

Montverde duo saw program's evolution

Andrew Astleford
Sentinel Staff Writer

Stephane Allegre and Ryan Barnes have seen transformation from loser to elite.

February 1, 2007

MONTVERDE - Practice inside Roberts Gym has finished. Perhaps senior basketball players Stephane Allegre and Ryan Barnes can now soak in how far the Montverde boys basketball program has come.

Signs of progress are everywhere. A tangle of cables, electric saws, nail guns, paint buckets, sawdust galore. All products of an effort to increase the gym's capacity after the team's rise among the nation's elite, one that includes a USA Today No. 8 ranking, a national schedule that goes beyond the FHSAA series. A spotlight of their own.

The journey continues today through Saturday, when the Eagles (25-0) host the Montverde Academy Invitational Tournament with teams such as USA Today No. 7 Montrose (Md.) Christian and No. 17 Mobile (Ala.) LeFlore competing against a program that has buried its former self.

Not long ago, this gym didn't have air conditioning.

Not long ago, there were dead spots in the floor where the ball wouldn't bounce.

Not long ago, Montverde was a loser.

"I don't know if you could have called it a program," Allegre said of the old Montverde. "There was a coach who had nothing to do with the school. I don't even remember his name. Sometimes we'd get to games and we'd be short [on numbers]. Or people I didn't even know would come out of nowhere and play."

Allegre, originally from Miami, has played on Montverde's varsity team since eighth grade. Barnes, from Oviedo, has been a part of the team since transferring from Oviedo High after his freshman year.

Both represent ties to the past for the new Montverde, which includes eight international players on its 13-man roster. These domestic players are overshadowed by their overseas counterparts, a sign of the times around this place. On lesser teams, Allegre and Barnes might be standout players. At the new Montverde, they are role players at best, surrounded by prospects from both in and outside of the U.S. who will soon suit up for major-college teams. That's fine with them. The experience has been about a lot more than just the game.

Both have seen Montverde rise from depths that included an 0-21 finish in 2002. Those days before the academy, an international boarding institution, produced Division I talent such as Michigan State's Idong Ibok, UCLA's Luc Richard Mbah a Moute, Wake Forest's L.D. Williams and more.

Before then, during summer drills in 2003 -- long before anyone around these parts kicked around ideas of undefeated records, national rankings and the like -- Allegre and Barnes sweat here. After a particularly tough afternoon, they threw up side-by-side outside these doors.

Since, they have matured with the program.

Since, they have seen Montverde go from a joke to a jewel.

"I didn't think we could get to this level," Barnes said.

It began in 2003, when headmaster Kasey Kesselring hired Kevin Sutton, a former coach at Washington (D.C.) Bishop McNamara who promised Montverde would compete for national championships one day. In the following years, Sutton changed Allegre and Barnes' perspectives on basketball, academics and everything in-between.

"He started bringing the players, and I got nervous," Allegre said. "They were bringing guys 7-feet tall, guys I had never seen in Central Florida, guys from Europe. I thought, 'I'm just from Orlando. And they're bringing guys from Europe? And I'm trying to be on this team? Man, this is crazy.' "

"Coach Sutton is cool outside of basketball," Barnes said. "But once he steps on the court, he is a different person. He is like a boss at his job."

The boss made himself known.

The boss told Barnes that if he wanted to play for the new Montverde, Barnes would have to take pride in something more substantial than ego.

The boss said Barnes' braids and earrings and baggy jeans had to go.

"Coach taught me how to present myself," Barnes said. "He told us the way we walk through an airport together is important, the way we respond to questions is important."

The boss told Allegre success goes beyond this gym.

The boss said basketball may someday fade, but character and work ethic -- those never die.

"I would argue with teachers, talk back to teachers, sleep in class," Allegre said. "Last year, I started seeing progress with my grades. This year, this is the first time I've made honor roll since the first grade."

The new Montverde plugs away, night after night, inside this place. Allegre and Barnes live it. During practice, players respond, "Yes, sir" to Sutton's commands. It's a subtle sign of the mind-set here. Its reward goes beyond this place. Its reward goes deeper than that.

"See that construction up there?" Sutton says, pointing to the activity behind him, his team at his side.

"Yes, sir."

"That's all because of what you have done."

"Yes, sir."

Montverde is on the map now, a power nestled inside Lake County's rolling countryside. The academy's success has allowed Allegre and Barnes to enjoy the spoils of where the new Montverde stands.

Allegre and Barnes lived the early years. Some thought better days would never happen here. Not long ago, this all seemed a fantasy far away . . .

It has become reality today.

Andrew Astleford can be reached at aastleford@orlandosentinel.com.

Copyright (c) 2007, Orlando Sentinel | Get home delivery - up to 50% off

Visit OrlandoSentinel.com