Written by STEVE OSTERMANN
Wednesday, 10 October 2012 17:50

http://www.ozaukeepress.com/images/101112/obamaSM.png**UW point guard and Port High grad Josh Gasser has had plenty of thrills on the basketball court but none quite like meeting the president of the United States last week**

As a starting guard on the University of Wisconsin-Madison men's basketball team, Josh Gasser has had plenty of sports thrills, including hitting the winning shot in a Big Ten game.

But last week, the Port Washington native got to do something most college students can only dream about: rub shoulders with the president of the United States.

Gasser, a junior, and his teammates had a personal meeting with Barack Obama during his Oct. 4 campaign stop in Madison. While a crowd of more than 30,000 waited to hear the president speak outside Bascom Hall, the Badgers were accorded a five-minute private session — just enough time to exchange handshakes, talk a little hoops and pose for photos.

"It was a great experience," said Gasser, a former all-state player at Port Washington High School. "It's something I'm sure none of us will ever forget."

The meeting, held in a VIP area, went quickly but wasn't so brief that the players couldn't toss a few questions the chief executive's way.

"A couple of hours before he spoke, we were told we would get to meet him, and we were taken to a room to wait. The anticipation was just crazy," Gasser said.

"We sat and stared at the door for about an hour, waiting for him to arrive. He came in and took a fake jump shot and then went around and shook everyone's hand."

Obama told the Badgers he knew they were hard to beat on their own court, but he wanted to see them start winning more on the road. "I was surprised at how much he knew about our program," Gasser said.

When Gasser asked Obama how far he would pick the Badgers to go in the NCAA tournament, the answer was decidedly politically correct.

"He said he'd have to wait to see how we did during the season," Gasser noted.

Arranging a private meeting with Obama during a whirlwind campaign stop was no easy task. The Badgers pulled off the trick thanks to the persistence of two players, Zach Bohannon and George Marshall.

Knowing Obama was coming to Madison, Bohannon launched a nonstop Twitter campaign inviting the president to not only meet the Badgers but play a pick-up game with them. He and several teammates tweeted messages to a variety of public figures, including Obama's campaign manager, ESPN talk-show hosts Mike Greenberg and Mike Golic and Oregon State men's basketball coach Craig Robinson, the brother of First Lady Michelle Obama.

"It all started with Zach Bohannon tweeting as kind of a joke," Gasser said. "We never thought it was going anywhere."

Marshall, who is from Chicago, was able to seal the deal by calling a former AAU teammate whose father is one of Obama's closest friends and is traveling with the president. Obama's political connections to the Windy City and his time as an Illinois senator didn't hurt, either.

No one but a campaign photographer was allowed to take pictures at the meeting. When a few shots were released the following day, the one that caught everyone's eye shows Obama surrounded by a tightly packed group of excited Badgers.

Broad smiles are everywhere in the photo. And right behind Obama's left shoulder, closer than anyone else to the president, is Gasser.

"They told us to all get together for a picture, so I got right in the middle, put my hand on his shoulder and wasn't going to let go," he said.

As if meeting the most powerful leader of the free world wasn't enough, the Badgers got a fringe

benefit. The players were scheduled to run Elver Park Hill in Madison as part of a grueling off-season training regime the same afternoon Obama came to Madison, but another man in charge allowed them to skip the workout.

“When Coach (Bo) Ryan found out we really had a chance to meet the president, he gave us the day off,” Gasser said.

Image Information: MEMBERS OF THE University of Wisconsin-Madison men’s basketball team were all smiles when they posed with an equally happy President Barack Obama during a private meeting last week. Among the players was Port Washington’s Josh Gasser, standing directly behind Obama’s left shoulder. Photo by Scout Tufankjian for Obama for America