

Benson breaks through his flaws

The redshirt sophomore has stepped up his game and finds success

By JOE GUZMAN
Senior Reporter

Exactly one year after being benched for the Summit League Championship Tournament, redshirt sophomore Keith Benson's emotional and physical growth has placed him among the best big-men in the league.

"It bothered me a lot," he said about being benched. "It was hard not playing [consistently] the whole year, and then not getting to play in those last two games."

Benson said that he wasn't exactly sure what the cause was for his benching, but used it as motivation to attack off-season workouts with purpose through a more committed work ethic.

Through his efforts, he came into the season prepared to prove himself as a legitimate force in college basketball. Now, as OU heads into the Summit League Championship Tournament as the No. 3 seed, Benson seeks redemption.

Nowhere to go but up

Last season came to a disappointing end for Benson and the Grizzlies after losing in the second round of the Summit League Tournament. Benson watched from the bench as OU lost 80-65 to IUPUI. After the game, head coach Greg Kampe said the reason behind benching Benson was that his defense was simply not good enough.

"You win a championship with defense. He's a freshman and a very good player, but we came here to win and I don't think the way he defends was good enough for us to win," Kampe said.

As the season winded down, Kampe made the decision to sit him, even though he was one block away from setting the single season school record. He wanted to send a message to Benson; and today he feels that it was the best thing he could have done for him.

"I didn't like how he went about his business," he said. "I didn't like how he was defending. So what I wanted to find out was if he would choose to say 'screw Kampe' or say 'why is he doing this and what do I have to do so this never happens again.' He chose the right way."

Benson got the message, hungry to prove that he had what it took to be a starter; he worked out to get bigger, stronger and improve his endurance. He and teammate Will Hudson joined each other for workouts at the hill behind the O'Rena.

"Running up and down the hill with weights, it helps you get mentally tough,"



BOB KNOSKA/The Oakland Post

In only his second year playing for OU, Keith Benson has set the OU career record for blocks.

Benson said. "If you can push yourself to do that, you can push yourself on the court."

At 6-foot-9, sophomore forward Hudson teams up with Benson to form OU's own version of the twin towers. Hudson saw that being benched for the end of last season bothered him, but thinks that Kampe was simply using it to set an example, to let him know that he has to be better defensively.

"Even though [Benson] didn't like it, I think it has helped him out," Hudson said. "He's a great defender now, and not only that, he's also scoring, which is forcing teams to double him [and] opens me up to score."

The work he put in this summer shows in his production on the court. He went from playing around 15 minutes a game last year, to playing 20 early this year, to 25-30 towards the end. With more playing time and confidence as a consistent starter, Benson's stats have improved.

Benson's points per game and rebounding have jumped from 5.2 ppg and 3.5 rpg last season to 14.4 ppg and 7.4 rpg this season, not to mention finishing this year with 75 blocked shots (2.4 per game).

As Benson's play gradually became more consistent, Benson began earning the trust of his coach and his teammates.

"Trusting him is a function of his play, and his growth and his maturity," Kampe said. "What he does in a game not only makes me trust him, but the players trust him. They know they can throw it to him and he's going to score; they know he's turning into a viable option for us."

Taking a chance

In 2005, Benson averaged 6.9 points and 4.5 rebounds as a senior, starting for Birmingham Detroit Country Day High School.

According to Kampe, Benson's role

with the team caused him to be overlooked by recruiters.

"He was a starter, but he wasn't a guy that got the ball, he didn't score a lot of points," Kampe said. He also said that Benson had grown a lot and didn't build enough muscle on his growing frame.

Yet, what most attracted Kampe to Benson was his athleticism and length, which was a combination that OU's roster lacked. Kampe admits that he didn't see the potential initially, so they red-shirted him, allowing him time to ease into college game.

"We hoped there was potential there, so we took a chance," Kampe said. "But, he could have gone to a Division II school where it would have been safer for him, so we both took a chance on each other, and it has paid off for both of us."

Benson said that the toughest part of transitioning from high school to college was the strength factor and adjusting to the next level.

"Everybody is the best player from where they came from, so I just had to step my game up," he said.

The pay-off was on display when he followed his performance against Centenary. Benson scored 23 points and nine rebounds in 36 minutes of play as OU beat IPFW, 83-72. With his six blocks, he tied the school record with 101 blocks for a career, in just his sophomore year.

After the game, he was asked about the team's chances for the tournament.

In a quiet and simple tone, he stated that he felt that OU should run through the Summit League tournament, and even get a couple games in the NCAA tournament. A statement that sparked his coach to respond, "We should?"

Such bold words were unexpected coming from Benson. Kampe was impressed that he even spoke, let alone declare such expectations so matter-of-factly.

"He doesn't talk much, so this is good, I get to hear him talk," Kampe said with a hint of sarcasm.

Finding a voice

Benson's reserved demeanor offers little insight into his personality, but symbolizes the humbling start to his career. During games, the most emotion you may see out of him is a clap of the hands out of frustration, or a high five to a teammate. Benson simply doesn't wear his emotions on his sleeve.

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A decade of champions

On Feb. 21, the Oakland University men's and women's swimming and diving teams both won the Summit League Championships for the 10th straight year. The men compiled 1,077 points and the women earned 1,011 points. The men's 526 point margin of victory and the women's 412 were the largest in OU Div. I history. Freshman Anders Jensen won swimmer of the year for the men while senior Sophia Gustafsson won swimmer of the year for the women and Alyssa Vela took newcomer of the year. Head coach Pete Hovland won men's coach of the year.



Photos by BOB KNOSKA/The Oakland Post

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"That was one of the problems I had with him last year," Kampe said. "We have to communicate on the court, so he had to learn, if you don't communicate, you're not going to play."

Benson admits that early in his career he found it difficult when Kampe yelled, which he admits caused some of his problems.

"I used to get yelled at a lot and I would think about every mistake I'd make, and would just compound the mistakes," he said. "Coach still yells, but now I take the positive feedback out of what he is saying, and just relax and continue to play."

Hudson agrees that one of the biggest differences with Benson's play this year has been how he allows the game to come to him.

"I don't think he's even thinking

anymore," Hudson said. "It's so tough to play college basketball with all the off-the-court stuff, then on the court it's such a quick pace, and he's just out there playing and having fun."

Benson knows that people can confuse his lack of emotion on the court as a lack of a desire to win, but he said that the game isn't complete unless he wins. He said that when he struggles, he focuses on the defensive side of the ball to rally the team — the same part of his game that got him benched just one year ago.

"I try to give us an energy boost on defense by blocking shots, and that can feed the fast break," he said.

But Kampe still would like to see Benson be more vocal, because he simply doesn't believe that you can lead by example in the game of basketball.

"I'm not a big lead-by-example guy," Kampe said. "Communication is a very important part of life. But he got over it because he really wants to play, and he wants to be good and because of that, he is, and he's blossoming into something special."



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