

WALK-ON WALKS TALL

By Ashley Zeldin Daily Trojan

March 22, 2007

Los Angeles, CA (CSTV U-WIRE) -- He's the perfect walk-on. At least that's what USC men's basketball coach Tim Floyd thinks.

"I hate to use that term, because I don't refer to him as a walk-on - I consider him a scholarship guy," Floyd said. "We ask him to do everything everybody else does. I've got all the confidence in him as a player - he just hasn't had much of an opportunity. Had we been able to give him a bunch of minutes early in the year, we'd be reliant on him right now for some minutes during games."

He's Ryan Wetherell, the 5-foot-10 Canadian half-Filipino walk-on. His name is Wetherell, but it might as well be "weather all" - he's been through it all, and he's weathered it well.

There's the issue, however, regarding his height.

"It's probably holding me back," Wetherell said. "I'd love to have the height, but you have to go with what you got."

Floyd, however, doesn't even see his height being a factor.

"He hasn't had much of an opportunity, but that hasn't had to do with his height, just experience and who's been in front of him," Floyd said. "He's got an All-Pac-10 player in front of him in Gabe Pruitt - he'll be gone a year from now - then he's got Daniel Hackett, but Daniel can play the one or the two, and I can envision a

scenario when he's getting some quality minutes for us at some point in the future."

Then there's the fight.

On July 5, 2006, just weeks before starting his freshman year at USC, Wetherell was at a party with his older brother Jason when five men started jawing at Jason.

"They thought he was acting cocky, and a little conflict turned into a big thing and they just started attacking, so I jumped in," Wetherell said. "I was doing pretty good in the beginning, but it's hard to fight off five guys."

Wetherell sustained a split upper lip that required surgery and bruised ribs. He also had a shoe imprint on his face.

He couldn't play basketball for two weeks while recovering from surgery, but joined his Amateur Athletic Union team in Las Vegas and started classes as scheduled on Aug. 21.

Wetherell might have been a natural athlete, but in order to be a student-athlete, he had to work on being a student.

"He knew he needed good marks to get into a good university," said Rollie Petrowitsch, who coached Wetherell for two years at Sir Winston Churchill, a high school in Calgary, Canada. "School starts at 9, but every class period has a tutorial a half-hour before school, and he never missed one tutorial in classes he needed to do well in."

Wetherell had an 80 percent average going into the Alberta diploma exam, worth half of his grade, and came out with an 85.

Transition to USC

Adjusting to life at USC wasn't easy.

"Sometimes I got depressed," Wetherell said. "In the beginning I used to feel really down because I always wanted to play, but it encourages me to work harder."

But Wetherell's dedication hasn't wavered, and he found his place on the team, replicating the play of some of the best point guards in the NCAA during practice.

"We don't have a guy in our program other than Ryan that can help us duplicate the speed and quickness of the guys we're playing against," Floyd said. "We'll see it again on Friday from Ty Lawson, who, along with Aaron Brooks, are probably the two fastest guards in the country. If you can't duplicate that in practice, you have no opportunity to do it in the game."

Wetherell has imitated Oregon's Brooks and Tajuan Porter, UCLA's Darren Collison, and Washington State's Derrick Lowe - and that's just in Pac-10 play.

"That's the biggest compliment, giving him that kind of a role," said Chad Collens, Wetherell's high school teammate.

"Had he gone (somewhere else), maybe things would've gone differently, but he figured he'd take his chances," said Don Wetherell, Ryan's father. "What did he have to lose?"

A lot, apparently.

Recruiting process

The University of Calgary and the University of Alberta aggressively recruited Wetherell, and Petrowitsch, an assistant coach at Mount Royal College, also wanted him.

"They said, 'We've offered you everything we can, what's it going to take?'" Don Wetherell said. "Ryan just wanted to come stateside. It was his dream since he was a kid to play at a high-end school."

And as Petrowitsch said, "We desperately wanted Ryan to stay, but you can't take away dreams from a kid."

Wetherell decided to forgo all the primetime offers from Canadian schools in favor of USC.

"He was prepared to start at the bottom and work his way up," Don Wetherell said. "He sees it as a challenge. At least he's doing what he wants."

Except playing big minutes.

"In many games he'd play 38 or 39 minutes. We couldn't take him out. He single-handedly won games for us," Petrowitsch said. "To practice his way onto a team, to go play two or three minutes, that shows incredible commitment."

Wetherell saw action in the waning minutes of USC's blowouts against The Citadel and Long Beach State in November, and got his first significant playing time - 13 minutes - against Mississippi Valley State, another rout.

"It was a big switch for him. It was a shock to (Ryan's) system," Don Wetherell said. "(In Canada) all the focus was on him, the newspapers and TV were on him. He knew he'd be sitting a while when he first came here."

Wetherell got minutes in surefire wins and insurmountable losses throughout December. Then USC traveled to Corvallis, Ore., to play Oregon State on Jan. 6. Wetherell's nine minutes in the 91-46 massacre prompted Floyd to comment to newspapers that had the Oregon State game preceded the Oregon game, he might have used Wetherell against the diminutive Ducks guards, 6-foot Aaron Brooks and 5-foot-6 Tajuan Porter.

"It opens doors for people in Canada knowing that they have a chance if they work as hard," said DJ Peart, Wetherell's friend and high school rival who also plans to pursue Division I basketball.

"The less he plays, the harder he works, that's just his mentality," Collens said. "All he really wants to do is play basketball."

Fly like an eagle

But Ryan Wetherell didn't always play basketball. He used to fit the clichéd description of a Canuck - until he was 10, he was strictly a hockey player. Then, in November 1996, he saw "Space Jam," and his whole life changed. Michael Jordan replaced Wayne Gretzky as his hero.

"As soon as that kid sets his mind to something, it's done," Collens said. "If he watched a movie about track and field, maybe it'd be different right now, but it just so happens he's an incredible basketball player."

From the outset, Wetherell possessed drive and skill. He played in community leagues before joining his AAU team at 13. By high school, Wetherell was a force.

"Every time going into the game I knew it was going to be a battle," Peart said. "We had a little rivalry going on. He kept pushing me and that made me better."

From ninth to 11th grade, Wetherell's AAU team was the Calgary Trojans, before expanding and changing its name to the AB All-Stars.

"It was fate for me to be a Trojan," Wetherell said.

With the AAU Trojans, then-junior Wetherell took on future USC recruit Brandon Jennings, scoring 18 points on him in the first half alone.

"That was one of the tapes we sent to (USC assistant coach) Gib Arnold. "That was when Brandon was younger but he was still thought of as a strong point

guard," Don Wetherell said.

Those tapes are what brought Ryan to the Trojans.

"This one just stood out a little bit because he was from Calgary - my wife's from Calgary, that's probably why I spent more time on it out of curiosity," Arnold said. "We knew by the tapes he would be a real good walk-on for us."

But not until the end of July did Wetherell find out the Trojans would take him.

"I didn't know until my dad told me - he got the call," Wetherell said. "I was with my (AAU) team and they all started cheering."

And now, Wetherell is living the dream.

It isn't every day that an undersized walk-on gets the chance to be a part of March Madness, much less play. But Wetherell came into USC's first-round game against Arkansas.

"(Coach Floyd) just called my name, and I got up and went in. I was happy to be out there, but I could've played a lot better," Wetherell said. "Everyone was congratulating me, but any other day I would've done a lot better. I was mad at myself."

But in Canada, he's a star.

"He's a legend. We have a wall of fame, and I just put up Ryan's picture," Petrowitsch said. "It's inspirational for kids. It shows them, 'This is how you get to be where you want to be.'"

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