officially begins. Throughout those nearly three decades of coaching, he has experienced his fair share of ups and downs. According to Stubblefield, the key is to always stay “even-keeled.”

“One thing I learned throughout my career is you can’t get too high or too low in this business,” he said. “We’ve had great teams, you can’t get too high about the success you are having. And when things aren’t going

your way, you can’t get too low.”

The ups and downs are part of a five-month college basketball season. It’s part of the head coach’s job to keep his players focussed throughout the year.

“I feel like, since he came from a big program like Oregon, he brings a lot of that Oregon energy here,” DePaul junior center Nick Ongenda said. “I feel like he’s really a big factor to our team for how this season’s going to go because our team, we see him as the Oregon guy, and we’re at DePaul, so we’re trying to get to their level.”

DePaul has had to turn over much of its roster from the previous season, with multiple players transferring and Romeo Weems leaving for the NBA Draft. In a short amount of time, Stubblefield recruited seven new players to Lincoln Park, including Jalen Terry from Oregon.

“[Stubblefield is] a great coach,” Terry told The DePaulia on Sept. 7. “He pushed me, at Oregon, as an assistant. He pushed me to do better and I need that. He knows what I’m capable of and he wants to push me to do that.”

A new era of DePaul basketball begins on Wednesday. For Stubblefield, it’s the latest chapter of his coaching career.

“I have had a lot of support from my family and friends along the way that have been with me throughout this coaching journey,” he said. “Just sticking with it and working hard, and a young man coming from Clinton, Iowa.”