

SPORTS

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Heaton's final test: NFL combines

By C.J. RISAK
STAFF WRITER

Toby Heaton has one major exam left in his college career.

A lot of people figure that will be in the one remaining class Heaton has left to take to earn his degree in advertising. But if you know Toby, you know that isn't any real problem. After all, this is a guy who's been an academic all-Big Ten football player since he first started playing at Michigan State.

No, the real test Heaton is preparing for comes Feb. 10 in Indianapolis. That's when NFL teams will send their scouts to time, weigh, test and interview prospective players.

Heaton plans to put up marks that are as impressive as those he's managed during his stay at MSU — on and off the field.

Another final? "Really, it is," Heaton agreed. "You've got to be ready." His last season as a Spartan didn't do much to advance those hopes, unfortunately. The former Redford

Catholic Central star from Plymouth was the only senior starter on the offensive line. Injuries cost MSU everywhere, but Heaton managed to play every game at left guard.

"I thought the team did a really good job keeping together," he said. "It was tough, for me, being out there and trying to keep something going."

There were different problems each week. New players were shuffled into the lineup, forcing Heaton to make an adjustment himself while helping the new player get adjusted — not always an easy task. He doubted some were willing, or ready, to make the necessary sacrifices when moved into a starter's role.

"They may have been young, but they were still starters," said Heaton.

The breakdowns hurt Heaton's draft chances. He knows it. Still, he managed to make second team all-Big Ten. That should be enough to get him a good look by pro scouts.

Heaton is listed at 6-foot-6, 283 pounds, but says he played between

280 and 285 all season. There are several other commodities he possesses that could interest the pros.

"I think I'm smart enough that I'm ready to play at any time," he said. "And I'm a hard player. I will go until the whistle blows. My pass protection is pretty good, and scouts have told me my footwork is good."

"I think I'm a coachable person. I do what I'm told to do." And his abilities? "Maybe my overall athletic ability," he answered. "That may drop me back to the middle rounds of the draft."

And, of course, MSU's lackluster 5-6 season. "All I can do is play hard and hope that if the scouts look at the film, they'll see," said Heaton.

He probably won't play in any all-star games. He was invited to the Senior Bowl in Mobile, Ala., but didn't reply in time to reserve his spot. Others don't interest him — not even the Hula Bowl, played in Honolulu. "I'm not interested in going out there just for the trip," was his reason

for bypassing it.

Heaton would rather not sacrifice time he could spend getting ready for the pro combine partying in Hawaii.

With talk around the NFL in cutting the draft to seven rounds, Heaton could go undrafted — a prospect that doesn't all together bother him.

"If that's the case, and I was drafted in the fourth or fifth round, I'd be OK," he explained. "If I'm in the sixth or seventh, I might as well be a free agent because then I can pick a team that needs offensive linemen."

If things don't go well, if Heaton doesn't make a pro team, it won't bother him. "I feel I've had a great career in football," he said. "I had a lot of fun. If you're satisfied with your accomplishments, then you have nothing to be sorry about."

"If football does work out, fine. If not, I'm fully prepared to go on with my life in the business world."

That is a decision Heaton won't have to make for a few months, anyway.

No excuses for sorry state of suburban hoops

So we're all sittin' around, doin' what folks in every business office in town do between Christmas and New Year's.

"When was Michigan's first Rose Bowl appearance?"

(Answer: 1902; the Wolverines beat Stanford 49-0.)

"When was Michigan's second Rose Bowl appearance?"

(Answer: 1948, and the score was the same — U-M 49, Southern Cal 0.)

"When was Michigan State's first Rose Bowl appearance?"

(Answer: 1954; the Spartans beat UCLA 28-20.)

"When was the last time U-M was voted the nation's No. 1 team?"

(Answer: Heh! . . . Well, the actual answer is 1948.)

It was at about this time that a more local, and certainly more obscure, trivia teaser was posed.

"When was the last time an Observer-area team won a state basketball title?"

Brows furrowed. Silence prevailed. Then one set of eyes suddenly brightened.

"1985 — Livonia Ladywood in Class B!"

OK, correct answer, but that wasn't the question intended. "When was the last time an Observer-area team won a boys state basketball title?"

Last boys champ was . . .

Again, brows furrowed with concentration for a long period before an answer was forthcoming.

"How about 1976 — Catholic Central in Class A?"

Wrong. CC did win in '76, and in '61, but it was located in Detroit at the time.

The correct answer, as it turned out, is embarrassing. There has never been a champion from the Observer-area, in any class, in boys basketball.

Can you imagine?

Why is that? The deluge of excuses — pardon me, I mean reasons — follows.

■ Basketball's a city game.

■ Soccer, swimming, golf, baseball — even football. Those are suburban games, not basketball.

■ There are bigger and better athletes in the city.

Why not say it's a black man's game? Or maybe it's something in the water.

Those aren't any closer to the truth, either.

The truth is, there is no good reason for not having a boys basketball champion from the Observer-area. Because all the ingredients are here.

There's some great coaching available. There are some very good summer camps, camps which should be more affordable to the alleged more affluent suburbanites, right?

The talent at most Observer-area schools may not be of championship caliber at present, but you've got to figure that sometime in the last 67 years they would have managed to win one title.

No good reason

As for the excuses — or arguments — listed above, well, they're ridiculous. When you say basketball is a city game, do you mean there isn't room for courts out here?

Sorry.

Other sports are more suburban? Well, there may be more alternatives for suburban kids, but basketball isn't the only sport of the city, either.

Detroit teams have won three football state championships in the last five years.

Athletes are better? Maybe. But reading Chris McCosky's story on the Observer all-area basketball team of a decade ago says something different.

Tom Demko, John McIntyre, Shawn Respert, Parrish Hickman, Mike Malecki, Lewis Scott . . . these are but a few of the top players to graduate from area schools in the last 10 years. All played NCAA Division I ball.

Besides, being suburban hasn't kept Birmingham from winning a few titles (Country Day, Basher Rice).

And it hasn't prevented the local girls' teams from excelling. Plymouth Canton reached the Class A final four in '91; Farmington Hills Mercy has won two Class A titles, and Ladywood has collected two more in B.

I'm beginning to think perhaps goals are set too low. Coaches point teams toward what they feel are obtainable goals — league championships, district titles — instead of the bigger plums. If players don't believe they can beat a Detroit team during the state tournament, chances are they won't.

Well, the challenge is there now. Look to the top. Start building a team that can match anything Detroit has to offer.

Redford Bishop Boring did reach the Class B final in 1988 before losing. So it is obtainable.

And I, for one, believe it's possible. A state boys basketball title for an Observer-area team — I'd like to see that.



JIM JACQUELINE/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

That was then: Remember when Lars Richters (shown during his days playing for the Marauders travel team in 1990) was the scourge of Observerland soccer? These days he sits and waits for his chance to display his All-American skills for the Detroit Rockers.

Richters' nears a crossroad with Rockers

■ The professional career of former Observerland standout Lars Richters may be idling away on the Detroit Rockers' bench, but he's too well-mannered to make a fuss. So far.

By CHRIS MCCOSKY
STAFF WRITER

Schoolcraft College women's soccer coach Nick O'Shea, a part-time analyst for PASS on its Detroit Rockers telecasts, was talking about his friend Lars Richters the other night. "He's too nice," O'Shea was saying. "He needs to go up to the coach and say, 'Hey, how come I'm not playing? I deserve a chance.'"

People around here remember Richters as the star of Livonia Stevenson's state championship teams of 1985 and 1986. They remember him as an All-Ivy League midfielder at Yale. They do not, however, remember him as a reserve player, or a bench-warmer.

But there he sat last Tuesday night at Cork Ave., watching his Detroit Rockers teammates beat the Chicago Power, 17-10, in a National Professional Soccer League match. Not once did Coach Brian Tinnion call his name.

"Sure it's frustrating," Richters said. "Nobody's sitting on the bench. It's very difficult."

But don't expect Richters to raise a big fuss about it. He can barely bring himself to complain about it.

"I just wasn't brought up to show disrespect to a coach," he said. "I was taught to just do my best and not say too much. I guess I need to be more aggressive, more vocal, so I wouldn't have to tread water like this and wonder if I have a future with the Rockers."

For the past two seasons, Richters has played the role of super-sub for the Rockers.

"Basically, my role is to fill in wherever necessary," he said. "For most of training camp and for the first few weeks of this season, Richters was being called upon quite frequently. In fact, while striker Andy

Chapman was injured, Richters was starting.

"I did all right, but it kind of bothered me because I was playing out of position," said Richters, a natural midfielder. "It's very difficult to play at this level in a position other than one your skills are suited for."

It's even more difficult when you are being pushed in and out of the lineup like a yo-yo.

"All I want is to get a fair shot to play the position my skills are suited for and I don't think that has happened yet," he said. "I've been thrown in different situations for brief periods of time. Nobody has ever given me a position other than a regular shift and said, 'OK, let's see what you can do.'"

It seemed like Richters was getting that shot at the beginning of training camp. The Rockers were going through a change in ownership and players were arriving late to camp. Richters was there from day one. He was starting in the pre-season games and he played well.

"I was loving that," he said. "I was playing well and getting confident. I was loving just coming to the practices and touching the ball."

But as more and more guys came into camp, Richters' playing time grew shorter and shorter.

"I felt like I was really doing good, and it would have meant a lot to me for them to say to those other guys, 'He's been here and he's been playing well. You have to take the job away from him.' But that didn't happen."

At that point in the conversation, Richters stopped himself.

"But, you know, I don't want to sound like I'm complaining. That's just the way it is."

No complaints, then. But here is the reality of Richters' situation. He isn't getting any younger and he isn't getting rich playing professional soccer. He has his life, his career, his future to think about. There is a prestigious fitness equipment manufacturer on the west coast offering him a nice career as a sales rep, and spokesman. He loves soccer and he wants to play as long as he can, but he needs to know if he is in the Rockers' future plans or is he just spinning his wheels.

See RICHTERS, 2C

Salem's Dena Head is home for holidays, but the road to pro basketball beckons

By CHRIS MCCOSKY
STAFF WRITER

The task: Track down Dena Head.

Let's see, she graduated from the University of Tennessee last summer, tried out for and nearly made the U.S. Olympic basketball team and then, last anybody heard, she was playing professional basketball in France or Italy or somewhere overseas.

Oh, this ought to be fun.

Where to start: Well, her brother James is a junior at Plymouth Salem. Maybe Coach Bob Brodie can help.

He'll have the number of Dena's parents, Jim and Jackie. Maybe they'll have an overseas number for Dena. Of course, what are the chances she'll be there? Her team is probably on a road trip somewhere in Europe or Asia or Africa. What the heck, call the Head residence in Canton.

"Hello?"

"Hi, is this Jackie?"

"No, this is Dena."

Unbelievable. Dena is home for the holidays.

"It's been enjoyable being home,"

said Head, who helped Salem to four straight Class A regional titles and two final four berths before helping Tennessee claim a pair of national championships. "I finally got to see my brother play. I am very proud of the progress he has made. His desire to have to be known as Dena's little brother anymore. He's got his own name and his own game now and that's what I always wanted for him."

James Head, a 6-8 junior and the

See DENA HEAD, 2C



Dena Head Back to Italy?