



# BULLSEYE ON THEIR BACKS

BY PAUL BURNS

Tricia Binford Aims to Take WBB Team to Next Level

***"She Doesn't Just Coach Basketball, She Develops Young Women Into Good Citizens"*** - ELLEN KREIGHBAUM

**B**illie Ranard has seen a lot of basketball played in Montana State's Brick Breeden Fieldhouse. For years she and her husband Bill attended men's Bobcat games, and then for a few years they went to men's and women's. But these days they're mainly interested in the women's games. Not that the men's games aren't enjoyable, it's that the women's games are "just so darn fun," Billie says. And, it almost goes without saying, the Bobcat women are just so darn good.

The Bobcats closed out the 2020 campaign with a school record

25 wins, only to have their hopes of advancing to the NCAA Tournament shattered by Covid-19. This past season, while sporting the youngest team in the Big Sky Conference with only one senior, the Bobcats finished 17-7. For fans like the Ranards, attending home games is the highlight of their winter. In recent years, the Bobcats have consistently won 80 percent of their home games, as the players feed off the crowd and the crowd feeds off the energy displayed by the players. What's the source of this excitement? For Billie, there's an easy answer: Head coach Tricia Binford.

"It's always been a fun crowd, but now the crowds are bigger and bigger and more vocal and exciting," Billie says. Because so many new fans started blocking their view, the Ranards switched their season passes to seats right behind the Bobcats' bench, perfect places to view Binford in action. "She's so calm; she's a great role model," Billie says. Like the rest of America, Covid-19 forced the Ranards to watch basketball from afar this past season. "It's a lot more fun to be there than it is sitting in the living room and watching on TV," she says.

Binford and her Bobcats haven't always been this good. She took over the coaching duties in 2005, when the program was struggling to be relevant. The revolving door for coaches didn't help the situation, but Binford came in knowing two things: she was going to be successful and she was going to stay. At the time, Bobcat coaches either moved on to better things or were fired, usually after just a handful of seasons.

The women's basketball program didn't start until 1976, thanks to Title IX, which forced the NCAA to acknowledge that women could play sports and they had as much right to play sports as did the men they shared campuses with. Until Binford arrived, Judy Spoelstra held the record for most years in charge of women's basketball with six. In the 10 years between Spoelstra's move to Oregon State and when Binford took over, four different coaches paced the sidelines. Some were supposed to be temporary, some were asked to leave. In 2005, the program needed saving.

Tricia Binford's outstanding playing career at Boise State

## “She Doesn’t Yell And Scream, She Teaches Them As An Educator.”

was followed by two years of professional action in Australia and five seasons in the WNBA. As a pro, she would return to Idaho to train, and for two seasons she helped coach at Boise State during the WNBA’s offseason. Those two years of playing and coaching proved too much.

“Playing ball, coaching and being a new wife, I felt I wasn’t giving everything to all three sides.

When I get into something I want to be all in and be the best at it and I felt I couldn’t do that and be a coach,” she says. But when Utah State resurrected its women’s program in 2003, she was willing to retire from the professional ranks and joined the Aggies as a full-time assistant coach.

When the Bobcat job became available in 2005, Binford was ready to settle down with her husband, Todd, and the first of their two children. Binford saw an opportunity to grow a program that needed an energetic young coach who had never led a team before. “From day one I never felt concerned about my job,” she says. “It was always about the process of ‘what do we need to do to build this culture,’ what our program is going to look like. My challenge was ‘every year we need to get better and do it the right way.’” Of course, when you finish your first season with just three wins in 26 games, the only way to go is up. And once the Bobcats got better, it was



time to stay that way. “Early on I didn’t fixate on the record, but not being competitive was really hard,” she acknowledges.

“It was helpful having a two-year-old in the house who had no idea if we won or lost when I walked in the door.” When the family of three became a family of four a few years after arriving in Bozeman, Binford and her husband became more and more adamant they weren’t going away. She says every decision is a family decision, particularly about what’s best for the children.

“When we started it was more that we could be successful here and this would be a great place for our family,” Binford says. “I did not realize that 16 years later I would love it even more.”

In many ways, her players are an extension of her family. Binford brings in girls straight out of high school and four years later sends the young women into the world prepared for wherever life takes them. She keeps in touch with all her former players; a handful have returned to MSU’s

staff as assistants, including current ex-Bobcats Blaire Braxton, Peyton Ferris and Katie Bussey.

“She doesn’t just coach basketball, she develops the young women into good citizens,” says Ellen Kreighbaum. “She doesn’t yell and scream, she teaches them as an educator.” Kreighbaum, who was instrumental in the creation of women’s athletics at MSU following the passage of Title IX, which banned gender discrimination in education, is a big fan of Binford. Kreighbaum was just wrapping up her career as an MSU professor when Binford arrived, and she had endured the ups and downs of Binford’s predecessors. “She was a new coach then,” Kreighbaum says. “It took her a couple of years to learn the ropes. She’s turned out to be an excellent coach.”

One thing all Bobcat players have in common is the feistiness to be tough on defense and the athleticism to be a threat on offense. Those are traits that keep the fans in the stands coming back for more. “With the men, it’s more about physical

strength,” observes Billie Ranard, who grew up in Bozeman and is now old enough to have been eligible for the first round of Covid-19 vaccines back in February. “With the women there’s more finesse.” That’s not by accident, Kreighbaum points out. “She’s learned so much, and she’s not stuffy about learning from anybody. She’s



so gracious and welcoming to any idea.” If that means making an adjustment on the offensive end or the introduction of a trap on the defensive end, Binford consistently puts her players in a position to succeed. Her professional career wasn’t always successful. While playing for WNBA teams in Utah and Cleveland, she averaged only seven minutes a game. She did see success once in a game Down Under where she scored 67 points, dished out 14 assists, grabbed 10 rebounds and came up with 10 steals. It’s a feat the three-time Big Sky Conference Coach of the Year merely shrugs her shoulders about today.

As a 5-foot-4 teenager at Carbondale’s Roaring Fork High, Tricia Bader was well known. Her team won three Colorado state basketball championships, she was named the state’s basketball player of the year as a senior, earned five track titles, and in 2017 entered the state’s high

school hall of fame. All that, and not a whiff of interest from local colleges. “I had never seen a college game until the first game I played in,” she says. That was at Boise State, where she intended to turn her criminal justice degree into a job with the FBI or secret service. “It was my senior year when coach talked about playing professionally overseas and I thought, ‘Oh, they have professional basketball overseas?’” There was no WNBA yet. I thought I’d keep playing as long as I could and then go into the FBI.” The J. Edgar Hoover Building in Washington D.C. is still waiting for her.

In her 16 seasons at MSU, the 48-year-old Binford has created a record of 270-209, which should be good enough to land her a job at a more prestigious program with better pay. But almost as a way to prove to the Blue and Gold faithful that this is home, Binford and her husband are now owners of Duds N Suds, a car wash and laundry service located about a mile northwest of the Brick Breeden Fieldhouse. It’s a place where their son is gaining valuable work experience and it keeps the family in touch with a piece of the community in ways that being a high-profile MSU coach could never allow. Just don’t expect to see her behind the counter. “I told Todd that I fold enough laundry in the house that I’ll take a break (from doing someone else’s),” Binford says.

Another reason she’s less inclined to move to another program: she has unfinished business here. “We want to be a premium Northwest basketball program. We’ve been competitive in the Big Sky Conference and now we want to be competitive at the next level,” she says. “We’re not the underdog any more. Now we have the bullseye on our backs.”

