

Wes Washpun follows in dad's footsteps

Written by Jim Ecker

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A talented point guard named Washpun decided to leave home and play college basketball in another part of the country, believing it was the right thing to do.

That was 30 years ago. His name was Troy Washpun, and he left home in Alton, Ill., and embarked on a college basketball career at the University of Wyoming.

Like father, like son.

Wes Washpun, Troy's son, made a similar decision last weekend when he elected to play for the Tennessee Volunteers instead of accepting an offer from Fran McCaffery and the nearby Iowa Hawkeyes.

It worked out well for Troy Washpun, who enjoyed a solid career at Wyoming, and he and his wife, Angie, encouraged their son to weigh all the options and make his own decision.

"We both told him, it's your choice, your decision, whether you go to Iowa, whether you go to Tennessee, both of them are in great conferences," Troy Washpun said Wednesday after Wes signed his letter-of-intent at Cedar Rapids Washington High School.

Troy Washpun knows what it's like to be 18 years old and on the verge of a new adventure, far from home.

"My concept was to kind of grow up and become a young man, so I wanted to go as far away from home as I could," he said. "And one of the reasons why was because I wouldn't have to worry about coming home on the weekends and getting home. I was far enough away in

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Wyoming, I couldn't get home. It was too far away."

Wes appreciated the support he received from both parents. He knew his father had walked the walk 30 years ago.

"He just pretty much told me that I had to do what was best for me," Wes said. "Not to go by what anybody thinks, but do the decision for me. Not for Josh (Oglesby), not for the fans, just for me. And that's what I think I did."

Washpun and Oglesby are friends and teammates. Oglesby, who signed with Iowa in the fall, tried to steer Washpun to the Hawkeyes, but did it gently.

Wes Washpun would not have gotten the chance to play Division I college basketball if he hadn't gotten his grades in order this year. Troy Washpun credits his wife for playing a major role.

"She's the enforcer," he said. "We just stayed on Wes. We knew Wes could do the work. He just developed bad habits early. He finally figured it out and turned it around.

"He finally listened, and it clicked. He's a good kid and it's not that he couldn't do the work, he just got distracted early. And he's matured a little bit, so he's doing a great job. We're proud of him."

Troy Washpun played a significant role in his son's development as a basketball player, giving him advice and lessons.

"He taught me more the mentality than actual skills," Wes said. "He worked with me on ballhandling and shooting and stuff, but also my mentality of never backing down and always playing my hardest and putting everything out there every game. Every game. Just toughness, is what he taught me, most of all."

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It took Wes a long time to beat his father in a one-on-one game of basketball. Father and son are a little fuzzy on the exact date, but it certainly didn't happen until high school.

"I'd say about a year or two ago," Troy Washpun offered. "Once he got a little bigger and started getting a little faster and a little stronger. I'd be standing down there, trying to guard him, and then he'd be around me.

"I'd give him a hard foul, the little tricks of the trade," he said, laughing. "But he got too fast for me."

They had good battles.

"He still can go, a little bit," Wes said, smiling. "Not as much anymore, but yeah, he could go."

Some of their battles got rough, as Troy Washpun tried to teach his son important lessons.

"Yeah, I've had numerous busted lips and bruised hips and all that good stuff, from him not being able to move as quick as he used to, so he'd just kind of try to foul me as hard as he could," Wes said.

"He still tries. It's just his reactions are late now," Wes said, smiling. "I'm by before he can throw up the elbow."

Washpun's parents sat on either side of him Wednesday morning at Washington as he signed with Tennessee.

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"I think it's a huge accomplishment," Troy Washpun said. "I'm really happy for him. He put a lot of hard work into the whole process and it's finally paying off, it's paying dividends. I'm just excited as a parent.

"It's going to be an exciting time for him down there in Tennessee. It's going to be a big challenge, but I'm sure he's up for the task.

"You stay the course, you do the right things and do the classwork, do your teamwork, everything will come together," Troy Washpun said. "And sure enough it did for him. Sky's the limit for him. I think his best basketball is ahead of him."

A few months from now, Wes Washpun will be playing in the Southeastern Conference on national TV against Kentucky, Florida and other national powers. Troy Washpun has talked to his son about that.

"You put yourself in a position now where you're on the big stage," Troy Washpun remarked. "Now it gets tougher, because everybody you're going to be competing against is going to be just like you, if not better. So now it's up to you, how much hard work and determination that you put into it, being successful at the next level.

"I think he will be tremendously successful at the next level because he has that drive and determination."