

CATCHING UP

**Former Wildcat guard
Chris Griffin reflects on
basketball during the
Asbury-era**

- Jeff Chapman sports@themercury.com - Jun 21, 2022



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Former Kansas State point guard Chris Griffin rises above two Baylor defenders during a game from 1999. Griffin led K-State in both minutes played and total assists during the 1998-99 season. Griffin now lives in San Diego and works for an insurance firm.

- Courtesy of K-State Athletics



Chris Griffin played point guard for K-State during the middle end of the Tom Asbury seven-year era, specifically 1996-1999. There were more flashy players on the squad with names you may recall easier: Tony Kitt, Ayome “Paco” May, Manny Dies and Shawn Rhodes to name a few. But during that time, Chris was the steady leader and role player who actually led the team in minutes played and in total assists during the 1998-99 season.

My then wife and I hosted Chris for dinner a few times while he was at K-State along with his roommate, Paco. Due to work travel, I have been fortunate to keep in touch with him over the years, and I’ve met with him a few times in San Diego.

With K-State men’s basketball in the middle of a transition period, I spoke with Chris about his time in Manhattan. This conversation is a collection of several visits over the years either in person or by phone.

During my last San Diego visit, Chris picked me up in his car and on the radio was an 80’s song by Bad Company...

CHAPMAN: Good tunes.

GRIFFIN: Yea, I flipped stations over for you from the hip-hop channel. Know your audience! (We laughed out loud.)

CHAPMAN: Chris, how does a Mississippi kid end up in California and then on the roster at Kansas State?

GRIFFIN: Jeff, as many families have interesting makeups, my nephew, whom I am close with, is actually older than me, and so in high school when my sister moved to Sacramento, I moved in with them and during that time, we went to several team basketball camps, including at Pepperdine University. My sister was already living in Sacramento. She came to visit Mississippi and asked if I could visit her in California. She allowed me to do so the following summer and the opportunity to participate in

basketball camps around the city, including at Jesuit High School, the school I would later attend. I enjoyed it so much that I begged both my mom and my sister if I could live with her in Sacramento. After working my charm, they allowed me after my freshman year of high school.

CHAPMAN: Ah, this is where you met (former Wildcat men's basketball coach) Tom Asbury?

GRIFFIN: Yes, I met Tom and David Campbell there at his camp and elsewhere, I met (current Houston coach) Kelvin Sampson who later coached at Washington State. Sampson and Asbury had no connection other than me. I went to play at WSU with my backcourt mate from high school, Isaac Fontiane.

CHAPMAN: I forgot you went to WSU to play. At that time, those were two up and coming coaches.

GRIFFIN: Yes I played there my freshman year for Kevin Eastman, and then of course, Coach Sampson went to OU the season before. So I took a transfer year off in Manhattan, deciding to follow Coach Asbury this time instead.

CHAPMAN: Let's talk about your days at Jesuit High School. You were California state champion runner-ups in 1993 and 1994 and you were nationally ranked as high as No. 4. Everyone on your team went to play D1.

GRIFFIN: Ben Ammerman played at Loyola Marymount, Isaac Fontaine (played) four years at Washington State. I followed him there. Gio Carmazzi, who went the football route and played for Hofstra and the San Francisco 49ers (he was drafted ahead of Tom Brady, but got injured) and the Canadian Football League, and Josh King went to Rhode Island. We were pretty stacked.

CHAPMAN: Chris, you were ranked the No. 6 point guard in the country and you played against some amazing competition. You must have been recruited hard.

GRIFFIN: It was the best time in my life, as far as basketball goes. I made friends and competed with the best in the country in summer camps and tournaments all over California and even in Las Vegas. We all played ball all the time. Some people I played against and beat or lost to in close games included Jerod Haase, Jacque Vaughn, Miles Simmons, Bobby Hurley, Jason Kidd and many more. I even played against Marcus McCullough, who played at K-State. It was then I was recruited by Jason Rabedeaux and Kelvin Sampson to go to Washington State. They beat out Tom Asbury, at least initially.

CHAPMAN: That transfer year between WSU and KSU then made you an elder on the team. Was it good or bad sitting out?

GRIFFIN: While I always wanted to be out on the court competing, that year gave me time to get comfortable with Asbury's system, but in open gym I got to play with Ty Davis, George Hill, Mark Young and others in what seemed like a very talented nucleus of players being assembled.

CHAPMAN: We will get back to that ... So that's a drastic change in scenery, what was your first reaction to Manhattan, Kansas?

GRIFFIN: I really like college towns, small college towns like in Pullman, Washington or Manhattan. Where the university is the center of activity, the lure for people to go there and the small-town atmosphere is really nice. People were nice, and I felt very welcome and part of the local family immediately.

CHAPMAN: You say you don't watch the Wildcats too closely or see all the games on tv, but when I ask you about them, you always seem to know a lot more than the average fan.

GRIFFIN: I don't follow them too closely, but I do keep in touch with some of my old teammates in a text group message, so it's inevitable to know some things.

CHAPMAN: Who, may I ask, is in your text group?

GRIFFIN: (Aaron Swartzenbender), Shawn Rhodes, Jay Heidrick, Josh Reid, Dave Ries, Ty Simms, Paco, and some others on social media.

CHAPMAN: The KU game in Manhattan was televised. K-State scored 50 and led by 16 at half and lost by 3. Your thoughts?

GRIFFIN: I didn't watch it, I saw the scores, but I do have an opinion about playing against KU... (EXPLETIVES DELETED)

CHAPMAN: Haha.

GRIFFIN: Probably shouldn't print that, Chappie.

CHAPMAN: No worries, we have skilled editors. Let's get back to that previous topic, KU basketball. What's it like, the rivalry, playing against a blue-blood team that has had a long streak against your team?

GRIFFIN: Adding to my previous frustrations and hopefully deleted comment, (he says with a smile) Allen (Fieldhouse) is a bit of hallowed ground. There is a bit of "ahh" as you enter, but it's over in a second because all you want to do is compete, and win and beat them.

CHAPMAN: How would you describe an Asbury game plan?

GRIFFIN: Coach had some success with his system at Pepperdine, and it sometimes worked for us at K-State, but we always played the exact same game every single time. So we were easy to scout. We had good enough teams to beat KU, there were close games, and I would argue we were the better team personnel-wise my senior year, but as I said, we were too predictable.

CHAPMAN: I recall the 1999 game in Lawrence when it seemed like Manny Dies and Shawn Rhodes were really dominating the inside, and the Cats were on their way to a win but fell short.

GRIFFIN: Yes, We were better, but we struggled to consistently play together as a team. We were great on defense but never could make the easy bucket. We were just way too mechanical, and our offense wasn't designed to create any surprises.

CHAPMAN: You had the players, the small-town atmosphere, the once-successful coach, but you seemed to be more of a role player than a stats guy. Did that bother you?

GRIFFIN: Nothing against Coach, but our style of play just wasn't my style, and it lacked the intensity I had been used to up until then. Coach had a plan, we stuck to the plan, and the plan left us short.

CHAPMAN: The whole team wore "JH" on their jerseys your senior year, honoring Jack Hartman. Did you get to interact with him prior to his passing, or anyone else from Wildcat history?

GRIFFIN: I did. Coach Hartman came to some practices. He was, at that point, a nice older gentleman, but he would light up when telling basketball stories. I also got to meet Rolando Blackman, who was back finishing his degree, and I had some fun conversations with Coach Tex Winter, the triangle offense guy.

CHAPMAN: What about your thoughts on other coaches at K-State since, including Bruce Weber?

GRIFFIN: I liked the intensity that Frank Martin and Bob Huggins brought to K-State. I think that brought more out of players than the Weber staff was getting.

CHAPMAN: Lots of changes have happened at K-State basketball since our previous conversation. Bruce Weber resigned, Jerome Tang and several assistants hired, and all but 1-2 scholarship players stayed vs getting into the transfer portal. Thoughts?

GRIFFIN: I really like the hire. I don't know him personally, but I like his recruiting over the years at Baylor. Also, he seems to be a teacher and a motivator which I think all good coaches are. For the scholarship players, I believe it to be a great opportunity for Tang to immediately put his stamp on the program by getting his own players. Granted he's behind the proverbial 8-ball due to timing, but I like to see things as an opportunity.

CHAPMAN: What's it like to play for a team when the coach is getting a lot of negative press?

GRIFFIN: Honestly, we had a pretty good year my senior year, and I was just concentrating on winning. We didn't have social media or pay much attention to outside information back then. We were #1 in the nation in team defense and had a 20 win season, we just didn't score enough points when we needed them.

CHAPMAN: Do you follow K-State regularly?

GRIFFIN: Like I said, I am a fan, I check the scores, watch bits and pieces on TV and we chat about them in my text group, but I am not scheduling my life around the Cats.

CHAPMAN: Chris, not to dig up the elephant in the room again, but KU just won the NCAA national championship and at the same time have an open NCAA investigation and FBI inquiry. Thoughts?

GRIFFIN: I have always looked at the NCAA as the biggest hypocrites. They are a corporation and they are in the business of exploiting kids and making money. I ask you, what kind of message does it send when you're under investigation and still get rewarded? The other universities in the scandal at least tried to reprimand their coaches with firings, and even then, that's light punishment.

CHAPMAN: I don't expect you to tell any dirty dark secrets, but did you and the teammates have any crazy stories?

GRIFFIN: We were in Padre at Spring Break, several team members, and I can't recall, nor will I tell you how we got into the predicament, but at one point one night, big seven-foot Joe Leonard was needing assistance getting home and into bed. Let's just say he was tired and went to sleep early, (Chris smiles at me with a clever expression) but it took all of us to carry him. This was no easy task... and then up a flight of stairs. Nobody could get hold of him or hold him up any longer. So we grabbed him by the feet as he lay on the ground and we pulled him up the stairs, as his head bounced up each step. That had to hurt, but we had no choice. We laugh about it now... Well everyone except Joe.

CHAPMAN: What's Chris Griffin's future?

GRIFFIN: Good question. I am working on it, Chappie, adding to my client base, networking and trying to grow slowly but surely. I work for a good insurance company and I like it because it's a service people need, so helping people out is an enjoyable thing. I am also licensed in Kansas. You know, in case anyone needs my services.

CHAPMAN: Finally and most importantly: You have the same name as a character on Family Guy. Does that surface often?

GRIFFIN: (Chuckles for a while) As a matter of fact, it does come up, and it's always funny. My friends send me occasional jokes or clips from the show. Most of that humor we can't mention here, but it has been a good source of laughs over the years.

CHAPMAN: Thanks, Chris, for your unfiltered comments and thoughts about your time at K-State and your insights about today.

https://themercury.com/k_state_sports/former-wildcat-guard-chris-griffin-reflects-on-basketball-during-the-asbury-era/article_f025931b-9a59-5d54-bf87-d285060e35b7.html