

Ex-Aggie star looks to make mark in coaching

Mason in 1st season as assistant for NMHU

By Mark Rudi

mrudi@lcsun-news.com
[@mrudi19 on Twitter](https://twitter.com/mrudi19)

LASCRCUCES » Former New Mexico State star Brandon Mason is looking to work his way through the coaching ranks in college basketball.

After a successful playing career at NMSU, and playing professionally overseas, Mason is in his first season as a assistant coach at New Mexico



Mason

Highlands after a two-year stint as the video administrator on the staffs of Steve Alford and Craig Neal at New Mexico.

Mason looked at the move to the Division II school in Las Vegas, N.M., — his first full-time assistant coaching position — as a resume booster, hoping to someday be a Division I head coach or, his ultimate dream, coaching in the NBA. But he knows that getting to that level will take some time. And for right now, Mason and Cowboys' head coach Craig Snow are look-

ing to build a program at Highlands.

Mason returns to his alma mater tonight as NMSU hosts Highlands in the Aggies' final non-conference game of the season.

"I played for the Albuquerque Thunderbirds (of the NBA Development League) and won a championship," Mason said. "I won a conference championship at New Mexico State and I won two conference championships with the Lobos. I thought I would be able to move to another part of New Mexico and win another championship. I thought that would be great to be a part of that."

Mason played for the Aggies from 1999-2003 for Lou Henson, was a member of three NMSU teams that won at least 20 games, and won a Big West Conference championship his freshman season.

Mason, who came to Las Cruces from Chicago, is a member of the NMSU 1,000-point club, with 1,051 career points, is eighth in program history in career assists with 302, is eighth in career steals with 123 and was a two-time defensive player of

the year at NMSU.

Following his playing days in Las Cruces, Mason played professionally overseas and in the NBA D-League, including playing for former Aggie assistant coach Rus Bradburd in Ireland.

But, after Mason suffered a career-ending ankle injury while playing in Lebanon, he began coaching Danny Granger's AAU team, which included Alford's son, Bryce, and Neal's son, Cullen. Mason met and got to know Alford from there.

During the summer of 2012 when New Mexico's video administrator position opened up, Alford called Mason about the opening and asked if Mason wanted to be part of his staff.

"At that particular time, I didn't really know if I wanted to become a coach," Mason said. "I just knew that I wanted to be involved in basketball. The hours are demanding, but I really enjoyed

it. Just to be around the game, and around kids and I realized I had a passion to become a coach. I thank Steve Alford and Craig Neal for keeping me a part of their staff.”

And he admits, it was tough being an Aggie sometimes while working at UNM.

“New Mexico State is where my heart is,” Mason said. “But at the end of the day, the Lobos did pay my bills for a few years. I’ve built relationships with guys like Cameron Birstow, Tony Snell, Kendall Williams, Alex Kirk, Hugh Greenwood on the down line. Relationships that I will never lose. It was incredible to be a part of both universities.”

When Lobo assistant Craig Snow got the head coaching job at Highlands last July, Snow hired Mason to be an assistant coach on his staff.

“I’m glad to see him in coaching because I think he’s a tremendous coach,” Henson said. “He’s knowl-

edgeable and I think he’ll do a great job teaching and coaching. He’s a very intelligent young man. He knew basketball. So, I knew if he went into coaching he would do a great job.”

Highlands is 1-10 on the season entering tonight’s game. But Snow and Mason did not get the jobs at Highlands until three weeks before school started. Mason said it’s hard to build a team three weeks before school starts and compete right away. While the Cowboys are struggling right now, Mason said in year two, three and four they hope to see results while they recruit and build up the program.

“He’s a die-hard Aggie,” NMSU head coach Marvin Menzies said about Mason. “Even when he was on the Lobos’ staff, he was still an Aggie at heart. Great young man and very, very passionate about this coaching profession. We stay in touch and talk quite frequently,

even before he joined their (UNM’s) staff. We actually considered moving him here at one point, but we just couldn’t afford him. But now, he’s in the coaching side of things. And he’s in a position where he can start to grow his craft and get his time in.”

And while he would like to be a Division I head coach or a NBA coach some day, Mason said one his goals before that would be coach at his alma mater.

“That’s (NMSU) my heart, my everything,” Mason said. “One day that would be a dream and to be involved with Aggie basketball. To this day, I still look at Las Cruces as my home. I loved being there, I love playing there and the community. I still tell people, ‘Man, one day I’m going to move back there. Buy a home and everything.’ Las Cruces is like home to me.”

Mark Rudi may be reached at 575-541-5455.