

Grant Gibbs loving life at Creighton

Written by Jim Ecker

Sunday, 08 January 2012 23:33 - Last Updated Sunday, 08 January 2012 23:43

Grant Gibbs has found basketball nirvana at Creighton University, but it took a few trials and tribulations.

He's had shoulder surgery for a torn labrum, two knee procedures to relieve a serious case of tendinitis and transferred from Gonzaga to Creighton after two years.

Now the Linn-Mar High School graduate is playing a major role for the 24th-ranked team in the country and loving every minute of it.

Creighton is 13-2 overall and tied for first place in the Missouri Valley Conference. Doug McDermott gets most of the headlines, but Gibbs has started all 15 games and has helped the Bluejays with his versatility and leadership.

He's nearly reached a composite triple-double with 12 points, 12 assists and 9 rebounds in different outings and was named a captain before he'd played his first game. Everybody at Creighton is thrilled with the season so far, but perhaps nobody more than Gibbs.

"Absolutely," he said. "Obviously we've gotten off to a really good start, but in the greater picture I'm happy to be playing again. Number one, being healthy and being on the floor, it's meant a lot just to be back out there and playing an influential role on a team."

Gibbs, 22, helped Linn-Mar win the Class 4A state title as a junior in 2007 and left a year later for Gonzaga with high hopes, joining one of the top mid-major programs in the country. He hurt his shoulder and was redshirted as a true freshman during the 2008-09 campaign, then averaged 2.2 points as a reserve in 2009-10.

Unhappy and far from home in Spokane, Wash., he decided to transfer and wanted to play for a good program in the midwest. Creighton was a logical choice, because Creighton Coach Greg McDermott had tried to sign him and bring him to Iowa State when he was coaching there.

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Gibbs had narrowed his choices to Gonzaga and Iowa State before heading to the west coast after high school. McDermott didn't get Gibbs the first time, but he got him on the rebound.

"I couldn't have been more excited, obviously, when I heard he was looking to leave Gonzaga," McDermott said. "I've always thought very highly of Grant.

"You don't want a player to have to go through a situation where he feels he has to transfer, but when he reached out to us and thought he might have an interest, we were obviously very excited. I think it really expedited the process of us getting this program back where it needs to be."

Gibbs remembers making a phone call to McDermott about four years ago, thanking him for his interest at Iowa State but saying he was going to Gonzaga.

"I think all recruits remember those phone calls. And I remember that one," he said. "I think he was out with Doug raking the leaves or something like that.

"Like I said, a tough phone call, especially since he had recruited me for so long. But ironically enough, he said if things don't work out for whatever reason, I'm hoping I'll be one of the first phone calls. And sure enough, that's how it worked out."

Gibbs, a 6-foot-4 junior, is averaging 7.5 points, 6.1 assists and 4.7 rebounds for Creighton. McDermott calls him a "point forward," somebody with point-guard skills who is actually playing a wing position for the Bluejays.

Gibbs tries to help any way he can.

"It's rebounds, steals, taking charges ... trying to do the little things," he said. "It's the role I've

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taken on with this team and one I'm very comfortable with."

Doug McDermott, the coach's son, is the star of the team and a budding All-American. He poured in 44 points Saturday in a 92-83 victory over Bradley and is averaging 25.2 points and 8.3 rebounds while shooting 63.2 percent from the floor, 58.2 percent on 3-pointers and 86.3 percent at the foul line.

"Man, he's incredible," Gibbs said. "I feel like every time I've seen him play, he gets better day-in and day-out. He's so talented offensively and he has such a terrific feel for the game, especially around the basket.

"He's the easiest guy to play with. I just throw him the ball and he scores it. It's that easy. I just have to look for him. He makes my job really easy. He's easily the best player I've ever played with."

Gibbs has collected 91 assists in 15 games and committed only 35 turnovers, an assist-to-turnover ratio of 2.6 to 1 that's helped fuel the Bluejays.

He had 10 assists, nine points and seven rebounds against Tulsa, was named the Missouri Valley Conference Newcomer of the Week in late December and became the first Bluejay with double-digit assists in consecutive games since 1990.

"I don't think I'm surprised, because I had an opportunity to watch Grant a lot in high school," Greg McDermott said, "and I was always impressed with his feel for the game and his ability to have success by sharing the basketball. His numbers really speak for themselves.

"We were very active in our recruitment of Grant when I was at Iowa State. He's not the same player he was in high school because of some of the injuries he's had, and that's what really led to moving him more to the wing and off the point-guard position.

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"Essentially you have a player that thinks like a point guard and plays like a point guard that's kind of playing a point-forward for you now," McDermott said. "The ball goes through his hands a lot in our offense and he makes great decisions with it."

Gibbs joined Creighton last season for the 2010-11 campaign, but had to redshirt due to NCAA transfer rules. Even though he wasn't playing in games, he made a significant contribution to the program in other key areas. That led to him becoming a captain this season before he'd appeared in a single contest.

"It's the first time in my coaching career where we've had a newcomer to the program be voted a captain," McDermott said. "That's really unheard of, for someone who's never worn a Creighton uniform to be voted captain before he even puts that uniform on."

"Aside from what he's done on the floor, his impact off the floor has been really important for our team. Without question he's got control of our locker room. He's the voice of this team when they're with each other."

Gibbs enjoys playing a leadership role on his new club and sensed the Bluejays needed someone to do the job.

"It's always been my personality, I've always kind of been in that role," he said. "Coach talked to me a lot about that, I needed to be that guy."

Gibbs tore his labrum right before his freshman season was set to begin at Gonzaga in 2008-09. He thinks he probably would have been redshirted anyway, but that clinched the deal. His arm was in a sling for four months.

"It was very difficult. I'd never really had to sit out an extended period of time up until the shoulder surgery," he said. "Being a freshman and far away from home, that was very difficult."

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He averaged 9.3 minutes per game as a redshirt freshman at Gonzaga in 2009-10, but had problems with his left knee and couldn't play the way he wanted. "I was in a rough spot, that's for sure," he said.

He's had two procedures to alleviate the tendinitis in his knee, one an experimental injection and the other a surgical procedure. "They dug around and took some stuff out," he said. "I'm not 100 percent sure what they did.

"They're a lot better now, but they've bugged me the last couple of years," he said. "I don't move quite as well as I used to and it's a lot harder for me to handle the everyday duties of bringing the ball up against pressure."

It's also harder to consistently play defense against the other team's point guard, which led to McDermott making him a "point forward" for the Bluejays.

"I don't think I've played my best ball yet this year, but I'm consumed with how we're doing as a team and winning games," he said. "I'm very, very happy to be back on the court and playing a role on a good team."

He's also happy to be back in the midwest and had a chance to spend a few days at home during the Christmas break two weeks ago before heading back to Omaha for a game. He enjoys being closer to home, giving family and friends a chance to see him play.

"It means a lot," he said.

Gibbs enjoys his new home at Creighton, but also has fond memories of his old home at Linn-Mar. He's a prominent member of the Linn-Mar alumni club that's helped the Lions win three state titles in eight years. Coach Chris Robertson and the Lions cut down the nets again last March in Des Moines.

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"We're always checking in on the young guys, seeing how they're doing, checking on scores, in contact with Coach Robertson," he said. "I'm extremely proud."

Creighton hosts Northern Iowa Tuesday night at the CenturyLink Center, where the Bluejays have drawn crowds of 17,676 and 17,665 this season.

"It's an incredible atmosphere," Gibbs said. "The people in Omaha are absolutely crazy about Creighton basketball. It's such a privilege to play in front of such a loyal fan base."