

Usher will Represent Canada Again at Pan Am Maccabiah Games

By Jack Borenstein

Sage Usher's upcoming participation at the Pan American Maccabi Games at the end of this month in Santiago, Chile will certainly enhance his current skills set, as starting point guard for University of Toronto Varsity Blues basketball team of the Ontario University Athletics (OUA) league.

The 20-year-old 6 ft. 3 in. Torontonian's Jewish roots have always been strong, over the years. He attended Hebrew school for a couple years, had his bar mitzvah at Masada in Israel and touring the country afterwards was "awe inspiring. Our family enjoys and celebrate Jewish holidays, and we attend High Holiday services at Miles Nadal Jewish Community Centre (in downtown Toronto)," said Usher.

He played hockey and soccer as a youngster but eventually decided on basketball "because it was a more serious and competitive sport for me." Usher participated in basketball while attending Crescent School and York School in Toronto and played on the U17 Canadian team at the 2011 Pan American Maccabi Games in Sao Paulo, Brazil. "The style of play was more structured and physical, than I was used in high school," he recalled. "It was a great experience meeting Jewish athletes from other countries, and I have remained friends with Canadian basketball teammates from that team."

Usher put his Games experience to good use while playing basketball for St. Michael's College Blue Raiders who went 45-1 (47-2 overall), and captured their first ever OFSAA 'AAA' championship in 2013 – in overtime no less. Usher recalled as the best moment he will remember the rest of my life "was in the dressing room afterwards, singing school songs with teammates."

Usher spent 2013/14 playing basketball at Worcester (MA) Academy. "It was a preparatory school and every team and game we played in our league and tournaments were high quality in terms of talented and athletic players," said Usher. He was named an All-Star at the 2013 Great Florida Shootout tournament in Kissimmee, FL.

"The tempo and style of play that season made me prepared for university basketball, without being surprised or in awe. I was playing point guard, which I didn't play a lot of in high school," stated Usher. He hoped to play for a NCAA Division II or III school, but with no scholarships available he returned to Toronto and enrolled at University of Toronto. "They had a brand new basketball facility, and an added benefit would be living close to my parents and family," he remarked.

With some Blues players graduating and others were transferring to other post-secondary schools. Usher took advantage of the opportunity and became the Blues starting



Sage Usher. Photo: Martin Bazyl

point guard in his rookie 2014/15 season. He dressed for all 19 games averaging 28.4 minutes and 6.3 points per game (including a career high 13 points against Queen's University). He led the Blues in assists and steals, and named to OUA All-Rookie team.

Usher has appreciated the time and effort that Blues head coach John Campbell and assistant coach Mike De Giorgio have put in with him "during team practices and after practices watching video tape of our games, and advising areas of my play that need improvement."

Campbell remarked his initial impressions of Usher were of "a good athlete who competes hard. He understands how to play, and does a good job playing as part of a team." He also acknowledged Usher benefited from his prior basketball experiences. "Sage was part of a great program at St. Mike's, and was a product of very good coaching there. His time at Worcester allowed him to continue to develop physically, and I believe his confidence grew that year. He played a big role on his teams, and that was a benefit."

Usher feels improved not just as a shooting point Guard, but also leading the team with his overall play. "I've become more comfortable during games as I've learned to take care of the basketball better and avoid turnovers, and share and distribute the ball to teammates for good percentage shots." His favourite NBA player is Toronto Raptors Point Guard Kyle Lowry. "I like his tenacity and how hard he plays. He always seems to be motivating and setting an example for his teammates."

Usher has learned to balance his academics (majoring in Urban Planning) with Blues team practices and games. "It's important for me to keep on top of things in advance, as there is generally not much time available for studying. We have access to tutors in our study hall lecture, which makes being a student athlete manageable."

Usher in summer 2015 competed in the Basketball World Toronto league where he averaged 16.8 points per game in nine

games, including a season high 37 points. "It was a recreational league I played for fun, and did some experimentation. The league instilled additional confidence and success in my on court Blues play, going forward."

In the current 2015/16 season the Blues are 1-4 in the OUA East Division but could be easily 3-2, having lost a pair of one point games to Ryerson (in the season opener) and Windsor. Usher felt honoured being named team captain this season by his teammates and is averaging 7.4 points per game (12 points against Ryerson). "I would hope that it will impact my play going forward as I continue to learn how to be a true leader on the floor, something especially important being a point Guard. So far this season I have done it well at times, and not so well at others. The more I get used to (being team captain) the more consistent I think my leadership, and play, will be."

Usher is an emerging Blues leader, according to Campbell. "The players have great respect for his work ethic and commitment to the group. Sage is learning how all his actions impact the team dynamic, and is growing throughout that process."

Usher has become the Blues dominant ball handler and stated, "I do a solid job of running the team/offense and creating opportunities for others on the floor. Generating baskets through assists (currently averaging five per game). I have also been shooting over 44%, from three point range." He added being optimistic going forward that the current Blues team has the talent "to compete and win now, with a core of six players in their first or second season, and no one is graduating after this season. The schedule will level out as we've already competed against top teams, and we are confident being in the playoffs come next February."

Usher contacted Allon Bross, head coach of Maccabi Canada's men's 'Open' basketball team, about competing in Santiago at the Pan Am Maccabiah Games. "Mr. Bross contacted Blues head coach Campbell, who gave permission to allow me to play for the

Canadian team," said Usher. "We had team practices in May and September and the last practice occurs December 22, with the Games beginning December 28 (and concluding January 4/16).

I'm the second youngest player on this team. Our strength is in our guards and we all need to play as well as possible, in order for our team to succeed in Chile."

Bross remarked Usher's "basketball IQ, and his skills as a playmaker and scorer, make him valuable to our team. He is focused every minute he is on the floor. We expect that Sage will be one of our leaders, both on and off the floor." He added

Usher will have an advantage having played four years earlier in Brazil "regarding what to expect during games, and how the international game is played. Over the past four years Sage's game has developed beautifully, and he will be one of our impact players."

Campbell noted Usher will have a great opportunity to play a big role with this Maccabi team "and this will benefit him significantly. International basketball is very different, and the physicality and different styles of play will be a great challenge."

Usher is also looking forward to playing on the Pan Am Maccabi team with his brother Brando. "Brando and I grew up playing basketball in our family driveway. It will be a great experience to play together, on a competitive Jewish basketball team."

Usher's basketball objective going forward is "getting bigger, stronger and faster. Learn to make the right play, and knowing that I don't need to make spectacular plays. Be level headed and steady to make my Blues teammates better players, and to help my team succeed in any way."

Campbell acknowledged if Usher continues on his basketball path, "he will be a very effective player in the CIS (Canadian Interuniversity Sport). Sage has already played a role, in the improvements made in our program. I am optimistic that his career will continue to ascend, as does the success of our team."

Usher will lead his Blues I team against Ryerson Rams in an OUA game at the Enercare Centre complex located at Exhibition Place on February 14, 2016, a couple hours prior to the NBA All-Star Game occurring at the Air Canada Centre in Toronto.

Follow Usher at the upcoming Pan American Maccabi Games on Twitter @sage_usher.

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