

Leaving his mark

Former Zag Turiaf again shows his heart is in right place

John Blanchette The Spokesman-Review

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Ronny Turiaf sits with his 2-year-old niece Elsa on the logo of his Heart To Heart Foundation that's painted on renovated court at Corbin Park.

(Full-size photo)

early five hours after the chairs had been folded up, the loudspeakers unplugged and Ronny Turiaf had highed his last five, business at the Corbin Park basketball court that now bears his name was brisk Friday afternoon.

At one end, two teams of teenage boys engaged in a half-speed 3-on-3 warm-up for today's Hoopfest openers. At the other, five or six of the younger set launched rainmakers from beyond 3-point line.

Leafy Corbin has a revived heartbeat. New asphalt, fresh paint, glass backboards, regulation rims.

"I love it, man – I grew up on these courts," said 28-year-old Mike Lesesne, whose parents live a block over. "Well, not these courts – the old ones. The triple rims, the crappy slick surface. Back when they had the lights up.

"The old school days."

Matthew Mills, 16 years his junior, was just as taken.

"This is great," he said.

Just one question, Matthew: Do you know who Ronny Turiaf is?

"No," Mills admitted.

Well, no surprise there. He was not even in first grade when Turiaf enchanted virtually the entire campus at Gonzaga and most anyone else in Spokane with a TV set and a passing interest in basketball. He left a big piece of himself here then – and keeps backing it up.

So he will know Turiaf because his name's on the snazziest new court in Spokane and on a plaque nearby, and that's OK with Ronny.

"I've always talked about having a basketball court, somewhere, that I've done," he said. "For myself, it was not always hard to find one, but back home we didn't have too many outdoor courts – and nothing like this."

And certainly no Hoopfest, and a happy offshoot of what Hoopfest does is, well, hoops.

In its 21 previous years of existence, the Hoopfest people have refurbished 26 different public courts in the area. For No. 27, they found a worthy site on Spokane's near North Side and a natural partner in Turiat and his fledgling Heart-to-Heart Foundation.

"When we heard from Ronny and he invited us to do this court with him," said Hoopfest executive director Rick Steltenpohl, "it was very easy to say yes."

Some \$14,000 later, Corbin has a jewel.

But this was only part of Turiat's Hoopfest weekend. On Friday night, he and comedian Cedric the Entertainer headlined a dinner and show sponsored by Providence Health Care to benefit Heart-to-Heart, which Turiat founded in 2009 to provide heart-related health services to children and schools in need.

If basketball has been his primary passion, this one seems to be gaining fast – because, of course, it has special significance.

Only days after being selected by the Los Angeles Lakers in the 2005 NBA draft did Turiat learn, while undergoing an otherwise routine physical, that had an enlarged aortic root. Six hours of open-heart surgery followed – and six remarkable months later, Turiat was back on the basketball court.

We shouldn't have been surprised.

"You're going to have to freakin' kill me," he said on the eve of surgery. "I'm going to get through it."

Once established as a pro – first in LA, then Golden State and now with the New York Knicks – Turiat looked for a way to give back. He found one with a Gonzaga connection – if hauntingly so.

Barely 16 months ago, 15-year-old David Gurganious collapsed and went into cardiac arrest at a basketball game at El Cerrito High School in California. His brother, Larry, played three years at GU, coming in just as Turiat was departing.

The younger Gurganious stopped breathing, but CPR efforts by a coach and parent brought him back a pulse, and he survived. Turiat's foundation soon donated automated external defibrillators and CPR training to four Bay Area high schools as well as the Warriors Basketball Camp.

He also went to the statehouse in Sacramento to personally lobby for a bill that would require all high schools in California to purchase defibrillators and provide better emergency training for coaches. He met with families whose lives had been impacted by sudden cardiac arrest during sports events.

"Talking to the women who have lost sons is heartbreaking," he said, "so we have tried to do everything we can to help."

“This is all connected. If we can help with free screenings, passing laws, the AED program, we will do that. If we can do something like this basketball court that helps promote a healthy lifestyle, that’s something I’m an advocate for – and I try to live it as much as I can. It’s something that’s very easy to do.”

For Turiáf, so is reaching people. The Special Olympians who helped him dedicate the court Friday – C.J. Stewart got the lucky high five for making the first basket – were dazzled.

But who’s met him who hasn’t been?

And the court? Well, it’s just asphalt and metal and glass and paint – about \$14,000 worth. But he left a little bit of magic there, too.

“If you make it from halfcourt,” Mills challenged Lesesne on Friday afternoon, long after Turiáf departed, “I’ll give you two bucks.”

“I’m good,” Lesesne demurred. “But if you make it from there, I’ll give you two bucks. Nah, just kidding.”

Mills was standing on between the block and the far basket at the time. At which point he windmilled a hookshot from down around his ankles – and swished it at the other end of the court.

Maybe he doesn’t know who Ronny Turiáf is. But now the two of them own a court.