

Danny Sprinkle

MSU's Basketball Hall-of-Famer



"When You Add People Who Truly Care About Other People's Success It Impacts People's Lives, And That Is What MSU Is All About, Impacting Lives."

BY CYNTHIA LOGAN

One of Montana State's most accomplished basketball players during his career in the late 1990s, head coach Danny Sprinkle is a man of singular

passion: to make those he credits with shaping his life proud. "My coaches impacted my life and still do today. Mick Durham took a chance on a skinny kid from Helena and I could never repay him for that. It truly changed the course

of my life and I would not be the head coach here today without that decision." And if his initial campaigns, leading the Bobcats to their first winning record in 10 years (16-15 overall) and a Big Sky Championship game are any indication, Durham and many others are mighty, mighty proud. The 16 wins were the most for a first-year MSU coach since Hank Anderson guided the 1972-73 Bobcat team to 17 wins.

As MSU's first coach to ever win his debut at Weber State, Sprinkle spearheaded a dramatic defensive turnaround in Division I basketball last year. The Bobcats' scoring defense went from 336th in the NCAA to 111th — they were outshot in just 11 games and ranked in the top 100 in defensive rebounds per game, field goal percentage defense and 3-point field goal defense. "We put a lot of time into it," says Sprinkle. "I knew this program needed a new mindset; it needed to get tougher. We had great offensive players, but defensively the numbers weren't good, so that part I needed to change. Now, we need to keep that and get better offensively."

A finalist for the 2020 Joe B. Hall Award (given annually to the nation's top first-year coach in Division I college basketball), Sprinkle says the game has changed dramatically since his playing days. "It's a more free-flowing game now, catered to the offensive side of the ball. The game is much more open with spacing; you can't hand check or play as



physical on perimeter or in the post. It makes it harder to defend the offensive player nowadays," he remarks. "It's a totally different game than when I played in the late '90s, and even into the mid-2000s; if you can't shoot a three pointer now, it will make it harder to go on to the professional level unless you have some other elite skill." He also notes there is more 'five-out' structure, having five guys on the perimeter, like a

spread offense in football. "When I played, we were a 'four-out one in' offense; four guards on the perimeter and one post guy instead of two, which was a little ahead of our time, with Coach Durham." Sprinkle sees the biggest difference in today's game as 'ball screen offense,' saying; "now you have multiple on-ball screens per possession and it's the main thing you have to prepare for in scouting opponents. Overall, there is more space to drive and be creative, which makes it fun for the fans."

Born in Pullman, Washington when his dad was coaching at the University of Idaho alongside Bobcat great Dennis Erickson, Sprinkle says he played 'all the sports' as a kid. "My dad coached some basketball as well as football, so I was always in the gym or on the field with him; that was my babysitter." So does he enjoy the occasional pick-up game around town? "No, I'm too old for that... no pick-up basketball for me," he says adamantly. "I've avoided major knee injuries and I'd like to keep it that way. Besides, nobody wants to play at 5:30 am when I'm available." Sprinkle had an outstanding career at Helena High School; he twice earned all-state honors in





basketball, while also competing in football and track. He enrolled at MSU in fall of 1995, something he considers “the best decision I have made in my life.” He graduated from Montana State in 2000 with a bachelor’s degree in health and human development.

As a Bobcat freshman in 1996, Sprinkle was a starter during the basketball team’s remarkable run to Big Sky regular season and tournament championships—garnering All-Big Sky Tournament honors for his 30-point performance in

the Championship. He earned Big Sky Freshman of the Year honors that year, and was an all-league three consecutive seasons, including his first team selection in 1997. He held the MSU career and season three-point records upon graduation and remains the eighth-leading scorer in school history. Sprinkle is a member of the 1996 team that was inducted into the Montana State Athletics Hall of Fame in 2006; he will be formally inducted for his individual efforts during a ceremony to be held in January, 2022.

His favorite memory playing for the Bobcats? “No doubt, winning the championship in the Fieldhouse. It was just electric that night in March of 1996, my freshman year. Seeing the excitement on everybody’s face; all the fans in the student section. It had been 10 years since we’d been in an NCAA tournament... taking a charter plane down to Albuquerque and playing in The Pit. I text the guys I played with every day—that’s what makes playing on a championship team so special.” Also special are more of those Sprinkle credits with shaping his life: “I would be crazy not to mention the community of Bozeman and the support of our fans and boosters. We would regularly have 6,000 fans in the Brick Breeden Fieldhouse and the energy helped us win a lot of games! Larry Aasheim, Dick Harte and Brad Daws were absolutely instrumental in my development as a person. They are the epitome of ‘Bobcat Born, Bobcat Bred, gonna be a Bobcat till the day I’m dead.’ They showed through actions and words how important this University is to them and I never wanted to let them down.”

Sprinkle’s coaching career began in 2000-01 as a graduate assistant at Cal State Northridge, where he coached in the Big West Conference through the 2013 season (other than 2006-08, when he assisted Bobcat Brad Huse). He was part of Cal State Northridge’s 2001 and 2009 NCAA Tournament teams, with the Matadors winning the Big Sky regular season crown in 2001 and the Big West title in 2009. He then coached at Cal State Fullerton, helping that team reach the NCAA Tournament in 2017-18 for just the third time in program history. Each coaching position brought additional duties as recruiting coordinator, which he continues in his current post.

We’re playing at the highest level basketball-wise, against top teams, even those in our league.

Literally just off the plane from a recruiting trip to Birmingham, Alabama, Sprinkle was slated to head to St. Louis the next morning on another scouting foray. “It’s been non-stop ever since I took this job; I haven’t been on vacation, Covid hit... I don’t play... that’s kind of my problem—I don’t do anything else: just coach, recruit and work out early in the morning to clear my mind.” When looking for potential Bobcats, Sprinkle has strict criteria: “We’re playing at the highest level basketball-wise, against top teams, even those in our league.” Regarding speed, ball handling, height and heart, he says; “You have to have some serious skill to compete in the Big Sky. We recruit toughness, competitiveness. You do have to have some size; a kid might not be the tallest—Xavier Bishop is only 5’ 8” but he knows how to play. On the other end of the spectrum, one of our

incoming freshmen is 7’3”—it’ll take him some time; he’s young. Everybody brings something different; you have to look at what the league is recruiting.”

While Brad Huse relied heavily on recruiting players from Junior Colleges, Sprinkle has built something of a reputation for finding great high school talent. “I do like recruiting high school, because you hope to have them four or five years and develop them. It’s important for the community; the community loves to see the development,” says Sprinkle, who credits his time with Huse as very formative. “Coach Huse is a great person; I learned a lot in my two years working under him and he shaped me as a coach,” he says, mentioning that two of his best players—Nick Gazellas and Mareng Gatkuoth, transferred from junior colleges. “We do have



to get a mix of Junior College and transfers—the state of college basketball now with the transfer portal means you’re gonna lose three or four guys every year; it’s kind of the culture now. You just keep recruiting the best kids and if it works out, it works out.”

Clearly, Danny Sprinkle’s tenure is on track to work out very well. And clearly, Coach Sprinkle is someone with significant emotional intelligence, someone who values long-term connection. “The relationships I built with students, teammates, coaches and faculty on campus is what shaped me as a person,” he repeats. “My academic advisor, Nancy Colton, was absolutely terrific. She made everything fun and you could see every day how much she enjoyed serving students and helping people. The passion she had for her job is what impacted me most and I hope to have that same energy and passion every day with my team. I have so many friends today because of my time at MSU and I cherish those [friendships]. The people are what makes MSU special—there are a lot of beautiful places and academic institutions, but when you add people who truly care about other people’s success it impacts people’s lives, and that is what MSU is all about, impacting lives.”

