

Caltech coach found winning formula for losingest team — Jewish Journal

By Ashley Zeldin, Contributing Writer | PUBLISHED Mar 8, 2011 | Sports

Oliver Eslinger let out a primal scream amid the 387 fans who stormed the basketball court on Feb. 24. His players, unaccustomed to winning, drenched him near the Caltech bench (right tradition, wrong sport).

Eslinger had coached the Caltech men's basketball team, one of the country's losingest basketball programs, to its first Southern California Intercollegiate Athletic Conference win in 26 years and 310 games.

"I was floating," he said. "This was it, this was our last chance, so our theme going into the game was being in the moment and not worrying about what might happen after the game or going into the off-season, so we tried to emphasize really believing in each possession, and staying with each other for the whole game."

That Ryan Elmquist, one of two seniors on the team, clinched the Beavers' 46-45 victory over Occidental on senior night, on a free throw with three seconds on the clock, was a fitting end to their 5-20 season.

"Our strategy was to get to the free-throw line and spread the floor," Eslinger said. Caltech went 19-of-25 from the line. "We had trouble scoring and taking good shots the first time we played them, and we still had trouble scoring but we took better shots."

Only a sports psychologist would take over a team that hasn't posted a winning record since 1954.

"I took the job because of the history of the program," Eslinger said. "I wanted to go to a program that hadn't really done anything as far as winning and being competitive."

Eslinger's goal is to change the culture of losing and commit to building a real collegiate basketball program.

Breaking the conference losing streak, which dated to Jan. 23, 1985, is a major step.

After posting a one-win season and a winless season in his first two years as head coach, Eslinger led Caltech to a five-win season, including a three-game winning streak against nonconference teams in December.

"It's hard to lose one game, let alone how many we've lost here. But what keeps me going are the players because they work so hard," Eslinger said. "They're inspiring just being at Caltech, but then to be able to balance and be committed to basketball in addition to everything they do with their studies and everything they want to do with the world when they get out there, that's what keeps me going."

Going into the final game of the season, Eslinger had put his background in sports psychology to use.

"I often talk about imagining everything that might happen during the game unfolding before it actually happens, seeing and feeling and hearing," said Eslinger, who wrote his doctoral dissertation at Boston University on "Mental Imagery Ability in High and Low Performing Collegiate Basketball Players."

“I visualized what the atmosphere would be like so that I was better prepared. I had a clear head going into the game, which wasn’t easy because there was a lot of hype, there was media there, the place was packed, and there was pressure, but that was pretty much how it was for all our home games this year.”

Eslinger takes a spiritual approach to basketball.

The son of a Jewish mother and Methodist father, Eslinger wasn’t raised religious, but he has great respect for his Jewish heritage. The menorah he lights at Chanukah belonged to his mother’s parents in Romania.

“I never went to synagogue or church on a consistent basis, so I was stuck in between. Maybe that’s where my spirituality comes from, wanting to believe in something,” Eslinger said.

He honed his spirituality as an undergrad at Clark University, studying Zen and Buddhist philosophy on awareness of the self and the world, which he applies to his coaching.

“There’s totally a spiritual sense of being in the moment, finding a rhythm and being ‘in flow’ as they say in sports psychology. That’s part of my belief system,” he said. “It’s all about finding one’s own way, and I’ve been finding my own way since I was young.”

Eslinger changed Caltech’s approach to athletics, actively recruiting athletes who in the past would have been a lock for the Ivy League.

“I love recruiting the pool that we get to recruit from because they’re bright, they know how to manage their time, they care about education for all the right reasons, they want to go change the world, and they care about basketball, too,” Eslinger said.

Caltech is known more for Nobel laureates than basketball players, and Eslinger's team is no different. The team comprises mostly role players and sixth men — mechanical engineering and computer science majors — who have had to adjust to their increased roles on the court.

One of these former sixth men is sophomore guard Collin Murphy, a computer science major from Wasilla, Alaska.

“Even before I came here, I could tell coach was a really dedicated guy,” Murphy said. “After I applied, as soon as I got in, he was already calling me. I'd written ‘basketball’ on an interest sheet because I'd played in high school.

“Everyone always jokes that, with how tough it is to get in, you have to recruit 80 players and hope a couple of them get in. [Eslinger] puts in a lot of work to get good players here.”

According to the most recent freshman profile, 98 percent of Caltech students graduated in the top 10 percent of their class. While 74 percent listed science and math teams as an extracurricular activity, only 36 percent listed sports.

But these Caltech basketball players are now in the media not for their research or inventions, but for their love of basketball.

“I can't think of another [Division III] school or sport that has garnered this much attention from a game,” Eslinger said. “We're going to use all of it to build our program.

“The way things have played out, winning the last game of the season, you can see what's unfolding here, and we're only in the beginning stages. We want as many people to be a part of it as possible. It's special.”