

Walk-on living basketball dream

USC's Nerbun lands on roster after summer workouts

Jonathan Hillyard
THE GAMECOCK

When J.P. Nerbun stepped off the court after a loss that ended his high school basketball career one year ago, the thought went through his mind that he may never play organized basketball again. Now he is playing college basketball at the Division I-A level in one of the nation's largest conferences.

"I don't remember a time when I didn't dream of playing college basketball," Nerbun said. "For a time there I thought it was over for me, but I'm back in it."

By back in it he means being the only walk-on listed on this year's USC men's basketball roster. But you won't find his name in the media guide. That's because Nerbun didn't join the team until December.

"I started playing pick-up games with some of the players last summer," Nerbun said. "Then there was a tryout before the season, but nothing really came of it. Finally coach asked me to come practice with the team for a week to see what I had, and they kept me."

At 6-feet-3-inches tall and 188 pounds, Nerbun is hardly an intimidating physical specimen when matched up against his teammates and other players around the Southeastern Conference.

Even at Cardinal Newman High School in Columbia, Nerbun called his statistics modest (he averaged 15 points a game as a senior last season). And while he has only seen playing time in two games this season, he says it has all been worth it.

"I wouldn't trade a minute

of it. It really is nothing short of a dream come true," Nerbun said. "I'm having a blast."

As a pure shooter with not a great deal of size Nerbun didn't get the interest from the top college basketball schools. As one of seven children in the family, basketball had been passed down to J.P. by his siblings and parents. His older sister Mary Kay played hoops at the Catholic University of America.

At Cardinal Newman, a South Carolina Independent School Association school, Nerbun played basketball with one of his four brothers, Michael, who is two years younger than him.

The decision on where to go to college was not a difficult one for J.P. Growing up in Sumter and being the son of Dr. Bob Nerbun, a physics teacher at USC-Sumter, turned JP into a Gamecock fan by default. So naturally, he followed that allegiance to USC.

After playing catch-up after joining the team nearly two months late, Nerbun likens his role to that of the scout team in football.

"I'm expected to practice everyday and give 150 percent or else I won't be here," Nerbun said. "It's not like I'm a superstar and can get away with less than that. So I have to push the guys every day."

"We saw how hard he was willing to work, and he understands how he can help our team," USC head coach Dave Odom said. "He gives his all everyday in practice and there's really not more you can ask from him."

Dressing out for home games is the ultimate perk

for Nerbun's hard work, he says, and he waited for his chance to shine and prove to everybody that he was part of the Gamecocks' basketball team. That opportunity came Jan. 3 when the team played host to South Carolina State.

"Coach Odom said, 'J.P. get out there; you've earned it,'" Nerbun said of his first official game as a member of the USC basketball team. Nerbun recalls the crowd at the Colonial Center cheering him on as he played in the first game of his career. He played two minutes and did get the chance to throw up a 3-point shot, but was just short.

"I was so nervous that when I shot the ball my arm was shaking, but the fans were really supportive," Nerbun said. "It was probably the greatest moment of my life by far."

While that experience was special to Nerbun, he plans on having many more before his time at USC is over. As a freshman, he will have three more years of eligibility and plans to make the most of them.

"My ultimate goal is to contribute to the team, even if that means just in practice," Nerbun said. "I would love to be able to contribute in games one day, but right now I just want to do everything I can to help my team make the NCAA Tournament every year."

Playing in the NCAA Tournament is another goal Nerbun says is high on his list. And for him it would just add to would he says is already "a dream come true."

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Juan Blas / THE GAMECOCK

USC guard J.P. Nerbun went from a modest high school player at Cardinal Newman to playing for Dave Odom and the Gamecocks. Nerbun has appeared in two games.

Gamecocks to travel to take on Bulldogs

Team looking to save postseason hopes with trip to Athens

Michael Aguilar
THE GAMECOCK

The Gamecocks saw contribution and devastation from unlikely places in their past two games. In a strong showing against Alabama, junior forward Renaldo Balkman played with an intensity that has been unmatched this season. He dissected the Crimson Tide defense for 28 points and 16 rebounds.

Last weekend against the Kentucky Wildcats, Carolina's outside shooting let the team down. USC, shooting higher than 38 percent from behind the arc this season, shot 26 percent from 3-point range against the Wildcats.

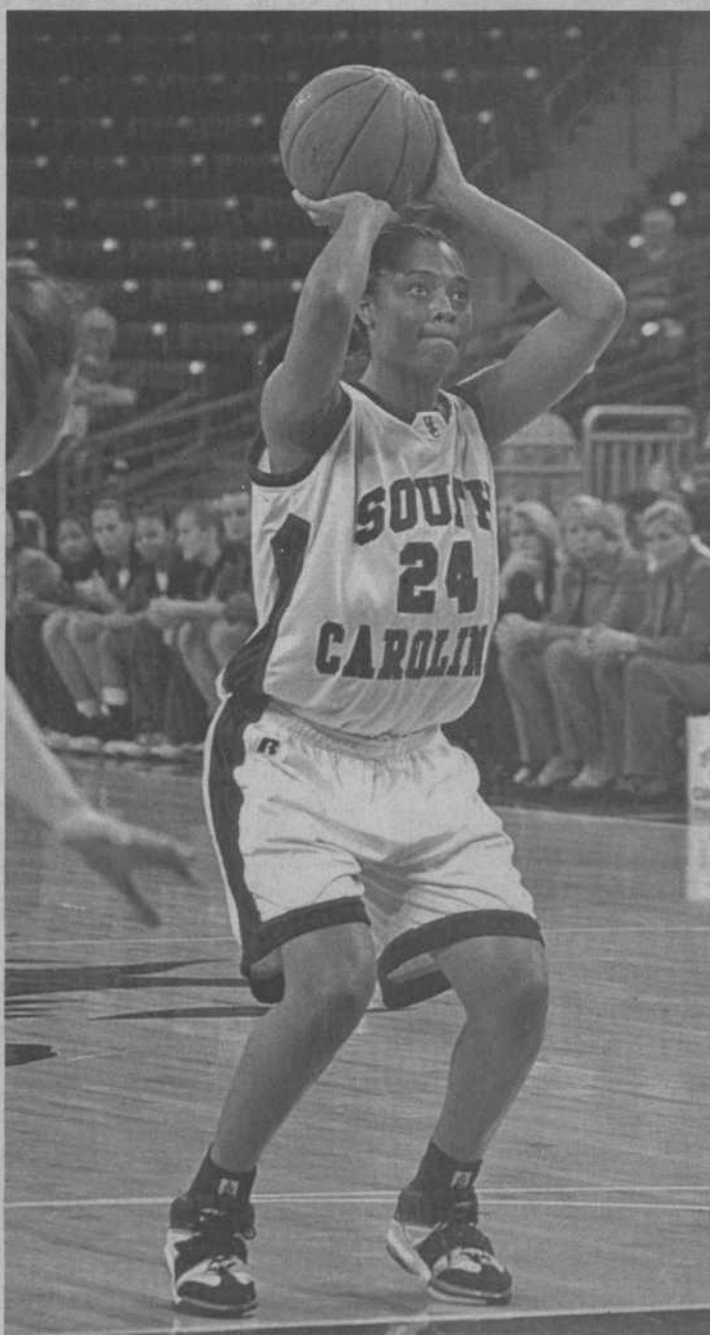
On Thursday, the Gamecocks fight to keep their hopes of an at-large bid to the NCAA tournament alive against conference rival Georgia. Last season the

Southeastern Conference sent six teams to the tournament. USC currently holds the seventh-best record in the SEC. To have any hope of making the tournament, the Gamecocks probably have to win out, hope for some upsets and make a run in the SEC tournament.

Georgia and Carolina played a fierce overtime game earlier this season at the Colonial Center. The Gamecocks had the lead with just more than a minute on the clock. UGA's freshman guard Mike Mercer drilled a baseline jumper as time expired on the shot clock to send the game into overtime. Georgia then ended the game with a last-second 3-pointer to prevent the game from going into double-overtime.

Since then, Georgia has lost six of its last nine games. Carolina has gone 5-4, although Carolina's wins include two against a top-10 Florida team and a hard-fought overtime win against Vanderbilt.

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Vaughn Braxton / THE GAMECOCK

Center Demetress Adams takes a foul shot in the Gamecocks' 99-48 win against Longwood on Tuesday.

Women drop 99 on hapless Lancers

Walvius' team scores 64 by halftime in romp

Matt Moore
THE GAMECOCK

Sophomore Lakesha Tolliver scored 19 points and pulled down eight rebounds in only 18 minutes of play, as the Gamecocks easily defeated the Longwood Lancers 99-48.

The route was on from the beginning. Forward Demetress Adams scored the first two of her 15 points off of an offensive rebound, and guard Shannel Harris and forward Melanie Johnson followed with steals and layups of their own. These three quick buckets gave the Gamecocks a 6-0 lead after only 45 seconds.

They didn't look back. "We came out to play today," USC coach Susan Walvius said following the game. "I thought we were real aggressive defensively. We played an up-tempo style and took a lot of high percentage shots."

Carolina (16-9, 6-6 in the SEC) was able to force 32 turnovers and shot 53 percent from the field.

The Gamecocks tied a season-high with 19 steals, including 12 in the first half. They out-rebounded the Lancers 47-32, led them 7-5 in blocks and led them 21-11 in assists. It was the stats, though, that usually don't end up in the box score that led Carolina to such a dominating win.

With an extreme height advantage, Carolina had 66 points in the paint, tying a season high, compared with Longwood's 24. The Gamecocks had 45 points from turnovers, a season high, and 28 fast-break points, also tying a season high. They scored early and often and went into halftime with a 64-28 lead.

The players' focus remained on rebounding, as it has over the past few games.

"Tonight we wanted to go out and play hard," Tolliver said after the game. "We wanted to make sure we didn't let them out-rebound us. We want to get better with this game."

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