

HURLEY MELLOWS FOR DEVILS' SAKE

By Kent Somers/Azcentralsports.com (published Jan. 24, 2020)

The eyes widen, the lips purse and the veins in his neck and face expand to capacity as they carry the blood that turns Bobby Hurley's face red.

That is what Hurley looks like when he's angry with referees, and it's a look we saw often in his first four seasons as Arizona State's basketball coach.

But in this season, Hurley's fifth in Tempe, it's a look he's flashed far less often. Hurley still appears to lose his mind at times — he was assessed a technical last week against Utah — but it's happened far less often this year.

That technical? It was his first of the season.

It's part of a concerted effort by Hurley to change his demeanor on the sideline, and it reflects both his growth as a coach and that of his program.

"I'm a relatively young head coach, in terms of years of doing the job," Hurley said. "I think I had to establish a fight to me that might filter through to the players early in my tenure here. I feel like now that I've been able to build the culture of the team. Now I have guys that have that fight in them. I don't need to be that demonstrative anymore."

It's strange to hear Hurley, 48, refer to himself as a "young" head coach, probably because we've seen him on basketball courts since he was a freshman at Duke in 1989. But this is just his seventh overall season as a head coach. In the Pac-12, only Washington's Mike Hopkins has less head coaching experience (three years), but Hopkins spent the previous 22 years as an assistant at Syracuse.

So it makes sense that Hurley is refining who he is a coach. It's an ongoing process because what he is trying to balance is not easy.

On one side is the realization that sideline tantrums directed at officials can hurt the Sun Devils more than help. Usually, they don't result in officials having an epiphany and acknowledging they are doing a lousy job. And they can keep Hurley from his main job: coaching his players and helping them win a game.

On the other side is Hurley recognizing that he has to be himself, too. He reached this point because of his fierceness and drive, not in spite of.

Hurley's name, his style and the resulting success have put fans in the seats at ASU's Desert Financial Arena. And not just on nights like Saturday, when Arizona comes to town.

And besides, a well-timed blood-letting by a coach occasionally can change the way a game is officiated.

"I've tried to adjust my behavior with officials," Hurley said, smiling.

I laughed.

"I just laughed at that myself," he said. "I know that everyone is going to say, 'sure, OK.' But I've tried to communicate more in a non-conflict way, maybe at a dead ball just talking about something that I might have thought.

"Now, there were a couple of outbursts on Saturday (against Utah). I just have to limit those as much as possible."

Part of what motivated the change, Hurley said, is that he wants to represent ASU, its alumni, and his bosses, President Michael Crow and Athletic Director Ray Anderson "the right way."

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So, he wants to "tweak" his style because he knows he can be "super emotional" and occasionally needs to "dial it back some."

That prompted an obvious question. Did Crow and Anderson ask Hurley to dial it back some?

"We talk after the season and there are always suggestive things that could come up," Hurley said. "I'm sure that was possibly the case."

That answer sounded a lot like "yes." If so, it was a good suggestion by Crow and Anderson. Hurley, to his credit, heeded the advice.

"It has given me an opportunity to focus more on coaching and tactics in the game and maybe not being influenced by emotion," he said. "Just having it in control a little more. But I have to be able to reach back and turn it loose a few times, too. That's just kind of

Hurley called it being "connected emotionally" to his team. After the Utah game, point guard Remy Martin said Hurley's outburst that drew a technical fired him up.

"As long he doesn't get thrown out of the game, I'm fine," Martin said this week. "He is who he is. He's such an accomplished guy, you kind of let him do what he does. After he got that one tech, I told him 'no more.' I feel like he knows what he's doing."

Players can get in a rhythm, but listen to Hurley's critique of himself in the Utah game and it's obvious he believes coaches can, too.

"I felt truer to myself than I have in awhile," he said. "I feel like I really nailed it that game, from both tactics, emotion and just the fire that my team could feed off."