

Former Bulldog baller represents Asheville in Germany

By Ben Smith
SPORTS EDITOR

Former player Omar Collington's American basketball career came to end when he graduated last year, but the Atlanta native, who will appear in Saturday's Crossfire basketball game at the Asheville Civic Center, spent last year in Germany playing for the Berghem Bandits where he averaged 21 points a game.

Collington, who stands in third on the Bulldogs' career three-point field goal list, played on the 2003 Big South Champion team.

"My senior year here I led the team in scoring along with Joe Barber and I was named MVP," Collington said. "Scoring was my job. I knew that, so I took that same mentality over to Germany."

The Crossfire game this Saturday pits local all-stars like Collington and Trent Strickland, former East-Hendersonville High and Wake Forest player, against established ACC and SEC players like UNC's Reyshawn Terry and Florida's Lee Humphrey.

During Collington's rookie season in Germany, he led the Bandits, based in the North Rhine-Westphalia state, near Cologne. In the final game of the season, Collington scored 42 points against division rival Capone Düsseldorf to lead the Bandits to a 102-94 victory.

German professional basketball is divided into eight divisions, the first being the most competitive. The Bandits are in the third division, but Collington, who trained with a division two team after the season's end, plans to move up to the next division when he returns to play in August.

"This year I tried out with a second division team in Germany and I did really well," Collington said. "I'm looking at other teams in France and South America."

While the NBA remains the world's most prestigious and well-known basketball league, professional basketball

leagues exist in all six populated continents.

German leagues provide some of the most competitive basketball outside of the United States, according to Associate Athletic Director Mike Gore. Collington said he wants to use his basketball career to travel the world and play in many different countries.

"Spain, Italy and France have first division teams and the second division teams play really, really well too. Almost every player in those leagues is making six figures," Collington said. "I would love to play there, but as long as I'm playing basketball, I want to travel around. I'd love to play in China for a season and play in South America."

Since 1991, ten UNC Asheville basketball players have played overseas, including Joseph Barber, last year's leading scorer for the Bulldogs, who currently plays in Finland.

Andre Smith, who led the Bulldogs in scoring in their 2003 championship season and stands at No. 6 in the Bulldogs' list of all-time scorers, plays professionally for the Miami Tropics in the American Basketball Association.

"It's nice to see that there's so many opportunities for players to play basketball professionally," Gore said. "Everyone wants to play in the NBA, but you've got to be awful good to play in that league. So Europe provides a wonderful opportunity to play, and we've got quite a few players over there."

After playing for four years as a Bulldog, the different style of play and officiating in Europe forced Collington to make adjustments to his game.

European rules prevent pivoting before dribbling, a common move for many American basketball players, according to Collington.

"The first couple games my travel calls were ridiculous," Collington said. "I was like 'What is going on?' Finally, coach pulled the Americans in and had us meet before practice."

Despite his strong performance for the Bandits, Collington-dealt with adversity in his first season of professional basketball, including problems with the Berghem management.

"The crazy thing is people like myself who don't have agents, who don't know anything about the business and want to



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF UNC ASHEVILLE ATHLETICS
Former Bulldog Omar Collington takes it to the rack during a conference game against Radford. Collington averaged 11.8 points per game in his '05-'06 season for the Bulldogs with 56 season 3-pointers. For the Berghem Bandits, Collington averages 21 points per game, with a 42-point career high.

play basketball, even if we're good players and good people, we can kind of get suckered into bad contracts," Collington said. "It was a rough first year for me."

Ironically, Collington played in Berghem as a second option. The former Bulldog standout originally planned to compete in Montevideo, Uruguay for a

Division I, South American team, but the day before he left, a phone call revealed that a chair board member of the team decided to cut Collington.

"As I was preparing to leave, calling all my friends to get ready, I got this call," Collington said. "I was just devastated."

Despite the difficult experience in his

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OMAR COLLINGTON
Former Bulldog player

rookie season, Collington managed to make friendships with his teammates, all while increasing his basketball stock.

"All my teammates, we really loved basketball, so we bonded well together and we played for each other," Collington said. "I bonded really well with the players I played with because of what we'd been through. We'll probably all be long-time friends."

Collington played with four other Americans including B.J. Timmons, who played college basketball at Queens College in Charlotte, graduating in 2003.

In addition to the friendships he made in his first season, Collington noted he also improved himself culturally. The 23-year-old now can speak German and has expanded his horizons even farther than when he made the transition from his hometown Atlanta to Asheville.

"Coming from Atlanta, I was closed minded to a lot of things when I got up to Asheville," Collington said. "I wasn't in to sledding and all this other stuff, but I opened up a little bit and came out of my shell, but I still closed my mind off to other things."

"When I got overseas, I opened up because I had been at UNCA, so I tried different German foods, I tried to not be the typical American, so I learned the language. I wanted to go to the restaurant and order in a different language."

Collington's girlfriend of three years, Cara Shelton, who described him as having "sugar running through his veins," said she enjoyed following Collington's growing success through the internet and watching him grow as a person.

"It's so exciting because I get to see on the internet how he's doing," Shelton said. "It's really cool for him to have the experience. He's growing so much from it, so as his girlfriend, I just sit back and watch him do his thing."

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