

# Special Report

*Utah State sports an experienced, older roster with myriad back stories, including former Mountain West MVP Sam Merrill. But the biggest story has been 6-foot-7 former walk-on, Justin Bean, who has become the Aggies' anchor.*

## Aggies and the magic Bean

*By Matt Craig*



*Sam Merrill was the Mountain West's 2018 MVP.*

LOGAN, Utah – There was a time in the not-too-distant past when Utah State was a measuring stick for mid-major consistency. From an overlooked conference (Big West, then the WAC), in an overlooked town (Logan), the program won 20-plus games in 14 consecutive seasons and reached eight NCAA Tournaments from 2000-11, twice with an at-large bid. Locals talk about the stars from this era in the way most describe their children. Mention to them names like Preston Medlin, Tai Wesley or Nate Harris and you're sure to generate a smile and a story.

Back then, the Dee Glen Smith Spectrum got so loud that players swore the court shook under their feet. During one five-year span, the Aggies posted an 81-2 home record.

"I've been at Duke and Kentucky and UConn and Syracuse, and it's clearly the best I've ever seen in terms of atmosphere," said Wichita State coach Gregg Marshall after a 2010 game.

In recent seasons, Utah State looked like a victim of conference realignment, unable to find its footing after moving to the Mountain West in 2013. Five consecutive seasons under 20 wins quieted the crowds. But after winning 28 games last season, this year's team – a 10-1 start, and at one point ranked as high as No. 15 – is the program's best chance to reclaim the Spectrum magic, and more importantly, to make a deep postseason run. That's one thing even the Utah State teams of old were never able to accomplish. The program is 1-16 in the Big Dance since 1970.

This reemergence can be credited to a return to the program's roots: gritty, tough players and an unselfish, unspectacular style of play. One Twitter troll ungraciously but not unfairly dubbed the team "revenge of the nerds" playing basketball."

Which begs the question. What type of player do you expect to find on a mid-major team capable of reaching the Final Four?

Probably someone like Steve Nash, Damien Lillard or Stephen Curry, a diamond in the rough that uncovered NBA superstar potential at an overlooked program like Santa Clara, Weber State, or Davidson (respectively). Memories flash of Jimmer Fredette or C.J. McCollum throwing in shots from the parking lot.

But you'd be wrong.

Of the five true Cinderella teams in the modern era

of college basketball – 2006 George Mason, 2011 Butler (2010 Butler was nationally ranked and a 5 seed), 2011 VCU, 2013 Wichita State and 2018 Loyola Chicago – only four players ever suited up for an NBA game. Only two got drafted. These were not superstars in disguise.

In fact, the leading scorer among this group was Butler's Matt Howard (16.4 ppg). Nothing about Howard suggested stardom. He rode to practices on a rusted out bicycle, got his hair cut only once per year (by a friend for free), and wore the same pair of socks and shoes every day until the elastic was stretched and the socks drooped down to his ankles. His signature moment was getting elbowed in the face, in a February 2011 game against UIC, causing blood to stream from his nose and a cut above his eye, painting the entire half of his face bright red like a horror movie.

A professor of management at Butler studied the program's Final Four runs and concluded players like Howard "are literally catalysts – agents that provoke a chemical reaction between substances that would otherwise have no effect on each other ... Alone they would be just average, but put them on the court and the pieces start fitting together."

This year's Utah State Aggies have one such catalyst. Squint your eyes and he might even look like Matt Howard's long lost cousin. Or, frankly, a character in *Revenge of the Nerds*.

His name is Justin Bean. He's 6-foot-7 and gangly, a former walk-on with a mouth full of braces resulting from two separate occasions in which he's gotten his teeth knocked in this season. In both instances, he played the remainder of the game with blood-covered lips.

"And doesn't say a peep," says Utah State coach Craig Smith. "Some dudes would've been out three weeks, and he doesn't miss three minutes."

Look no further than a recent game against Fresno State for proof of Bean's catalytic abilities. It's a night when starting center Neemias Queta is on a minutes restriction and backup center Kuba Karwowski is sidelined after an emergency appendectomy. The Aggies are playing poorly and shooting even worse, just over 25 percent from the field, trailing by eight points midway through the second half. Bean logs the full 45 minutes in an overtime win, playing extended minutes as the team's center down the stretch.



On one of the final possessions of regulation, he contests an underneath inbound pass lobbed toward midcourt and knocks the ball off the Fresno State player to earn possession – a possession that should have won the game if not for a 30-foot bank shot at the buzzer. Hustle plays like these have become his trademark. In overtime, he snags an offensive rebound and puts it back to tie the game, then helps ice it with two free throws in the final minute. He finishes with 14 points and 13 rebounds, including six offensive rebounds, five steals, and after the game, one fat lip.

“He’s a cross of the Ultimate Warrior and Dick Butkus,” Smith says.

Bean is quick to admit his WWF wrestler-meets-NFL linebacker mentality did not come naturally.

“I didn’t like to bang,” he says of his time playing high school ball in Moore, Okla.

An ACL injury his senior year left him without any scholarship offers. Then he went on a two-year mission as a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints to Reno, Nev., where he picked up a basketball only sparingly. Bean’s height was enough to at least attract some interest as a potential walk-on, and he agreed to join the Utah State team after an Aggies assistant and family friend visited him in Reno.

He showed up on campus in 2017 with 10 to 15 unwanted pounds and something less than a sharp skillset.

“It was rough,” Bean says of his early practices. “I definitely looked in the mirror quite a few times and had to reflect and decide if this was something I really wanted to do.”

The reevaluation led to a rededication. Bean wanted to contribute, desperately, hoping he could overcome any lack in skills by flying around the court setting screens, diving on the floor for loose balls and fighting for every rebound. While redshirting during the 2017-2018 season, he went to the gym after games to get shots up and work on his handle, and pushed himself to get in shape.

“I matured a lot on my mission as well,” Bean says. “I just kind of developed into a different kind of player honestly, more tough, more physical.”

Smith replaced Tim Duryea as head coach heading into last season, bringing in a philosophy that effort could offset errors (in the form of an acronym, G.A.T.A., which stands for “get after their ... butts”). Smith saw Bean’s potential.

“He would screw so many things up defensively last year, it was almost like I was constantly blowing the whistle like, ‘Bean! What are you doing?’” Smith says. “But you always saw something in that guy, there’s just something about his heart, he has some intangible things you can’t teach.”

Smith remembers asking his wife around the holidays why he wasn’t playing Bean and fellow walk-on Abel Porter more. His wife reminded him he was the head coach, with the power to change that. So in January, Smith put Bean and Porter on scholarship and made them a fixture in the rotation. The Aggies ripped off a shocking 15-3 record in the Mountain West, exceeding a ninth-place projection to win the league and eventually earn an 8-seed in the NCAA Tournament, the highest in the school’s storied history.

This season, Bean is the team’s anchor. He’s averaging 14.7 points, 12 rebounds, 2.6 assists and nearly three combined steals/blocks per game. Anyone inside the program will tell you he’s worth far more than the numbers.

Along the way, Bean has become a crowd favorite. Every time he checks into the game, scores, or grabs a contested rebound, chants of “Beeeeeeean!” greet him. Late last season, he and teammate Diogo Brito spawned the chant, “Bean burrito!”

The wordplay suits Bean, whom teammates say is a lover of puns. Other quirks make him a singular figure

Newbold that will outwork anybody, and that’s what we appreciate at Utah State.”

These days, Sprout keeps up with the team from the stands at the Spectrum and as the host of a Utah State-centric podcast. He sees a similarity between Bean and his own appeal a decade ago as a 350-pound shirtless wonder.

“You look at Justin Bean and you’re like, you’re tall but are you really going to get out here and ball?” he says. “I think everybody likes to be pleasantly surprised, everybody likes to be shocked. That’s what did me so well. I shocked them.”

Bean’s story is not unique. Every college program in the country touts the adversity it has had to go through. Yet few have taken quite as long on the road to relevance as Utah State. In 2016, leading scorer and past Mountain West MVP Sam Merrill was in Nicaragua on his two-year LDS mission, where at one point he got two of his own teeth knocked out while being robbed. Starting guard Brock Miller served in Argentina, not an easy place to be for someone with the auto-immune disease alopecia. Porter was posted in Russia before coming up the ranks as a walk-on. Reserve forward Alphonso Anderson played junior college ball in Northern Idaho. Neemias Queta and Diogo Brito were going through preps in Portugal, Sean Bairstow in Australia, Kuba Karwowski in Poland.

“The experiences we’ve had, we’re men,” Miller says. “Coach treats us like men, too, so we have those high expectations and we’re able to limit those little distractions and stay on task and do what we need to do.”

In a college basketball landscape increasingly dominated by teenage underclassmen and infinite transfers, Utah State looks and acts like a team full of adults. Perhaps that is why they’ve been so successful in close games. They took the best blows of Montana State and North Texas, overcoming second half deficits to pull away. They climbed out of a 19-point hole to stun LSU. They held a one-point lead with three minutes to play in a slugfest at Saint Mary’s, before taking their first loss of the season.

Even Fresno State’s miraculous buzzer-beater to send the game to overtime, a broken play in which the players on the court failed to carry out Smith’s directive to foul, didn’t unnerve the veteran team.

“Having guys that are mature, not just in the real world but are also mature and veterans on the basketball court, makes a huge difference,” Merrill says. “I think it helps us every game.”

It remains to be seen what the ceiling for this team can be. The Aggies had not yet played a game this season at full strength. With Queta and Karwowski still on the mend, they will have to find their stride in the midst of a tough Mountain West conference schedule. And this time around, the target will be squarely on their back.

But with a roster full of powerful chemicals and a catalyst like Justin Bean, the potential for a chain reaction in March is extremely high.

“We talked about the Mountain West championship a lot last year. That was our mindset, that was our goal,” Bean says. “This year, why not go to the Final Four and see something happen, try to cut down some nets?”



**Former walk-on Justin Bean has been an inspiration and an Aggies fan favorite.**

in college basketball. He runs up and down the court with a perpetual smile, produced by some combination of his personality and the thick, translucent mouth guard protecting his braces. Teammates swear he has a singing voice that belongs on a television talent show. And during games of one on one after practice, Porter says Bean will block his shot and then apologize, saying something like, “I probably fouled you bro, it’s alright, you take the ball.”

Bean’s unassuming appearance and unconditional effort has earned the love of fans in part because it reminds them of the great Aggie players of old.

“He is the quintessential Utah State player,” says Bill Sprout, better known as famous Aggie superfan “Wild Bill” during USU’s last heyday. “He’s a Brian Green. He’s a Preston Medlin. He’s this energy and this passion and this clutch player that comes in. He’s a Tyler