

STATE COLLEGES

For Miami's Darren Hertz, his role as a Dayton assistant is study in perseverance, passion

BY WALTER VILLA *MIAMI HERALD WRITER*

AUGUST 25, 2020 02:03 PM

Brandon, Julie, Darren and Lexi Hertz. *COURTESY OF FAMILY***Listen to this article now**

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At Darren Hertz's bar mitzvah three decades ago, he was photographed with his constant companion — a basketball.

That was an early sign that he wouldn't quite follow his father, retired coach Steve Hertz, into baseball.

"When he was about 11 years old, Darren told me, 'Dad, I don't want to play baseball anymore,'" said Steve Hertz, who briefly reached the major leagues as an infielder with the Houston Colt 45's in 1964. "I never pushed him toward baseball. I loved that he was passionate about basketball."

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But while Darren Hertz didn't follow his father into baseball, he did emulate his dad by becoming a coach.

Steve Hertz served as a head baseball coach in Miami for 41 years, winning more than 1,200 games. He coached at Coral Park, Southridge and Miami Dade College, leading MDC to a fifth-place national finish in 2001. He also helped send more than 150 players to pro ball.

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This past season, Darren Hertz, 44, was a first-year, full-time, on-court assistant to former Miami High star Anthony Grant at Dayton, helping the Flyers produce a 29-2 overall record and a No. 3 national ranking when the coronavirus pandemic ended the college basketball season.

The Flyers didn't lose any games in regulation — falling to fourth-ranked Kansas and to Colorado in overtime — and went 18-0 in the Atlantic 10 Conference. Colorado, by the way, needed a three-pointer at the overtime buzzer to beat Dayton 78-76.

Senior forward Obi Toppin — Dayton's first consensus All-American — had a lot to do with the Flyers' school-record 29 regular-season wins. But Grant, Hertz and the

rest of the coaching staff deserve credit, too.

“Darren is extremely thorough and qualified,” Grant told the Miami Herald when asked about Hertz. “He is organized, a good teacher, communicator and relationship-builder. He’s able to find common ground.”

Trey Landers, a 6-5 senior guard this past season for Dayton, can attest to Hertz’s ability to relate to players.

“My dad died in the streets,” Landers said. “I had a difficult childhood, and it was hard for me to trust people.

“Coach Hertz pushed to get to know who I am and my story. We would grab food sometimes and have sit-down conversations. I knew I could open up to him.”

PASSION FOR THE GAME

When Hertz was a freshman at Miami’s Killian High, he once came home with a black eye.

“He was tough,” Steve Hertz said of his son. “He wouldn’t back down from anyone.”

That same type of determination has typified Darren Hertz’s coaching career.

Hertz’s playing days ended in high school, and he went to the University of Florida with no set career plan. But as a UF senior in 1996 — still passionate about basketball — he was hired as a student assistant by new Gators coach Billy Donovan.

But it was hardly a glamour job.

“I was making little to no money,” Hertz said. “It took me about five years before I got hired full time.

“But I knew something special was being built there. I’m not so sure everyone thought it was the greatest idea [to stick around without a full-time job], but I hung in there.”




Dayton offered Grant the chance to replace Archie Miller, who had just taken the Indiana Hoosiers job.

“I didn’t know much about Dayton, but when [Grant] got the job, we connected,” said Hertz, a married father of two. “If he felt I could bring value, that was all I needed to hear. I was ready, and my wife [Julie] was on board.

“Anthony is a great coach and a better person. I knew this could be a home run.”

Hertz, hired as assistant to the head coach for his two years at Dayton, finally became a full-fledged assistant coach this past season.

Meanwhile, Toppin, who is projected to get selected among the top six picks in this year’s NBA Draft, was one of the first two recruits signed by Grant’s Dayton staff.



“Obi didn’t have any offers out of high school,” Hertz said of Toppin, who is from New York City. “So, he went to a prep school, and we had some connections to him.

“He wasn’t going to qualify academically right away. But we were in ‘Year One’ as a staff, and we had the luxury to take a chance on him. We saw the upside.”

Toppin was just 6-2 as a prep junior but grew seven inches to his current height, and the Dayton program has had a similar rise under Grant.

After a 14-17 record in a 2017-2018 season during which the Flyers had three incoming transfers sitting out the year, things got better for the Flyers. Dayton finished last year at 21-12, qualifying for the NIT.

This season, the Flyers became the first team ever to go undefeated in Atlantic 10 play, and they won every road game (9-0) for the first time in school history since 1954-55.

Hertz, who earned his Bachelor's degree (sociology) in 1997 and his Master's degree in 2001 (sport management), both from UF, worked his way up to video coordinator, then assistant to the head coach and, finally, to director of basketball operations.

He stayed at Florida for 19 years, helping the Gators reach 14 NCAA Tournaments during that span. That run also included four trips to the Final Four and two national titles.

"I didn't know Darren until I got to Florida, but it developed into a 19-year relationship," Donovan, now the coach of the NBA's Oklahoma City Thunder, told The Herald. "Everyone loved Darren.

"He did a lot of different things for us. At first, he ran the basketball camps. He was also great with our players, checking on class attendance and working with our academic advisors.

"He also watched a lot of film and was a great resource for me, coming up with ideas and suggestions. He was always well prepared with a great drive to be a complete coach."

Donovan said Hertz was not — at that time — allowed to go on the road to recruit. He was also not allowed to get on the court to coach in practice, and both of those things were due to NCAA rules on tasks that can be performed as a director of operations.

"[But] Darren was as valuable as anyone on our staff," Donovan said. "There's nothing you could put in front of him that he wouldn't tackle."

NEW CHALLENGES

After leaving Florida, Hertz spent two years on staff with the University of Illinois. But on March 11, 2017, Illinois coach John Groce was fired, which meant Hertz was effectively unemployed.

Meanwhile, Grant, who had worked with Hertz at Florida and played his college ball at Dayton, was one of Donovan's assistants with the Thunder when he got an intriguing call in the spring of 2017.

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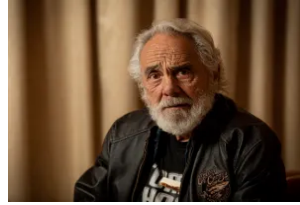
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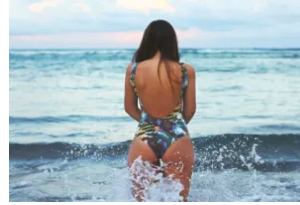
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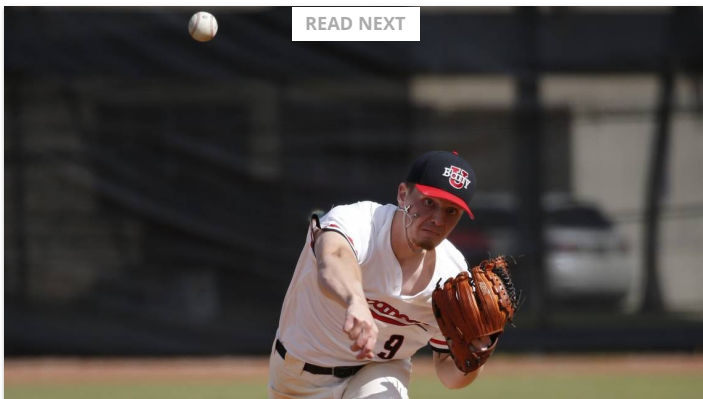
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When the season was canceled, Dayton was on a 20-game win streak, longest in the nation.

Hertz, who said he is no hurry to become a head coach and hopes to be at Dayton a long time, said the abrupt end to the 2019-2020 season was painful.

“I feel for our seniors and a guy like Obi who will never get to play in an NCAA Tournament,” Hertz said.

“When we got back to Dayton [after the season was canceled], we had an emotional team meeting. We stood in a circle, holding hands, and there were a lot of tears shed.

“[Grant] was amazing with his message to our team, and we soon realized that this was bigger than basketball.”



Darren Hertz and head coach Anthony Grant at Dayton. *COURTESY OF UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON.*