

Don't bother trying to define ASU's Remy Martin — he has bigger things in mind
(by Doug Haller, The Athletic/Oct. 9, 2019)

SAN FRANCISCO — Defining Arizona State's Remy Martin can be difficult, but Casey Jacobsen tries anyway.

"He's one of the most genuine, exciting, dynamic, great personalities," the college basketball analyst said Tuesday at Pac-12 media day. "I wish we had more Remy Martins in our conference and in our game."

Oh, no. Here it comes.

But ...

"There's a jumping-off-the-cliff-type thing with him," Jacobsen said. "I mean, I'm nervous because he's so confident in himself that he's not going to recognize how important a single possession is."

Martin proved himself last season. In Pac-12 contests, the energetic point guard — who battled injuries all season — averaged 14.2 points and a conference-best 6.2 assists. Jacobsen's not much of a stats guy, but he admits Martin's conference-best 3.2 assist-turnover ratio means something because it measures decision-making, and that's everything for a point guard.

But ...

"I've just seen a couple instances where Remy has taken what I would consider a bad shot in a crucial moment," Jacobsen said. "To me, at the point guard position, that's a no-no."

Jacobsen pauses.

"Is that fair?"

It is. And it's probably a reason most would rank Martin behind Oregon's Payton Pritchard and Colorado's McKinley Wright as the Pac-12's top seasoned point guards. Martin can control a game — who else puts up 27 points, eight rebounds and seven assists at Arizona? — but he's also prone to firing up quick shots and making wild passes. It's what makes him so much fun to watch.

"I'll tell you," Jacobsen concludes, "with all due respect to (Pritchard and Wright), I'd rather watch Remy Martin. But as far as the trust factor maybe late in the game, it skews a little more the other way."

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Not long before lunch, Martin sat in a conference room at Pac-12 headquarters, wearing a coat, playing NBA Live 19 on a big-screen television. He had 15 minutes to kill so he played the Phoenix Suns against the Golden State Warriors. Martin was the Suns and he led 17-14.

Usually for players, this is a one-time event, but Martin was a rare media day veteran. He had attended the previous season with forward Zylan Cheatham, learning a valuable lesson. "Yeah, I know," Martin said. "That's why I bought this coat because last time I was freezing."

"You Arizona guys are soft," an Oregon State media official joked.

Martin just turned 21 this summer but he seems much older. Analyst and former coach P.J. Carlesimo actually pointed this out during coach Bobby Hurley's group media session.

"It feels like Remy has been there almost as long as Doug, and yet he's only a junior," he said to Hurley, referring to Doug Tammaro, the program's basketball spokesman, who's entering his 27th season. "He's been there so long, it's amazing."

Told some people see him this way, Martin acted surprised.

"Really?" he said.

He doesn't feel that way.

"Honestly, it goes by fast," Martin said as he guided virtual Devin Booker down the lane for a one-handed dunk. "I've experienced a lot here. I don't really want it to end. I have two years left and I'm just trying to absorb everything."

The biggest news of the preseason: Martin is healthy. As good as he's felt in a long time. Last season, the day before this event, then-teammate De'Quon Lake fell into Martin, leaving the point guard with a high-ankle sprain. (Hurley is so superstitious he considered keeping Martin out of this week's practices just so the same misfortune wouldn't happen again. Associate head coach Rashon Burno talked him out of it.)

The ankle injury limited Martin for most of the preseason. He also battled shin, lower back and groin issues, the latter slowing him in the Pac-12 and NCAA tournaments.

"Ah, dude, the groin was the worst," Martin said. "Very frustrating."

You wouldn't always have known it, which was what made Martin's conference performance so impressive.

About 30 minutes earlier, Bill Walton had raved about this very thing. The basketball Hall of Famer and popular television analyst loves Martin. His spirit, his personality, his passion, his ability to connect, all of it. Martin plays the game how Walton analyzes it, with an enthusiasm that's hard to match (and yes, both sometimes take it too far.)

"Remy plays with such exuberance and joy," Walton said. "He loves the light. He loves to receive it and he loves to give it right back."

To Martin, that's just basketball. He can't help it. That's what the sport brings out of him.

"I was built to play this game," he said. "I was built to lead. Certain things, you just can't explain."

As Walton said, he feels the love from the crowd.

"Oh, 100 percent, man," he said.

And he tries to give it back.

"I love playing in front of our crowd," Martin said. "I love playing in front of the 942 Crew, the student section. What we've been able to do here as far as getting people in the seats has been pretty cool. My life is good."

Bobby Hurley saw Martin on the recruiting trail shortly after he was hired in 2015. He had his introductory news conference, attended the football spring game and then he was off, watching prospects on the Nike circuit, first in Dallas, then in Lexington, Ky.

"I saw him that first weekend and there was just something about him," Hurley said during Tuesday's lunch break on the roof of Pac-12 headquarters. "Just with how he moved. How he attacked. The speed. You can get this aura about him. He's passionate about what he's doing."

Hurley went easy on Martin as a freshman; he usually does with young guys. Last year, however, this started to change.

With Martin playing such a big role, with the ball in his hands so much, Hurley coached the point guard harder. Martin didn't mind. In fact, he appreciated it.

Hurley doesn't mind Martin's flash. He believes in letting players be themselves on the court. Besides, during his playing days, creative passing was the one way he could stand out, "so if a guy is capable of making a pass that might have a little more spice to it," let it rip, Hurley said.

Martin has thrived under this freedom — he's also gone too far. During a fast break early last season, he tried to throw a between-the-legs lob to Cheatham. It failed miserably.

"It hit the shot clock," Martin said. "Z's an athletic guy. We all know he can catch almost anything but there was no way he was catching that. It almost hit Eddie House's jersey (hanging from the arena rafters)."

The turnover earned Martin a spot on the bench. At media day, Hurley didn't even remember it.

"That was probably a game we were winning by a lot, and I didn't want him to (show up) the other team," he said.

Martin said his relationship with Hurley is outstanding.

"Every year it just seems to get better," he said. "We're talking a lot more. He holds me accountable. We've had our battles. We've been through adversity but at the end of the day, we know we both have each other's backs."

At 2:10 p.m., ASU took the main media day stage. Hurley sat at the front of the room and answered questions about the program's opening contest in China and this season's deeper 3-point arc.

In the back, Martin and Edwards sat a small table side by side. Pac-12 Networks analyst Matt Muehlebach asked Martin about summer workouts with James Harden, the school's most famous basketball alum.

"Oh, man, he's by far the hardest person I've ever guarded just because he has so many moves," Martin said. "You cut him off, he's got another one for you. You cut that off, he's got another. Next thing you know, he's at the basket."

The workouts showed Martin he wasn't ready for the next level. That he needs to get stronger. That was an emphasis in the offseason. So, too, was perimeter shooting. Martin was in the gym as early as 5 a.m., getting up shots.

He knows much was made about last season's shot selection, at least early in the season. To Martin, it's not so much a thought process, but a feel. If he thinks ASU needs a boost, he tries to provide it. Sometimes that's scoring. Sometimes it's finding the hot hand. Sometimes it's simply taking a charge.

If that's not good enough to make him the Pac-12's top point guard, so be it. Martin's goal is to win a conference title and advance in the NCAA Tournament. Besides, he said, "at the end of the day, the cream always rises to the top."

No buts about it.