Canzano: You ask how he does it, and the coach points at No. 5

For the last 16 seasons, a one-time Southern Oregon farm kid named Jim Martineau has run the women's basketball program at Clackamas Community College. During that time, his teams have won seven Southern Region championships, including three of the last four. And so one day early this winter I dropped by his office and asked him to show me how he does it.

He pointed to No. 5.

That would be Laci Effenberger.

"They're all here for different reasons," Martineau said. "She's here for a second chance."

Effenberger is 21, and on Wednesday night, she played in her final regular-season community college basketball game. She scored 23 points to go with six rebounds and six assists. Her team beat Mt. Hood Community College 88-40. But before that last game, she sat on a bleacher seat with me, tears in her eyes, and made me wish I'd been there to see them all.

"I went from being practically homeless to all this," she said.

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Effenberger grew up in Ketchikan, Alaska. Population: 9,000. Her parents were both basketball officials, and so as far back as she remembers she was in a gym, dribbling a ball.

"There's not a lot to do there," she said. "If you want to get out, you find a way."

She found basketball. In high school Effenberger, a point guard, became good enough to play AAU tournaments, including the prestigious NCAA-certified End of the Trail tournament held in Oregon City. And so a few years ago, at the event, with a line of high-profile Division I coaches on the baseline, scouting the talent, someone threw an errant pass.

"There's a guy sitting there in a chair eating a hot dog and drinking a soda," Martineau remembers. "He gets
drilled with the ball, and his hot dog goes flying, and there's soda everywhere. Just a mess."

Suddenly, there's something else.

"The play goes on, but then all of a sudden a girl appears, goes over, leans down, and starts helping clean everything up."

That was Laci.

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Effenberger would eventually leave Alaska to finish her senior year of high school in Oklahoma, living away from her parents. There were two major knee injuries in high school, too. Then, her stint on scholarship at Angelo State in Texas was interrupted on the second day of practice with another major knee injury. She had five surgeries in three years --- MCL, ACL, meniscus --- and oh, one more surgery to remove a set of screws that were initially put into her right knee to hold it together.

Basketball wasn't the only part of her life crumbling, either. There was a falling out with her parents. She made a move to Seattle, she said, "to get a change of scenery." It ended with a roommate running off with all her belongings.

"Everything I owned besides my purse and the clothes I had on was pawned off," she said. "At the time, I thought I had it all figured out, I never thought I'd be the one to lose my pride and call my mom."

But she did.

"Mom," Laci remembers asking, "can I come home?"

It was back in Alaska that Effenberger, rehabilitating her battered knees and making plans to get on with a life without basketball, thought about Martineau. All those years earlier, amid the spilled soda and flying hot dog, the long-time Clackamas CC coach had thrown her a lifeline.

"If you don't have a place to play," Martineau told her, "give us a call."

The coach knew Effenberger was a Division I prospect. But he said it anyway. And all those years later, she picked up the phone.

"I called, even knowing that nobody believed I would ever play again," Effenberger said.

Martineau told her his offer stood.
Said Effenberger, wiping away tears: "I don't think he realizes the impact he's had."

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Wednesday was a heavy night in the Clackamas Community College gymnasium. It was "sophomore night," and there were parents and flowers present. Martineau was there. So was his co-coach, Kayla Steen. And as Effenberger sat with me before the game for a few minutes, explaining how blessed she feels to be playing a game few others even knew was going on, a delivery driver for a florist was directed our way, handing her a bouquet of roses sent from Alaska.

The card read: "You're a star! – Love, Mom and Dad."

Before tip against Mt. Hood, both teams stood, and the public address announcer played the national anthem. Effenberger started to cry. Martineau, a few feet behind her, hand over heart, noticed, leaned forward and nudged the back of his player's left knee with his foot. Martineau's wife, PJ, a 16-year assistant coach and former Portland State star player, leaned in and put her arms on Effenberger's shoulders.

"It's not over yet," PJ whispered. "We have a game to play."

"They were happy tears," Effenberger said later.

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The story doesn't end here for Martineau and his program. He'll coach the games. His co-coach, Steen, will run practices. They'll continue to draw local talent, and keep the door open for players such as the All-Region point guard from Alaska who needed a place to play, learn and grow.

Said Martineau: "This is my job."

They'll probably continue to win big, too. There's magic in what Martineau's program is doing, even if everyone on the outside is too busy to notice on a Wednesday night.

Martineau's cool touch and rock-solid work ethic may have been born working on his family's 1,100-acre ranch in Douglas County. But his act was refined in this gymnasium.

"I was one of these kids," Martineau said.

Martineau starred at Sutherlin High and used basketball as a ticket to somewhere else, playing two seasons at Clackamas Community College and a season at the University of Idaho. After that, he returned to the community college campus as coach and, five years ago, added "athletic director" to his title.
"I know I'm here for a reason," he said.

The Cougars (19-6) begin postseason play next weekend. Effenberger said she'll be ready. After that, she plans to finish her basketball career at Point Loma Nazarene University. But it's what she said before she skipped off with her bouquet of flowers toward that final regular-season game that sticks with me today.

See, it's the gift of opportunity Martineau has given Effenberger. And the gift of capitalizing on that opportunity she's given her coach in return. This symbiosis is the foundation of every successful pupil-mentor relationship.

"Dream job?" she asked, "I'd come back here and steal Jim's job someday."

She meant that as the highest compliment.

--- @JohnCanzanoBFT

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