

Ladies of the Court

news

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The Bison, all deaf or hard of hearing, ended the regular season with an astonishing 23-2 record. [Photo by Matt Kohashi]

When Kevin Cook landed in Washington, D.C., to coach Gallaudet University's Bison women's basketball team in October 2007, he braced for the challenge of his career. Even though he had an impressive résumé—he'd coached WNBA and NCAA Division I women's teams and, most recently, the Nigerian national women's team—he had never worked with athletes quite like these. The students at Gallaudet are deaf or hard of hearing, and Cook didn't know even a letter of sign language before he boarded the flight back to the U.S. "I went from a foreign country to another foreign country," he recalls.

The Bison were just as perplexed by their towering, impatient new coach. Cook's last few teams were championship winners, while

Gallaudet was struggling in every single game—the team had compiled an abysmal 3–22 record the season before he was hired. "We were trying to get on the same page as him, and he was frustrated," Gallaudet center Nukeitra Hayes says through an interpreter.

But this year, the Bison have staged a dramatic turnaround. Led by two talented seniors, Hayes and forward Easter Faafiti, they've finished the regular season with a 23–2 record. They were the top seed in the North Eastern Athletic Conference (NEAC) tournament—and its only nonhearing team. Their success has been nothing short of amazing, especially considering that the players must keep looking at one another to communicate, which means taking their eyes off the ball.

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At the team's final regular-season game last month, cheerleaders waved their pom-poms in silence. The crowd encouraged the team not by shouting but by stomping their feet to send vibrations through the wooden floor. On court, Gallaudet's women looked like the other college players, with their tattoos and swinging ponytails, except they communicated silently, relying on the tiniest and briefest of head nods, hand motions, and—since many of them can lip-read—mouth movements. Cook strode along the sidelines, gesturing in sign language. He was shadowed by an interpreter he uses for games. (Cook is at level four, out of eight, in the American Sign Language course.)

The Bison's success did not come easy. The team's first season with Cook was shaky. They went 3–21, their low point coming when they lost a game by 75 points. While the team's performance improved over the next two years,

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the real transformation began early last fall, as the season began. “At one practice, I was unhappy about their work habits,” Cook recalls. “Easter told me some of the freshmen were saying, ‘Coach doesn’t understand deaf culture.’ I got really upset.” He told the team that the problem wasn’t deaf culture—it was that the players had gotten too used to losing. They needed, Cook said, to build “a winning culture.”

To drive home his point, he scheduled a scrimmage between his team, which plays in the NCAA’s Division III, and the women of the University of Maryland, members of the elite Division I. Even though Gallaudet lost by 53 points, the players learned a lot from the experience. “We always remember how we played that day, and it’s lifted our level of play in general,” Hayes says.

The Bison went on to win their first 20 games in a row, their best run since the Gallaudet women’s hoops program began in 1896. “Everything came together this year,” says Faafiti, an All-American and winner of two back-to-back player-of-the-year awards.

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On the court, she and Hayes have learned to work in sync effortlessly, and their teammates follow suit, constantly glancing at them for direction. The fact that the players must sign on court has been both a hindrance and a help. Cook speculates that the team loses up to six points per game because the players are looking at one another instead of looking at the ball. However, they do have an edge: Their opponents yell out their plays, information Cook hears and passes on to his athletes—but other teams frequently can’t understand the Gallaudet hand signals.

Cook credits their remarkable streak this year in part to the leadership of Hayes and Faafiti. But personal difficulties have also created strong bonds. In his first year, Cook learned he had Parkinson’s disease. That same year, Hayes lost her brother Keith in a fire in Indiana. Grief-stricken, she nearly dropped out of school, returning only after she found an unmailed letter from Keith urging her to finish college.

In 2009, the coach’s sister (and best friend), Kelly Preston, died in a fire in Ohio. “The team got me several cards, not just one,” Cook says, his voice breaking. “Nukeitra would check on me three times a day, dropping by to ask, ‘Coach, you okay?’ She’s special people.

“The biggest lesson I’ve learned from this team is about being grateful,” he adds. “I tell them, ‘Look, none of us hears perfectly, but we’re all here and going to university.’ I’ve also gained patience. I’ve had to slow down my communication, and it’s carried over into the rest of my life.”

Faafiti’s father (who is able to hear) flew in from California to watch his daughter play her final regular-season game. After the Bison won 73–54, he was beaming. “I am so happy to see her succeeding and being so strong and humble,” he said. “This is one of the proudest moments of my life.”

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