

From Hoops to Hamburgers

by Emily Baggett

DREW Gressett's first love wasn't burgers. The owner and operator of Hat Creek Burger Co. has been a basketball nut for as long as he can recall, attending Longhorn games with his parents as a kid and, eventually, making the team as a walk-on guard as a freshman in 2000.

Three years later, Gressett, BS '04, Life Member, was T.J. Ford's teammate on the first UT squad to reach the Final Four in 56 years. As a walk-on, Gressett didn't get much court time — he played in eight games that season, scoring a total of four points — but his infectious enthusiasm made him a fan favorite and generated “We want Drew” chants once home games were well in hand. “He was a team player,” says former assistant coach Dan Ahearn, who now works for Gressett as business operations director at Hat Creek. “He was willing to play his role and do whatever he could to make the team better.”



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fter graduating with a youth and community studies degree, Gressett, an Austin native, spent time working in commercial real estate outside the state before returning home to work the griddle.

He opened the flaps of the Hat Creek trailer — named for the cattle company in Larry McMurtry's *Lonesome Dove* — on West Sixth Street in October 2008, moved the trailer to the West Campus area a year later and recently opened for business at the Hat Creek restaurant on Burnet Road. The former Arby's location came complete with a large neon sign shaped like a cowboy hat.

And if all that sounds exhausting, for Gressett it's nothing a quick burger or pick-up game can't fix.

Did you always want to go into business?

Like any kid who plays basketball, I wanted to be a pro basketball player. [Laughs] I played in elementary school all the way through high school — I lived and breathed hoops. I quickly realized, though, that wasn't going to be my way to success, so I switched gears.

What made you decide to walk on at UT? I'd always wanted to be a Longhorn, and I had confidence in what Coach [Rick] Barnes was building. I knew I wouldn't get to play much, but that was fine — I wanted to be part of something greater. The summer before my senior year of high school, I played in a league with some guys who were going to be on scholarship at UT. The team didn't have tryouts, but I knew I'd have an opportunity to walk on. Going to Texas was what I wanted to do if I could be a part of the basketball program.

What do you miss about being on a college team?

The fellowship. You miss the camaraderie of being with those guys day in and day out. A lot of my teammates are still playing, some overseas, some in the NBA, but I think they realize too that it's never the same as playing in college — there's nothing like it. Also, being around Coach Barnes and what he was building then was a huge learning experience and education in itself.

Do you still talk to Coach Barnes?

I still keep in touch with everybody; in fact, I was up at practice yesterday. My buddy Chris Ogden [also a member of the 2003 Final



Four team] is on the coaching staff, and a lot of the coaches are still there from when I was playing. I enjoy going up there and hanging out.

What was it like to go to the Final Four?

Unbelievable. We won the regional final on a Sunday in San Antonio against Michigan State in front of 33,000 screaming, burnt-orange fans. Then we went to the Final Four in New Orleans. Coach would always tell us that if you make it to the Final Four, they take care of you on a whole other level — you get this huge duffel bag filled with Final Four paraphernalia, you're staying in this awesome hotel, you're getting police escorts everywhere, you're going to pre-game practices that are open to the public — it's big-time. To have everyone in Austin and the state of Texas so excited we were going to the Final Four was such a cool feeling. Everybody worked so hard to earn it and get to that point.

How did your relationship with Dan Ahearn carry over from basketball to burgers?

We became friends when I was playing, but I'd say our friendship evolved after I graduated. We'd play golf and go out to dinner, and my wife babysits his kids. Two months ago I put the hard sell on him to join Hat Creek. I know his talents — he's so organized, so detailed ... he brings a lot to that side of our business. He even takes care of some things that may get overlooked by me from time to time.

Why burgers?

I've always been a huge fan of awesome cheeseburgers. Anywhere we traveled to play basketball I was able to try and appreciate a lot of different burgers. Ten years ago I decided I wanted to own my own hamburger company, and two years ago I figured it was now or never. I was working in real estate but wasn't feeling it, so I decided to give it a whirl. I got a bunch of investors and opened the trailer. We do a bunch of catering as well — we're just trying to grow and build the Hat Creek brand.

Have you catered any UT events?

Last year we catered the basketball games, setting up outside the Erwin Center for people going to watch the Horns play. Last summer at baseball games, inside [UFUCU] Disch-Falk, you could get a Hat Creek burger, and we do Bevo Boulevard, selling burgers at every home football game. We like staying in touch with the University.

What's the secret to a Hat Creek burger?

I try to capture what I think makes a perfect burger — and continually try to improve upon it. The perfect combination of different elements is the cornerstone of what we're doing — beginning with high-quality, never-frozen beef. We use Angus beef from the upper Midwest that a lot of other places don't use, along with fresh Texas produce. The fact that we hand-patty our burgers every morning is pretty unique.

What made you decide to start up in a trailer?

It's significantly cheaper than a regular store. I used that trailer as a test kitchen, with the goal of opening a store one day. That opportunity came this year, and I'm fired up about that.

Any plans for additional expansion?

I want to stay in Austin and grow it locally, and I'd love to someday expand beyond Austin. But for now, I think focusing on what we have is the first order of business.

What's the most rewarding thing about being a business owner?

You wake up every morning and have something that you own and control — and you're driven to make it better. That's certainly similar to the basketball program ... you build relationships with the people who work for you and with you. We have close to 35 employees now, so being around them and encouraging them is what I really enjoy. We're helping the company grow as a group.

Business is booming, but do you have time to play basketball?

I still play, primarily up at UT's practice facility with some of the managers and coaches.

Are you going to have that access forever?

[Laughs] I don't know — I just keep showing up. Maybe someday they'll tell me not to, but I'm hoping that won't happen. 