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The Seasoning of Cindy

UMaine’s head basketball coach isn’t the quiet, shy superstar you remember
The Seasoning of Cindy

Cindy Blodgett always had total confidence on the basketball court. Now, after 10 years as a professional athlete, that confidence is evident in all areas of her life.

By Melanie Brooks

When Cindy Blodgett ‘98 returned to the UMaine campus to accept the head coaching position for women’s basketball last spring, things looked and felt very familiar to her. Games were still played in the Alfond Arena and practices were still at the old “Pit.” As she was introduced to the fans, she still received their adoration. When she walked out to the parking lot, people of all ages still stopped to ask her for an autograph. And just as in 1994, the air around campus was full of expectations that she would once again lead UMaine women’s basketball to the promised land.

What had changed, however, was Cindy Blodgett. The last time she stood on the floor in Alfond Arena it was as a player—the record-shattering superstar who helped the Black Bear women’s team gain national recognition. The quiet, shy young woman, to those who didn’t know her, only seemed comfortable on a basketball court.

Now she is head coach—a pro basketball veteran and seasoned traveler whose playing experiences have taken her throughout the United States and around the world.

Sure, Blodgett is still the lean 5’7” woman who was told over and over again that she was too small to take her talents to the next level. And she still has that intense drive to win. But she is no longer shy or reserved. She seems comfortable with adoring fans, with her players—even with the media. As a UMaine trainer noted in a recent newspaper article:

“She’s the general. Before she was a
general by action. Now she's very vocal. She's come out of her shell...."

And UMaine's assistant coach, Rita Sullivan '95, who was Blodgett's first hire after taking over the program, agrees.

"When Cindy came as a freshman, I was a senior," Sullivan says. "Even as a first-year player, she was incredibly confident on the basketball court. But that wasn't the case off the court. She was always courteous, but she really wasn't comfortable with all the attention and public exposure."

Now, Sullivan says, that has all changed.

"The kind of confidence everyone saw as a player has now blossomed through all parts of her life," she says.

Blodgett's maturation, her experience, and her stature have brought her full circle—back to the program that, when she was a player, regularly filled the Alfond with 5,000-plus cheering fans.

Make no mistake about it; the current UMaine players are well aware of Cindy Blodgett's lofty status. So just how do they feel about playing under a Maine basketball icon?

"We don't talk about it," Blodgett says. "Do I think that they might put pressure on themselves to please or impress me? I think that's natural. When I was a player I'm sure I felt the same way about Coach McCallie."

It was, in fact, Joanne Palombo McCallie who enticed Blodgett to become a Black Bear.

"I could have gone anywhere I wanted to—it was obvious to her, it was obvious to me," she says. "But UMaine presented the biggest challenge."

It was McCallie who stressed to Blodgett that UMaine was the place that would challenge her. The program hadn't been winning for a time and the people of Maine were already on the Cindy Blodgett bandwagon. Whether the UMaine coach knew it at the time or not, she was pushing the right button, dangling a carrot right in front of the young high school phenom.

"I'm a competitive person—I'm not one to run from a challenge and I thought, 'She's right, this is the biggest challenge,'"

Blodgett said. So she bit.

To say that Blodgett was successful in her four years at UMaine would be a gross understatement. A four-time All-American, she broke a total of 20 school records. She became the second woman in NCAA Division I history to lead the nation in scoring for two consecutive seasons (her sophomore and junior years). She led Maine to its first four appearances in the NCAA Tournament and was the America East Player of the Year in 1996 and 1998. She earned Academic All-American honors in 1998 and graduated cum laude with her bachelor of science degree in elementary education.

The college of education was a natural fit for Blodgett at UMaine.

"Teachers are coaches and coaches are teachers. In order for me to coach I needed to be an educator," she says. Her education has served her well in her brief coaching career.

"It taught me that everyone learns differently and how to treat every person as an individual."

Blodgett's family, her former coaches, and her overseas experiences have also helped her become the mature, confident 32-year-old she is today. She's adopted coaching strategies from playing in the WNBA and overseas as well as from her former coaches. One of the major influences was Joanne McCallie.

"I think Joanne had a great impact on her," Sullivan says. "Certainly we employ a lot of her style of play, because Cindy knows it's been successful. But I also think Cindy, like all of us, was impacted by what Joanne did off the court. She was tremendously organized and she was great with the community and the media. She was tireless in promoting women's basketball in the state. Cindy observed all that for..."
four years and she knows how important it is to a college program."

Blodgett also talks fondly about her high school coach, Bruce Cooper. It was Cooper who showed her the human, more personal elements to coaching.

"He understands people, so I’ve tried to take that from him—his way of making every single person on the team feel very, very important."

That lesson would resonate with Blodgett as she transitioned from being a big fish in the UMaine pond to the professional ranks of women’s basketball.

"In my last couple of years in the WNBA I realized that my career was winding down. I’m definitely a realist," says Blodgett who didn’t get much playing time during her stay with the Cleveland Rockers and the Sacramento Monarchs. "I was a practice player. It’s an important job and no one likes it, but it’s very important to a team," she says.

And during her time in the pros she started to see the game from a coaching point of view, which Blodgett says helped her acclimate to her current position as a head coach more readily.

After the WNBA, Blodgett went on to play overseas for three years. She loved being able to continue playing basketball but found life so far from home to be a bit solitary.

"My experiences overseas helped me mature at a much quicker rate because you go to a foreign country and you don’t speak the language and your teammates don’t speak your language, you have to fend for yourself—there’s no one looking out for you. There’s a certain amount of survival skills you need to learn," Blodgett says.

Those overseas survival skills are being put to the test this season. A young team with a losing early season record, Coach Blodgett doesn’t pretend there aren’t plenty of doubters out there.

"If I spend one ounce of my time thinking about that, I’m not giving it to my team," she says. And Cindy Blodgett’s focus is always the team.

Even though it hasn’t been that long since her own student days, Blodgett has had to adjust to the lifestyles of current college players. Today’s student athlete is much more “plugged-in,” literally, than in Blodgett’s era. Twelve years ago texting wasn’t a verb, and the iPod was nonexistent. Even email and the Internet hadn’t been around very long. In spite of all the technological advances, Blodgett still prefers face-to-face contact. She doesn’t like to be on the phone or tied to a computer. This Clinton, Maine, native has some traditional values.

"I think our culture today is very materialistic and at times our values are shortchanged. So I try to get the players to invest in each other and invest in where the team is," Blodgett says.

Building trust and a support system is an integral part of Coach Blodgett’s plan.

"I think it’s really important that they always understand that we’re in this together. I’m never going to hang them out to dry," she says.

A big part of her relationship with her players is being direct and honest, qualities which Joanne McCallie says will serve her well.

"She’s a truth-teller," McCallie said in a recent Portland Press Herald interview. "Cindy has great character and is interested in the truth. It’s part of who she is—she’s very straightforward.

"Those young women are quite fortunate to play for her. She will be very direct and honest. That’s what kids need...""

Sullivan adds that the UMaine players respond to Blodgett’s style and stature.

"One important way of getting players to respond is to command their respect," she says. "And Cindy has their respect."

When Blodgett started her new job last May, she inherited a program that was far from robust. No coaching staff and a young, depleted team for which most fans had pretty low expectations.

But it was just another big challenge for Cindy Blodgett. She explains that there is a difference between a coach who is using the position as a stepping-stone and one who is committed to the program for the long term.

"I think recruiting has taken a hit because coaches haven’t been here thinking long term, therefore they may look two to three years into the future—not a long period of time to build and sustain a program," Blodgett says. "We need to invest. It’s going to take us some time to rebuild. You want to get to a point where you’ve got eight or nine players who are all really fighting for starting spots. We’re not there yet but we’re not supposed to be—I didn’t expect us to be."

Recruiting is a huge factor in building the women’s program back to what it was when Blodgett was a player.

"I believed when I was 17 that this was the place for me," Blodgett says. "And all my dreams and aspirations were met here as a player and student athlete. I want every single player from Maine who I feel can make an impact on our program to come here. There is no reason to leave the state. Do they want to be a professional player? They can do it here."

While Blodgett has the charisma and drive to be a successful Division I coach, she now needs the tools to lure the best players into the program. While the new recreation center, the renovated Memorial Union, and the obvious beauty of the campus are draws for students, the facilities
for the basketball teams are something of a setback.

"Do I think our facilities are sub par—and I feel like I'm being polite in saying that? Absolutely. We don't have a home facility and that's sad considering we're the only Division I school in the state," Blodgett says. "We should have the very best facilities in the state and we do not."

Indeed, women's basketball rarely gets to practice on their home court in the Alfond. They have to share that arena with men's basketball and men's and women's hockey. Practice time in the 75-year-old Pit is also compromised because the basketball teams must share it with the volleyball team that practices and plays all home games on the court. In fact, the new floor in the Pit was installed only when volleyball became a varsity sport.

"The school, in general, has had a face lift," Blodgett says as we sit in her 1970s wood-paneled office in the Memorial Gym—an office that hasn't changed since Blodgett was a player under Joanne Palombo McCallie from 1994 to 1998.

"The Pit is the same. Alfond is the same (for basketball). And that bothers me sitting in this seat—that in almost 12 years that hasn't changed."

The solution? The hardwood floor is transported from Alfond Arena to the field house so that the team doesn't have to practice late at night. And there are real plans in the works to revamp the Pit—a project that would cost $12 to $15 million. Such a renovation would involve knocking out the walls of the Pit to make room for bleachers on the floor. The men's and women's teams would have new locker rooms and coaching offices as well as a new training room. Blodgett's heart rate quickens just talking about it and she doesn't hide her impatience for people who aren't as committed to the project as she is.

"I want young girls growing up wanting to come to Maine, and I feel if we can get the program back to that level then I've done my job," Blodgett says. "I'll feel fulfilled knowing that we are at the point where young girls aspire to come to UMaine to play basketball."