

Q&A with Wildcats legend Mark Dobbins

- Jeff Chapman - Contributor
- Nov 14, 2016 Updated May 16, 2017

I recently caught up with my good friend, Mark Dobbins, No. 41 for K-State basketball and Kansas City business man. I met Mark the first time shooting hoops in the driveway of his then-girlfriend Amy Morrison in Salina about 30 years ago.

CHAPMAN: Mark, how did you end up going to K-State?

DOBBINS: For starters my dad was a big KSU basketball fan. We never missed the Wildcats on TV, because it happened so rarely back then.

CHAPMAN: Your older sister was a Wildcat first though, right?

DOBBINS: Yes, my sister earned a scholarship and played for Lynn Hickey beginning in the fall of '80 and I followed the men's team even closer after she went to Manhattan. She was friends with Ro' Blackman, Eddie Nealy and those teammates.

CHAPMAN: What did you see about those teams that made you want to be part of K-State?

DOBBINS: Their reputation with Coach Hartman was solid. In '81 they were an Elite 8 team and Ro was on the cover of (Sports Illustrated). How they played intense team ball and the personality of the coaches and players were very unselfish.

CHAPMAN: So you graduated from Humboldt High School in '84, but initially weren't you a football prospect?

DOBBINS: I was a three sport letterman in basketball, football and track, and I was recruited much more intensely for football than basketball. I was interested in what the opportunities might be in football, but I knew if I played basketball, it would be at K-State.

CHAPMAN: Did you go to a lot of camps?

DOBBINS: I went to the KSU basketball camps and was subsequently invited to stay another week of camp when the higher profile players and coaches, mostly from KC, (St. Louis), and Chicago came in. I believe this is when Coach Kruger, who was on Coach Hartman's staff at the time, began to show a lot of interest in me. I performed well at those camps and was soon offered a scholarship to play basketball at KSU.

CHAPMAN: And what about football, who was recruiting you?

DOBBINS: Nebraska, Notre Dame, Arkansas, UCLA were the schools I was most interested in that recruited me in football. In Lincoln, (Nebraska) at football camp, I was offered a scholarship, but I ultimately chose basketball over football.

CHAPMAN: What made up your mind?

DOBBINS: Coaches Charlie McBride and Tom Osborne told me, "You're not a quarterback in the Nebraska system, you're a defensive end." I would have been honored to play defensive end at Nebraska but I simply enjoyed playing basketball more.

CHAPMAN: Funny, you know if that happened today, you might be playing for Bill Snyder. His whole team is full of former high school quarterbacks.

DOBBINS: I would have loved to play for Coach Snyder. He actually addressed our team my senior year in the fall of '88 and said they were going to get KSU football turned around. Well, we had heard that before ... but we had not heard it from Bill Snyder. Amazing what Bill Snyder has done for KSU. I knew he was special right away, but in '98 when we finally beat Nebraska and were ranked No. 1 and you look over at our aluminum bleachers on the east side and our little press box on the west, and it was simply amazing. Now look at our facilities. None of that happens without Bill Snyder.

CHAPMAN: So you skipped the opportunity to play football for K-State basketball, and the guy who recruited you, Lon Kruger, wasn't there when you arrived. Were you prepared for that?

DOBBINS: Kruger had left to be head coach at Pan-American University, and I was redshirted my freshman year. Coach Hartman had a heart attack that year, and we did not have the best success the remainder of that year or the next, after which he retired. We unfortunately didn't get the best Coach Hartman had to offer due to his health problems. I was really struggling with what to do. I was looking around at other schools, even possibly going back to football. My parents encouraged me to see how it played out with the coaching replacement. Shortly after, Kruger was named head coach and made an immediate impact. Great new assistants and new players and it was a young, fun, energetic, group.

CHAPMAN: What were Dana Altman and Greg Gensing like?

DOBBINS: They were young and energetic and organized. All on the same page. They had a plan; everyone got along. There were no cliques. It was a very cohesive team environment. The coaches had us over to their homes at times, and we did a lot together socially. We were a very close knit group. Dana (Altman) of course brought Mitch Richmond and Charles Bledsoe, we got Will Scott, and in walked Steve Henson, the point guard we had to have.

CHAPMAN: Back while you were playing, Coach Kruger almost left for Texas. Tell me about that.

DOBBINS: Man, rumors were swirling, and it ended up being true that Texas really wanted Coach. He had been offered the job as I understood it. He called Steve (Henson) and I into his office, because we were team captains, and he said in a very emotional conversation, that he was staying. It meant a lot to me at the time and to Steve, because he said he wanted to stay to coach us. I knew he probably meant he wanted to stay to coach Steve Henson's remaining two years, not my senior year. It still meant so much to me that he stayed. I mean it would have been tough had he left.

CHAPMAN: Let's talk 1987-88.

DOBBINS: In 1986-87, we went to the tournament, beat Georgia and lost to a great UNLV Final Four team. We knew we had a lot coming back, minus Norris Coleman, and the team had become Mitch's (Richmond) during the course of that season. The come from behind win in Norman where he hit a last second shot to win was enormous for our confidence and elevated Mitch. His performance in the tournament cemented him with all of us within the program. Players and coaches believed in each other and we were optimistic about the upcoming season.

CHAPMAN: Did losing to the Runnin' Rebels change the teams approach to the game?

DOBBINS: Funny you would ask. We worked really hard in the off season and the coaches had a different style of play in mind to start the '87-88 season. Up-tempo and a lot more pressure defense. We played OK to start the season, but just OK. We had great chemistry and played through some rough spots. Something just wasn't clicking, and just before Christmas we played a special Purdue team on the road and got hammered. 101-72 I believe. That was a very difficult thing for a proud team to go through but it ultimately was a blessing in disguise for us.

CHAPMAN: I kinda remember that and a couple of tough games against Southern Mississippi.

DOBBINS: Yes, Southern Miss was a tough team. We played them home and away within a 3 week timeframe and lost both games by 2 points. After the Purdue loss, Coach Kruger told us to go home a couple days for the holidays, and when we returned we would get into better shape and do some things differently.

CHAPMAN: That sounds like lots of running to me.

DOBBINS: Well, the first thing about Kruger and even Coach Snyder today is that times and dates are very important to the structure and team discipline. We all got back except a couple of guys from St. Louis — I won't name names but they know who they are — didn't get back into town on time and were 20 minutes late to film session. They finally come rolling in, and Coach didn't say a word to them or to us about it. It was two practices each day, and we were completely changing our identity as a team. Very competitive practices and conditioning sessions. It was dead of winter. We were running on the track inside Ahearn. We had finished the second practice that day and they were great practices. We all thought Coach was going to let this tardy thing blow over.

CHAPMAN: And he didn't?

DOBBINS: Then right as he dismissed us Coach says, "Oh by the way, be at the rec fields by Edwards Hall at 6 a.m. tomorrow. Coaches will be there in the morning, and dress warm. So we ran laps at the rec fields each morning that break before our two practices. The interesting thing was that Coach's spin was that it was an opportunity to get better. Don't look at it as punishment. What other team in the country was doing anything like this.

CHAPMAN: That was such a fun Big 8 season, especially beating OU in Manhattan.

DOBBINS: When we beat OU, we knew we were getting better and never looked back. OU was averaging 110 pts/game and we won 69-62, We knew if we could control tempo against OU that we were on the right track. We broke KU's 55 game home winning streak. Won at OSU against a talented team. We lost a close game to KU at home and then beat them handily in KC at the Big 8 tournament. Missouri was good with Chievous, ISU had Jeff Grayer. I believe 5 of the first 16 NBA picks that year were from the Big 8. Manning, Richmond, Grayer, Grant, Chievous. We definitely felt confident heading into the NCAA Tournament. We knew the Big 8 was the best league in America. It certainly played out that way.

CHAPMAN: Let's talk about the tournament and KU:

DOBBINS: We beat LaSalle and DePaul to get to the Sweet 16. We then faced a rematch with Purdue. They had dominated the Big Ten and were the region's No. 1 seed. It was a dog fight start to finish. It was a grueling game. Kansas was hitting their stride and Coach Brown had them playing well. Danny Manning took that team on his back. He was an amazing player and a heck of a nice guy. They beat us to go to the Final Four. It was, and still is, heartbreaking. We truly believed we were going to win it all. It is a survive and advance tournament with so many twists. The truth of the matter in that game is we ran out of gas. I don't want that to come across the wrong way as though I'm taking something away from Kansas. Milt Newton made everything difficult on Mitch that day and particularly in the second half Mitch wore down. Wish we had another day between the Purdue and KU games. Maybe the outcome would have been different, maybe not. People forget we led at the half in that game. Afterward, we knew it would be OU-KU in the final. KU got better every game in the tournament. They deserved to win the national championship.

CHAPMAN: So tell me about the locker room in Pontiac, Michigan after that loss.

DOBBINS: After the loss, when you are on a team like that, playing at a high level, performing well, you never think it will end. You cannot think that way. That day Mitch was defended so well by Newton. We had just beat the Big 10 champs and No. 1 seed.

We knew we could beat KU again. We never even considered losing. Don't get me wrong, we knew KU was capable of beating us because they had. We just didn't think about that outcome. When it happens and the run ends, the stark reality of never getting to play together again really hits you. It was really really really tough and the tears were flowing. It really is hard to relive those moments even today. That's not something you forget, ever.

CHAPMAN: And looking back now, was Kruger as good as he seemed? And you were the unsung hero, the 6th man. What is that like?

DOBBINS: The thing that was genius about Coach Kruger was he identified our individual strengths and allowed us to play to those strengths. He had the vision to see how each player could benefit the team. That was so important. I played a lot of minutes. I wasn't asked to score 10-15 a game. I was a role player and I earned that spot because I didn't make a lot of mistakes. He could trust me to be prepared mentally and be in the right place at the right time and my grit brought something to the team. You know in 3 years I could count the profane words he used on one hand.. You just didn't ever want to break his trust. We all respected him so much. If he said go run through that wall, we would all look at Steve first and then go run through the wall.

CHAPMAN: I heard Bill Self talking recently about how KU walks into any gym thinking they can win. How important is that kind of confidence?

DOBBINS: Coach Self is right, confidence on the road is key. We looked forward to playing on the road. We loved Ahearn, but playing on the road was fun. We didn't care where we played, we knew we were going to be a tough out and we loved to take on the home team.

CHAPMAN: Speaking of not so great games in Norman.

Dobbins: We lost in Norman 112-95. Mitch had 45 and we still got killed. It was so crazy, the officials couldn't call all the fouls. We got mugged! Funny thing though, Stacy

King told me this story later, but there was a young OU player that looked at the schedule the next year and said, "Well, K-State graduated a bunch of guys and that should be an easy one." Stacy said, 'Buddy, K-State is not easy, they are tough as nails and that is a huge mistake, all they do is win.'" That meant a lot to hear.

CHAPMAN: And how about that game you were down 9 with 1:30 to go:

DOBBINS: That was '86-87 and It was senior night in Norman. The crowd was intense. Oklahoma players were already celebrating on the sidelines. Talking on the court about where the parties were after the game ... no kidding. One of the most memorable games. We somehow cut it to 1 with 10 seconds left and have the ball. Charlie inbounds to me, me to Steve, Steve to Mitch who hits the winning shot at the buzzer. Then, flying over the rail out of the crowd and to our bench is a K-State fan, it was our good Salina friend Cary Renfro. He flew over the bench and onto the floor and was hugging us all. It was something else.

CHAPMAN: What was Billy Tubbs like after that one?

DOBBINS: I was walking off the court with Steve and Coach Tubbs walks right to Henson and grabbed his jersey and said this: "You know what I like about you? You're an ornery little shit just like me." Hahaha, No joke, it really happened.

CHAPMAN: I used to actually have a No. 41 jersey, and claim to be the president of the No. 41 fan club. How did you pick that number?

DOBBINS: The truth is I can't even remember how I ended up No. 41, but your story about the jersey is better, you should tell that.

CHAPMAN: Luckily for us both, this story is about you. Who was the toughest person you played against?

DOBBINS: Toughest for me to defend were Jeff Grayer and Derek Chievous, but the best defender was Mookie Blaylock. He had the quickest hands, never got tired. Goodness did he have serious stamina. His hands were so fast you literally could not see him plucking the ball loose from you.

CHAPMAN: Let's shift gears to today. Since Jacob Pullen was here, there has been a lot of comparison to Steve Henson. You played with Steve and saw almost every Pullen game live, how would you compare the two? Who is the best point guard to play at K-State?

DOBBINS: Well, they have very different styles. Steve had grit, was stone hard determined with an incredible will to win and an unmatched work ethic. I will say though, those intangibles somewhat overshadowed what an incredible athlete Steve was. This is a 6 foot guy that is a 7-foot-high jumper, a Big 8 caliber decathlete in his spare time. He played nearly every eligible minute for K-State. We were not an up tempo team, which meant he had to successfully bring the ball down the court against some amazing pressure, set up our half-court offense, etc. Mookie Blaylock in particular. He could score, hand out assists, and then first back on defense. He was a hardnosed defender and never rested. He went nearly 40 minutes intensely on both ends of the floor every single game for 4 years. When I think of Steve he was a guy you could always count on. Tremendous competitor and teammate and still a valuable friend to this day. Plus he was my roomie.

Jacob Pullen was just a fierce competitor, who was a pure shooter and a clever, crafty player. He had so much confidence and could make uncanny plays. His statistics are fantastic, it shows how great he was, but Jacob Pullen, like Steve, was a winner I am biased to pick my friend Steve, but they certainly are at the top in K-State history at their position and regardless of position. Give me Jacob Pullen or Steve Henson. You can't go wrong,

CHAPMAN: So where is Mark Dobbins now?

DOBBINS: After retiring from Cereal Foods, my only job since college working for Fred Merrill, I am enjoying more time with my wife Amy (Morrison) of 27 years, my sons, Connor, 25, and Graham, 22, and the rest of my family. Traveling more. Connor and Graham are both recent KSU grads.

I follow KSU basketball. I think we have some fine players and coaches and I think this year's team will exceed expectations.

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