

The Freshman Fifteen

A freelantz contribution; written by Jessica Lantz

Many students dread the “Freshman Fifteen” when they pack up and head to college.

But for Dylan Richter, his “Freshman Fifteen” was a welcome addition.

Of course, we’re not talking here about the fifteen as measured in pounds by most incoming college students. Richter’s fifteen, instead, was measured in minutes played on the basketball court for Washington University in St. Louis.

Since arriving on campus last fall, Richter has become an integral participant off the bench for the Bears, playing in 26 games, averaging 5.7 points and 3.0 rebounds in 15.7 minutes per contest and shooting 56.1% from the field as a freshman.

Those are numbers that almost any incoming player would be proud to have.

Achieving such numbers wasn’t easy. The first year of the collegiate experience can be a struggle for anyone, but just imagine adding in two hours of practice, four-to-five times a week, voluntary work outs before or after class, Thursday travel days and taking make-up exams while traveling on the team bus.

And that’s doesn’t even cover the pranks from the upperclassmen that Richter has fallen victim to – and is excited about pulling when it is deemed his turn to do so.

Still, despite all this, Richter seems to have found just the right balance between academics and athletics, here at what he calls his “ideal school”.

Richter is lucky enough to have benefitted from a strong support system — both through blood and basketball — to help him through the transition of traveling away from home to attend college in St. Louis. On the familial side, his relatives live about five hours away in Lincolnshire, Illinois, and committed early on to going to many of Richter’s first-year games in order to show their support and vocalize their enthusiasm for his play. In the meantime, Richter’s collegiate basketball support system came in the form of the 2002, 2008 and 2009 Division III Coach of the Year for Washington University, Mark Edwards. When speaking of Edwards, Richter says, “he like an all around great guy, everyone goes to him and talks to him about stuff other than basketball all the time. He’s really easy to talk to, really easy to get along with and he makes it really easy to play for him.” Still, Richter acknowledges that one of Edwards’ most likeable traits is that “he’s a competitor.” “Competition,” Richter states, “is what we talk about in practice and drills, pre-game speeches.”

It is this competitive nature which Coach Edwards focused on as a mantra at the start of the year in order to push Richter and the Bears to an 11-0 start on the season, this before falling to host-program Elmhurst College in the Bluejay Classic in December. An additional loss came toward the end of February to the University of Rochester, a home-contest decided by only one point,

but allowed Washington University to enter the NCAA Division III tournament with a 23-2 record.

The seeding committee for the tournament subsequently paired the Bears in a first-round game with Lawrence University, where, much to the disappointment of Richter and others, Washington University was left to play once more at Elmhurst, a gym that had not been kind to them in December. Regardless, the Bears escaped their first contest without a loss, no small part in thanks to an eventual game winning three-pointer hit with 12.3 seconds left.

Unfortunately, the Elmhurst floor still proved a daunting nemesis during the win, with Richter playing in the victory, but suffering a broken foot well before the final horn sounded and Washington advanced to the second-round.

The injury came as a definite blow to the freshman, with Richter learning he faced several weeks of recovery time in order for his foot to heal properly. That meant not being able to play for the remainder of the NCAA Tournament. Fellow teammate and one of the Bears' team captains, Sean Wallis, knowing exactly what Richter was going through (Wallis himself suffered an injury early in the 2007-2008 championship run for Washington University), gave Richter words of wisdom about staying positive and remembering the contributions that he made throughout the season. On an insider's blog Wallis kept throughout this year's tournament (d3blogs.com), he offered a "shout out" to his injured teammate, and told him to keep his head high. "Dylan broke his foot in the first round game against Lawrence," Wallis wrote, "(and then proceeded to NAIL a three-ball before coming out) . . . It's no fun sitting on the bench from injury (I'd know from experience) but I know [Dylan is] still pulling for us big time."

The rest of the Washington University squad realized it would have to come to terms with Richter's on-court absence, but, nevertheless, pressed on to get through opening weekend with a close victory against Wisconsin-Whitewater. Spring break greeted the team on the other side of the win, and with its arrival, additional practice in preparation for the next round of the NCAA Tournament. Sadly, instead of participating in the practice drills and training with the rest of his team in the suburbs surrounding Chicago, Richter was forced to the role of an observer, wishing his "stupid foot" wouldn't have broken in the opening game. It was a part Richter reluctantly continued to play afterward, by no choice of his own, sitting on the bench and cheering from the sidelines as his team handled their next three opponents and made it into the championship game, where the Bears beat out Richard Stockton for the 2009 NCAA Division III title.

Richter undoubtedly ponders what could have been if only his foot had held up through the game with Lawrence. Still, he is easily moved toward more a more positive line of thinking when speaking of a future with a team he has obviously grown to love. With only one senior definitely leaving the squad, Richter feels that next season holds great potential, with camaraderie and fellowship two key elements he believes will find the 2010 campaign for the Bears ending in a fashion similar to that the team achieved this year. Richter, as such, is ready to follow in Wallis' footsteps, recuperate from injury and come back to help win Washington University in St. Louis' third straight national title.

Except, this time, it'll be on the hardwood, and not from the bench.