

ASU basketball's Bobby Hurley finds a home in the Arizona desert

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(Photo: David Wallace/The Republic)

Shortly after 7 on a recent summer morning, Bobby Hurley walks on the Gateway Loop Trail on the McDowell Sonoran Preserve, a 4.2-mile stretch that winds into the mountains not far from his house in North Scottsdale.

The Arizona State basketball coach smiles as fellow hikers pass on his left and continues up the mountain, climbing toward an elevation that will reach 2,378 feet. Throughout his life, Hurley always has fit in on the basketball court, but out here in the desert, with the temperature creeping toward 90 degrees, he fits in in a different way.

"There's different things I can do with it, which is why I like it," Hurley says of hiking. "Like what we're doing now. Just kind of walking. I could do that with my kids and my wife and we can talk and it's really not exercise.

Or I can do it where I'll have the stopwatch and I'll see what I could do it in time-wise."

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Three years ago, ASU's hire of Hurley produced great excitement among the university's fan base. Hurley was college basketball royalty. A two-time national champion at Duke. The sport's career assists leader. A poster child for grit and determination.

At the same time, many paranoid souls wondered about his future. They feared that after his first successful season, Hurley would bolt back east, closer to his roots in Jersey City, where his father, a Hall of Fame basketball coach, pushed him to limits Hurley never knew existed.

No doubt, home produces a strong pull for nearly all of us, kind of like a magnet. But out here, nearly 2,390 miles from where he grew up, Hurley has created a home, and the desert has a significant place in it, somewhere Hurley can push himself, unwind or simply breathe.

Not long after his arrival, his wife, Leslie, purchased a book that listed the 50 best trails to hike. Since then, Hurley estimates they've done seven, Camelback Mountain among them. This, however, is his go-to spot. It's close, convenient and challenging. It's also beautiful. At any time, Hurley can turn back over his shoulder and see nearly all of the East Valley.

"I feel like there is something spiritual to it," Hurley tells azcentral sports during the hike. "Just something really genuine or authentic that hasn't been touched by society. You can just enjoy this in a really natural way. You don't know what wildlife you might encounter out here. I don't know. ... There's something peaceful about it – it kind of calms me down or something."

Always seeking a challenge

Last summer, Hurley took the team out here for a run. They started from Hurley's house and ran to the preserve, up the trail, back down and back to Hurley's house, a course he estimates at six miles. Naturally, the guards – Tra Holder, Shannon Evans and Kodi Justice – led the way, but Hurley wasn't far behind.

This shouldn't surprise you.

Even at age 47, with gray taking over his dark hair, Hurley is a well-known competition addict. It stretches off the basketball court and into other areas of his life. Hurley is a member at a health club not far from here. When on the treadmill, he cranks it up as high as he can tolerate while running three miles. He started running this loop during the early summer months because basketball slows and he wanted to find a way to stay competitive and to challenge himself.

On Father's Day, he took off from his house with a goal to finish the Gateway trail in an hour and 10 minutes. He finished in an hour, 10 minutes – and 51 seconds.

"I wasn't thrilled," he says.



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ASU head basketball coach Bobby Hurley hikes in the McDowell Mountains in Scottsdale on July 3, 2018. Since moving to the Valley when Hurley became ASU head basketball coach in 2015, hiking in the desert has become a regular part of his exercise routine. (Photo: David Wallace/The Republic)

Hurley enjoys the mental challenge. Unlike most, he doesn't run while listening to music or podcasts or sports-talk radio. It's just him. His thoughts. His focus. *Stop! Go! Faster! Slow down!* Asked if it's his voice running through his head or his father's, he laughs.

"There are times when you're wondering why you're doing it," Hurley says. "It's pretty difficult. You're winded, you're hot. You got to concentrate, especially when you're running on this because there's a lot of loose rock. There's rock that's sticking out of the ground so you always got to watch where you're putting your foot down."

Welcome to Arizona

Upon his hire, Hurley was familiar with Arizona, but nothing more. During his five-year NBA career – cut short by a car accident that nearly cost the point guard his life – it always seemed like Hurley's teams would have an off-day here before playing the Suns in downtown Phoenix. After retirement, his family visited the Grand Canyon, but that was it.

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Not surprisingly, his official "welcome to the desert" moment included a reptile.

"I was running one morning – I think my first year here – and it was very hot and so I ran early," Hurley says. "I was in the street and literally 15 feet in front of me I see a rattlesnake crossing the street. I just stopped like 10 feet from it and was looking at it. It didn't move or do anything. It was like a standoff. I was just appreciating it (thinking), 'Wow, I never thought I would see that.' I'm glad I was looking down so I didn't just run right into it."

This day, Hurley is simply walking, making his way past the saguaros and mesquite, a route that will take nearly two hours in what will become another 100-degree afternoon. This is part of his routine, as well, the downside of his competitive nature.

Last season, after Saturday conference games in Tempe, the coach often hiked with his wife on early Sunday mornings. Hurley is known for his intensity. That goes back to his father, Bob Hurley, Sr., a legendary coach at St. Anthony High, which recently closed.

After his father's losses – which were rare – Hurley said he and his brother would climb into the back of the family's Dodge Caravan for the ride home, far from his dad's anger. Once in the house, everyone would "kind of bolt to their own corner of the house" and stay there the rest of the night.

Calming down after a loss

Hurley's routine differs. For him, the worst part of losing comes right after the game. Before addressing the Sun Devils, he meets with his staff in a side room. There, while trying to come up with a postgame message, everything rushes to mind, everything he possibly could've done better.

Once he gets past that, Hurley usually is fine. After his media duties, he drives home and the family watches a replay of the game. (Hurley has three children; daughters Cameron and Sydney, and son Bobby. Sydney is a student at ASU.) For the most part, Hurley is detached while watching, but his anger flashes when he sees poor effort or inexcusable mistakes such as careless turnovers or players bailing on taking a charge.

On Sundays, Hurley wakes up and plans his week. Then he and Leslie often go for a hike – his favorite time to hit the Gateway trail. No cell phone. No basketball. Little stress.

"I'm able to think a lot and we're able to talk and just kind of disconnect for like an hour and a half," Hurley says, quickly adding: "I'll get ahead of her and she'll yell at me, so we do have things that happen with that. I tend to move along faster than she might want to sometimes."

'Somehow I feel better'

Growing up in Jersey City, Hurley was a gym rat, someone who would shovel snow off an outdoor court if his father's gym was unavailable. After his pro career, he lived five years in Hollywood, Fla., where he pursued a career in horse racing. As a coach, he lived in New Jersey, Rhode Island and Buffalo before landing in Arizona.

Here, people seem nicer.

"I don't know if you guys have noticed," he says on the trail, "but just about every person we pass says, 'Hi, good morning,' which doesn't always happen in New Jersey."

And he feels different, too.

"Just my body, with all it's been through with the car accident and all the wear and tear of playing, somehow I feel better," Hurley says. "I have felt better here the last couple years, physically."

The job situation helps. Despite a poor finish, ASU is coming off a breakout season, reaching the NCAA Tournament for the first time since 2014 and posting the highest average home attendance in school history.

Just a few days earlier, per terms of his contract, Hurley received a \$700,000 raise that bumped his annual salary to \$2.1 million. His contract runs through June 30, 2022.

As he approaches the highest point of the trail, Hurley takes a drink of water. He expresses his appreciation for the administration's support and for the fans' enthusiasm. He feels the program is in a good place. Despite losing its top three scorers from last season, Hurley lassoed a recruiting class that one prominent evaluation service ranks 11th nationally.

He hopes that helps put certain fears regarding his future to rest.

"I've been on the run," Hurley says. "It was a lot for my family, going from Florida to Wagner for two years, then to Rhode Island for a year and to Buffalo for two. ... It's always natural to assume that (I would want to return east), but I'm very happy here. And I think my family's happy, too."

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