Basketball takes West Albany grad to France

Lourdes is one of the most visited Catholic pilgrimage sites in the world, drawing almost six million people a year to southwestern France.

Many come seeking healing in the springs or spiritual enlightenment in the small city made famous by reports of visions of the Virgin Mary.

It wasn’t exactly a miracle, but West Albany graduate Brian Freeman has also found what he was looking for in Lourdes: his basketball home.

Freeman plays for Lourdes-Tarbes, a squad in the French professional leagues that represents the two cities, which are about 11 miles apart.

He has played for the team for the past two seasons and his contract runs for another year. His agent is already working with the team on an extension and the 6-foot-9 center/forward hopes to stay much longer.

Lourdes-Tarbes had a successful season in 2012-13 and will move up from the NM2 league to the NM1 league this season. The promotion means more prestige and higher competition.

“It’s fun, it’s exciting,” Freeman said of the team’s success. “That’s our goal, to get to the top league in the next couple of years. We want our team to advance.”

There are two higher leagues than NM1 in France, but Freeman said that’s a little bit deceiving when it comes to judging the level of competition. Even NM2 is a tougher league than the top leagues in other countries, such as the Netherlands.

Freeman, 26, has seen quite a bit of European basketball over the past several years. His journey began after his graduation from West Albany in 2004. He spent three seasons at Clackamas Community College, having to sit out one year because of a leg injury.

He finished his collegiate career at Long Beach State and then turned his eye to Europe.

He was familiar with that possibility because that is what his father had done.

Gary Freeman played for Oregon State in the late 1960s and after a brief stint in the NBA kept his career going by playing in Europe. It was there that he met the Dutch woman would become Brian’s mother, Anneke.

Brian Freeman first joined a team in Poland. That turned out to not be a solid situation. By the end of the season the team was three months behind on its payroll, he said.
Even though it was time to come home for the summer, Freeman stayed.

“I didn’t leave until I had my money,” he recalled. “There were teammates owed $30,000 they didn’t end up getting.”

He left once he got paid and he didn’t go back. He joined a team in Holland for the next season and while the financial situation was better, the playing situation wasn’t.

So he left the team at midseason with his career at a crossroads.

“I was getting a little discouraged at that point,” Freeman said.

But he caught on with a team in Austria and finished out the season on a positive note.

“They needed a guy like me. It ended up being a good situation and reinspired me,” Freeman said.

It was then that he latched on with the team in Lourdes-Tarbes. He plays for a coach, Alex Casimiri, who was born in Oregon. The team’s system allows Freeman to use his skills as an inside and out big man.

“I have the European-style game. I can shoot, I can drive,” said Freeman, who averaged about seven assists a game last season, a surprising number for a player of his position.

Staying with one team has also allowed him to work on his language skills. He picked up a little Polish and a little German in his earlier stops, but didn’t get too far. His French, however, is improving and that makes his daily life much easier.

“I can’t express how nice it is to be able to say what you need to say,” Freeman said.

He will return to France in mid-August. It’s a trip he hopes to make many more times, while also acknowledging how unpredictable life can be.

“A basketball career is a tough thing to predict,” Freeman said, “but I love my job.”