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"From south Minneapolis to the big dance"

Guard looks like a winner in game of life

by PATRICK REUSSE, Sports Columnist

Romone Penny's competitive basketball career came to an end Friday when he played 100 seconds in American's 72-57 loss to Tennessee in Birmingham, Ala.

This was not a defeat the East Regional audience was watching but another milestone in Penny's passage from a tough corner of south Minneapolis to putting on a cap and gown to graduate from an outstanding Eastern academic institution.

"I grew up on 34th and Stevens," Penny said. "My mother had five children to raise by herself, since my dad was in Chicago. She was working two jobs, so she didn't have the time to drive us places, to go to school conferences."

There was plenty of gang activity in that neighborhood. Penny's older brother became involved and wound up in jail.

"He's incarcerated now," Penny said. "We talked before the tournament, and he told me what he was reading. He got his GED while he was in there. He gets out in a year. I'm excited for him."

Romone was in the seventh grade when he tried out for the Southwest Area traveling basketball team. He was selected for the "B" team. Rex Holland was one of the coaches.

"A woman came up to me and said, 'That young man is going to need some rides,'" Holland said. "I started to tell her, 'This isn't a cab service,' but she said, 'You do it. You take an extra interest in him. He's a good boy.'"

Penny played for the Southwest travelers for two years. The bond between him and Holland became so close that Romone now says, "He's a father figure for me."

Holland and some friends wound up paying Penny's way to attend Holy Angels as a freshman and a sophomore, then DeLaSalle as a junior and a senior.

They were so impressed by the manner in which Romone seized this opportunity that they started "MinneapolisNEXT," an organization that provides scholarships to private high schools for underprivileged youths.

Penny was the first, and now over 200 Minneapolis kids have benefited from this program.

Dave Thorson was Penny's coach for two winters at DeLaSalle. Thorson was in North Dakota with his wife and new daughter on Friday, showing baby Ella to her namesake, Dave's 102-year-old grandmother.

The DeLaSalle coach did take time out to try to monitor Penny's game against Tennessee.

"He was one of the best, hardest-working kids I've ever been around," Thorson said. "We told him that he had to get stronger and to improve his offensive skills.

"Some young men treat that as a setback, but Romone accepted it as a challenge. He was a very good player for us as a senior."

Penny received interest from schools such as Bucknell, Lafayette and even the Naval Academy, but he didn't have the college board scores to gain admittance.

Holland and others arranged for him to attend Mercersburg Academy, a prep boarding school in Pennsylvania.

"Students from all over the world go to school there," Penny said. "There are athletics, but it's all about academics."

There was a brief period in his higher education when Penny allowed basketball to take precedence over academics. He had a productive enough season at Mercersburg that Florida State coach Leonard Hamilton invited Romone to join the basketball team as a walk-on.

"I really enjoyed the school and Tallahassee, but I was in over my head when it came to basketball," he said.

Penny went back to looking at Eastern colleges. A Lafayette assistant who had taken an interest in him earlier was now at American. He wound up at that prestigious school in northwest D.C.

He sat out a transfer year and then spent most of his time sitting on the bench. Then, earlier this month, he was able to share in winning the Patriot League tournament, and on Friday he played those precious 100 seconds in American's first-ever NCAA tournament game.

Now what?

"I'm going to graduate in accounting this spring and then I have a job with Ernst & Young that starts in the fall here in the Washington area."

Fiancée?

"No, but I have a girlfriend -- Sirisha -- that I met at Mercersburg," he said. "Her family comes from India. She's in this area, too, going to medical school.

"I like it here in the East, I have to admit that."

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