

New strategy shakes up men's basketball

ABBY TURNER
REPORTER

Pre-game rituals are a common thing for athletes to have. It provides a sense of control when days can be unpredictable. The MSU men's basketball team is not a stranger to the stereotype of pre-game rituals.

Pierre Sanders, accounting senior, eats six to twelve Toll House chocolate chip cookies before every game.

Mason Gibson, business management sophomore, has to have a bag of candy before every game, whether gummy sharks or Life Savers gummies.

Will Shepherd, business finance junior, has three things he does before every game. First, he showers, then eats a bag of trail mix, and lastly, he listens to one specific song, "Lean Chronicles," by Rio Da Yung Og.

But not every ritual or established plan can last forever.

As the MSU men's basketball team looks to bounce back from last season's 12-16 record, Head Coach Justin Leslie had to make changes in the off-season to better the team.

In the off-season, Leslie had to approach recruiting with a different mindset. He said he focused more on recruiting strong, fast and experienced players rather than his past approach of recruiting younger players.

"My track record has always been we recruit high school kids, and we redshirt them, develop them for two, three, or four years, and get older that way. I had to throw that system and philosophy out. The trick in basketball, especially in male sports in college, is you want to get old and stay old. How we got older had to change, so we had to go out and target more 21 to 22-year-old transfers that are more physically and emotionally ready for what a season entails," Leslie said.

Shepherd is one of the newer additions to the team in the off-season. He was looking for a school that would utilize him in the best way it



PHOTO BY STEPHANIE GARCIA | THE WICHITAN

Men's basketball head coach Justin Leslie talks to the team, Nov. 9.

could as a player.

"At Oakland, they didn't really utilize me the way I should be. Here, they told me that they needed a stretch four who could shoot, who could play on the floor, who could play a two through five. That was really what I was looking for. I wasn't trying to be stuck down at the post. I was trying to be that stretch four. It was perfect for me and fit for how we play," Shepherd said.

Leslie also took a new approach to defense and offense. He decided to play a new defense style, whereas in offense, he decided to return to his roots.

"We are playing a very different style of basketball than I have ever coached defensively. Offensively, we are getting back to my roots a little bit. Where I had to essentially look and be where am I most comfortable teaching. I think our team is going to be best where I am most comfortable teaching," Leslie said.

Sanders is one of two returning seniors.

Compared to last season's defensive style, the new type of defense is better suited for the players on the team.

"It has been more beneficial. It caters to the type of athletes we have on the team. We are able to go after and try and create more turnovers and play to our strengths. Of course, we have to be more conditioned and everything, but other than that, I think it is benefitting the athletes that we have," Sanders said.

Gibson, also a returning player, agreed with Sanders's statement.

"Our best offense comes from our defense. So all the turnovers we get, all the steals, and all the stops, that's when we usually score on offense," Gibson said.

The start of this season's preparation differed from previous seasons. The team had the opportunity to play in an international tournament in Taiwan. Because of this tournament, the team got extra practice and games before the season started.

"We had 10 extra days of practice and preparation in addition to 10 straight days of team building and getting to know each other," Leslie said.

Leslie joked that the players were so close that sometimes it seemed like he had to pull them back from each other.

"From day one, we were just gelled together as a team... The chemistry is just unimaginable right now," Sanders said.

Shepherd had the same thoughts on how closely the team had bonded from their trip overseas and the practices and time leading up to the tournament.

"It was basically two and a half weeks just being stuck together, so we basically had to bond," Shepherd said.

Apart from playing, the team was able to travel around and explore the city. Gibson said



PHOTO BY STEPHANIE GARCIA | THE WICHITAN

Reggie Hill (1) shoots the ball while Pierre Sanders (23) tries to interfere, Nov. 9.

the team prioritized spending time together.

"I mean, we did everything together. We got to walk around, eat meals and all that stuff. The traveling was crazy. It was probably everybody's first time leaving the country, so everybody had a great time, and we were able to bond over that," Gibson said.

Just from the pre-season and the trip overseas, the coaching staff and the players can already tell that this year's team is different from last year's. Assistant coach Casey Weitzel gave insight into how this team compares to last season's.

"It doesn't. We didn't have the success we wanted last year and we felt we had to get bigger, stronger, and more athletic, and we felt like we did that, so it just doesn't compare," Weitzel said.

The MSU men's basketball season began on Nov. 10. The team's next game is Saturday, Nov. 18 against St. Mary's University in D.L. Ligon.



PHOTO BY STEPHANIE GARCIA | THE WICHITAN

Left to right Pierre Sanders (23) defends against John Gaines (0), Nov. 9.