because somebody close to home, it

ball, keep shooting for the orange

hoop. Getting better is all they have

warm-ups, Gilliam gathers his players

and puts them in positions to run

practice will be spent this way, moving

slowly through the rotation and picking

At first, the guards are having trouble

getting the ball to the post players in the

"If a guy is coming off a screen, or

really battling with his man," he says,

motioning and swaying, "you've got to

hit him where he can catch the ball and

stretching out his large left hand and

fending off center Mark Librizzi with his

thick frame. Someone bounces Gilliam

the ball and he swoops it up and into the

The guards work on that for a while

before Gilliam again leaves his post at

center-court, where he usually stands

arms crossed, watchful and surprisingly

quiet. If he needs to be heard, he stops

the play and gets everyone's attention.

Now he is down working with his post

players, Librizzi and Battles, who have

'You guys are trying to pop it off the

He demonstrates a few times, show-

When Gilliam has seen enough, he

ing how a light, high fade makes the shot

tells the guys to break the press, which

demics. The rest of the players are

It's easy to make the passes in prac-

tice, the long cross-court chucks that

But game after game, the Altoona

"Freshmen are going to make a lot of

team can only break the press in spurts.

allow your team a quick transition and

an open hole for the easy two.

harder to block and more accurate.

Then, Gilliam demonstrates by

keep moving, all in one movement."

right position, so Gilliam enters the fray

down low and slowly explains.

he Lions just keep playing basket-

seemed, was responsible.

time to worry about.

out minor flaws.

hoop

Up, over, and in."

Beginnings Exendings In Altoona, everything changed when an ex-NBA star arrived to invigorate a basketball team.

By Chris Korman COLLEGIAN STAFE WRITER | ckorman@psu.edu

hirteen young men are waiting in the skinny corridor between the gym and the locker room at the Adler Athletic Complex on the Penn State Altoona College campus. Count them among the lucky ones who are starting something new. Their opportunity is still fresh.

Brandon Battles, Altoona's best player, is telling his teammates about a friend who was once hypnotized on stage. Most of the players are watching - Battles excels when all eyes are on him — and listening. Others are paired off just talking about anything: class, girls, parties, maybe even basketball.

Practice will begin as soon as the women's team leaves the gym.

One player is wearing shiny new shorts with "Villanova" crisply embroidered above the left knee. Another player wears the baby blue North Carolina shorts that Michael Jordan made famous. But this pair is faded and tattered, showing signs of summers on the playground. The majority of the players are wearing their old shorts from high school, the icon that probably meant everything to them only a year earlier faded and seeped into the mesh and barely visible.

is finger into the place where his Air Nikes are supposed to have air.

everyone turns to him and busts up the coach's fresh approach that will board and goes on by. "Put it right in. laughing. The noise echoes around the hallways as other students pass through better. without paying any heed to the basketball team.

They don't much look like a basketball team. Few would stick out in a crowd. Only two players look exceptionally athletic, like they've been in the gym yearround. There are those that look like Joe College Fraternity Brother, their athletic frames distorted ever so slightly by the college diet of fast food and cheap beer. None are taller than 6-foot-5. Most are around 6-foot. Just college kids.

In walks a 6-foot-9 man with keys in his hand. Armon Gilliam, a veteran of 13 NBA seasons and the first-year coach of the 0-17 Altoona Lions, ignores his squad as he walks through the hall and peeps into the gym. The players are content to squeeze every carefree moment they can out of the time right before practice. It is, after all, during this time that teams like this really become teams.

"Who's got jersey duty?" Gilliam asks as he looks through the hall and counts want to do it." He drops the keys for the equipment closet between a set of blue and white Nikes.

Mike Collins, a perpetually happy redhead, scoops them up, starts to protest and is promptly interrupted.

"You all can use the gym," a woman says. She slips out of the door and heads for the water fountain. "We was just watching film in there."

Practice time. Time to work on the fundamentals, the little things, in hopes that maybe the Altoona Lions will be able to out-fundamental a better

team. The young men stir slowly, gathering water bottles and knee braces before entering the gym. As soon as they've dropped all that on the floor and pushed it to the side, up against the wall the players race over to the ball rack. Suddenly, bas-

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ketballs are flying from every angle,

Justin

all aimed at the round, orange rim. Basketball is a simple game. omewhere, Kenny Macklin and

Steve Portland are doing something other than basketball with their lives. These two had something suddenly

washed away. An opportunity has ended. Macklin, who coached at Altoona for nine years before Gilliam, and Portland, a sophomore who expected to play for the Lions this season, both know how tough it can be to simply pick up and leave when something you started is suddenly stopped by somebody else.

The announcement of Gilliam's hiring came last summer and appeared, probably, as a bullet in the notes section of vour local paper. A new beginning for a tiny program and the start of the next chapter for a former professional player. Point guard Tony Persio sits and digs lives when Gilliam moved over there. line and missing shots. There wasn't room for those details in the paper. Plus, that part's not uplifting. Battles reaches the punch line and All talk about a new coach centers on almost certainly make things so much

It's coaching etiquette to make a team your own, to put a stamp on it. Gilliam learned this eventually.

But he also learned that if you're changing something to make it your own sends them scattering and spreading. It then you're getting rid of something that takes an experienced and heady team to must have belonged to somebody else handle the press. Librizzi is a redshirt along the way.

With that, there is bound to be friction. ior but neither has played much college There was in Altoona, perhaps more basketball in over a year because of acathan wanted or expected from a school with just 4,000 students, a team that won freshmen, most of them walk-ons. two games, a program where basketball

actually takes a back seat to academics. Macklin started it all with a simple burst of human emotion, a natural reaction. Because he had been replaced after a 16-57 record over the past three years, he decided to give away all the game tape from last year to the departing players. At the time he was "hurt, embarrassed and angry."

But the result was that Gilliam, a little miffed, called for a university-wide try- from each player and a gathering at has been waiting for this to happen. The out and only ended up keeping three of his players. "Collins, it looks like you the players that had played the year before.

> Immediately, people were saying that Gilliam wanted to root out Macklin's players.

"I think a lot of people wanted to make a big rivalry out of it," said Andrae Baldwin, who was one of the players Gilliam

The rift continued to grow.

Those three players eventually left the mates down the team, with Gilliam claiming that Macklin hall, past Gilliam's had "poisoned" them. Macklin often private office and went to lunch and chatted with the players he recruited and once coached, but he claims

total innocence. "I was telling them to be sity teams. ready for the new guy," he says. "I never wanted to be a in a videotape hindrance to the program."

Portland, meanwhile, was day's oppo-busy making "anonymous" nent as the phone calls to the players fight Allegheny Mountain for seats. Collegiate Conference There are (AMCC) claiming that only three chairs the Lions were using in the whole room. The ineligible players in

practice. page dedicated to the deprecation of Gilliam ing?" The team they are and the Altoona Athletics Department

mistakes," says Gilliam, "especially in yelling. pressure situations when you need them the most." Practice finishes with 10 free throws

mid-court where Gilliam tells his team to keep the faith. Collins gathers the blue and white plain jerseys that the team wears during the next eight, it dropped to 10 points.

practice and tosses them into a tub that, were it anywhere else on a college campus, would be used to hold a keg of beer and

some ice. He slides it into a closet and follows his teaminto a room that serves as the office for most of Altoona's 14 var-

Gilliam pops of the next

game-film is grainy and dark. Five minutes into But worst of all was the session, somebody the Web site. A whole asks, "What team are we supposed to be watchsupposed to be watching is Penn State Erie, That one hit close to home which happens to be

Armon Gilliam, who played 13 seasons in the NBA, took over as coach of the Penn State Altoona men's basketball team in September. He never expected the resistance and turmoil that marred his first season.

Altoona's archrival and also, fittingly, the program it is trying to emulate. With 21 varsity teams and enough four-year degree programs to keep a majority of its players, Erie serves as face as some of the fans come out onto the model for Penn State campuses looking to shed the commonwealth cam-After five minutes of chaos called pus label.

Erie beats the Lions 50-41 the next day, but Gilliam's team shows toughness through the half-court offense. Most of in a harsh environment.

His team is now 0-18. After all he's been through since embarking on what he thought would be a wholesome and happy adventure a few months ago, he figures things can't get worse.

ne Web site called Gilliam "a fag" and Altoona Athletic Director Fred- chance. ina Ingold "retarded."

But it was not the idle schoolyard taunting that made the page so frankly frightening. A regularly updated feature ranted about Gilliam's failings and proclaimed to tell the "Truth" about the "poor decision made by Altoona Athletic Department." One section of the page had a paragraph lauding the players who hadn't made the team or who had left, explaining why they had been cut and why Gilliam was against them. Another section identified current players who were "Gilliam Lovers" and others who were not, and were therefore

To sign the guestbook, users first entered their names and then respond-But it changed a whole lot of people's been getting jammed down by the base- ed to the question: "Are you a Gilliam Lover?

> Freedom of speech ran rampant on over a game openly defamed their targets without taking responsibility. All the spitefulness, the immaturity and the hatred weren't attached to anybody's name.

None of the current players profess to know who put up the Web site. The "Masked Webmaster" as he calls himself. remains a mystery.

Most of the players assumed an exsophomore and Battles is a redshirt junplayer or one of his friends created the

Says current guard Ethan Stewart-Smith: "It's hard to tell who did it. There were a lot of rumors about Steve Portland, but you can never really believe things like that." ____

illiam is jumping up and down G with his knees coming up as high as the short referee's head, his arms are swinging and he's smiling and

The ref, though, is waving it off. The Lions have kept it close with Mount Alyosius the whole game. Gilliam Lions have shown steady signs of progress: their average margin of defeat in the first 10 games was 21 points. In all this basketball experi-The Mounties tie it at 72 with 1:10 left. They've been a two-man team all night: one big guy and one shooter. Those two are doing all the damage and Gilliam is that chance here, and fuming on the sideline. Librizzi misses from the baseline with 33 seconds left and the Mounties end up with the ball and call a time out.

What to say now? Gilliam tells them to relax at almost every time out. He's constantly trying to cut arrived in Altoona, the out all the frenzy.

So his team goes back asking him was how on the court and holds long he planned to

carrv turns it over. Now it's a Penn

State time out. Gilliam goes over the With 8.4 seconds left, it goes into and proud. Only motion. The gym only one thing works in

has one set of bleach- Altoona: hard ers but they are work. So who packed and it is loud. Penn State gets off a shot with a few seconds left and it

bounces and then it is tipped up and through the hoop. Mike Collins is looking for someone to

hug. Librizzi is wiping sweat from his the floor. Gilliam looks like a kid pretending he just won the NBA Championship. And then, there is that ref. Everything settles back down after he explains his

decision to Gilliam: The shot didn't get off in time. For a third time, Gilliam must talk his

team through a pressure situation. But this time is worse. It had the win and feel that it was taken away. Battles thumps heavily into a seat and slams his fists down on the chairs next to him. The Mounties are celebrating a second

t's not the extent, but the nature, of the adversity that bothers Gilliam After being the second overall pick in 1987 out of the University of Nevada-Las Vegas, he played for six NBA teams and was the type of player that everyone traded for or signed because they were convinced they could get something more out of him. The teams that traded or waived him were convinced they couldn't get anything out of him. Gilliam learned a lot about beginnings and end-

He was also the type of player that no one could make up his mind about. Teammates in Philly nicknamed him "Charmin," because he was soft like the NBA's most notorious: Isiah Thomas, this. Derrick Coleman and even Michael Jorroom.

And he always spoke his mind. After the most popular Philadelphia 76ers it's unfair. Everybody knows what's believes he can carry a struggling team. ership potential and a head for the player, Charles Barkley, had left for Phoenix, Gilliam said he felt as though he would finally get a chance to shine and that Barkley had been holding him back. Reporters constantly went to Gilliam for quotes because of his up- so strongly that it isn't warranted. front nature and willingness to call out his teammates.

Not much has changed since 2000, when Gilliam retired after reaching the Western Conference Finals with the Utah Jazz.

He took the Altoona job because of what he sees happening in pro and college basketball, where the game is all about flashy dunks and obnoxious celebration. That's not what he wants. The money would be nice, especially since he has a wife and an 18-month-old

All he wants is the chance to teach.

"You know, all I care about is being able to share," he says. "I've had ence and all I want to do is be able to use it to help a younger player. I knew that I would get that the students would want to learn, not only about basketball, but about everything else."

Gilliam When one thing people kept solid. The Mounties stay. Most set the overwant to wait for under at three years. a late shot, but They seemed weary a guard is and unsure of this called for a man. It's not surprisand ing, though. This is a tough town. Altoona is like a sibling to Pittsburgh and the people are the same: hard-nosed, simple, passionate

mon Gilliam

TDOOR LIFF

Smith

FINN STATE

Ethan

Stewart-



The Altoona Lions review game film after practice. From left to right: Justin Wolcott, Ethan Stewart-Smith, Mike Collins, Justin Page, Brandon Battles, D.J. Black, Tony Persio and head coach Armon Gilliam.

can blame them if they can't trust this former pro athlete who's probably just like the rest of those whiny rich boys living the Playboy life across the country without ever having to work a day in their lives? So what if he's a Pittsburgh guy and the son of a preacher man?

Gilliam can deal with doubt. He has proven people wrong before. What bothers him is that the nature of all the crititoilet paper. Yet he had run-ins with the cism. He feels like he doesn't deserve

mes i wonder what i did, you glass," Gilliam says and then tries it this tiny parcel of the Internet. Bitter dan. He once became so angry he went know?" he says while driving through himself, a hook shot that skims the back- and disgruntled college students upset after a guy in the opponent's locker Altoona in a Volvo, his legs scrunched up so he looks entirely uncomfortable. He is thinking. "All the anger, the bitterness ... going and who's behind it, and I don't know why I'm a target."

He chooses not to elaborate. Over the months he has become tired of talking about it, and only does because he feels

Driving by a Sheetz, he tries to change the subject, "Oh man, look at that guy," he says, pointing to a man pumping gas. "He must be, what, 6-5 or 6-6, right? Wonder if he's got any eligibility left."

Gilliam has had his baskethall bliss unexpectedly blindsided before. When he was leading his UNLV team to the Final Four in '87, reporter after reporter asked him about the school's reputation for placing academics second behind athletics. The Runnin' Rebels had such a reputation as thugs that his mother almost didn't let him

> go there. But Gilliam told her he would rise above that, and he did. His degree is in communications and he hopes to finish graduate work in sociology someday. about a Toni Morrison at all, and then he dismissed me. novel comes as easily as talking about the 2-

3 zone. Yet he'll never shake that label of being just another UNLV jock.

He'd hoped the NCAA Tournament experience and what they had done on the court.

job would be about his team and what they could do on the court.

He didn't sign up for everything else. Can you blame a guy

, after all that, he begins to worry that people don't take the time to judge him for

does anymore? here's no contakes over. Librizzi Brown."

She called the flies through three Mounties, tips in a story a "little rebound and is witch-hunt" and

Mounties won't come within three points When the clocks wind down, the scoreboard reads 88-82 and the crowd

runs onto the floor. Battles belly-flops and slides 10 feet on his stomach. Gilliam sits and stretches before resting his hands behind his head be around his friends. for a second

Then, he gets up, shakes the other in Altoona, Steve Portland is a thinker almost 10 years, but no longer has any coach's hand and joins his team on the and a shooter on the basketball court. connection with the basketball team.

ndrae Baldwin is an athletic slasher-type who'll shoot from the outside. He wants the ball and And he is just the type of player that

Gilliam thinks is ruining basketball. shots a game and making 35 percent," he says.

"There's no team basketball. It's all about scoring and being flashy and rubbing it in a guy's face."

Baldwin says he did his best to fit into Gilliam's system. Without much talent to work with, Gilliam instituted a simple press since he was cut. Nor did he meet game plan: quick passes and high-percentage shots from down low, an offense was Ingold who, in an article that based on the famed UCLA system. In appeared in the Pittsburgh Post-Baldwin he saw a player who could use his athleticism to get in position for petrator of those "anonymous" calls to

those easy shots. "He wanted me to play out of position," Baldwin says. "I said, OK, that's what you do for the team. Our big guy the conference. He would not stop. For that he showed up at practices and influ-[Librizzi] wasn't eligible yet so the team needed me down there."

Problem is. Baldwin never got the chance to play his game, even when Librizzi joined the team in January.

"After [winter] break, he still wouldn't let me play my game," Baldwin says. Talking "He told me I'd play his way or not play

> teve Portland's mother told him to press the delete button on the computer and get rid of the

e-mail. When contacted via e-mail - the second attempted conwould be about his team tact for this story — Steve Portland never responded. He had said earlier during a phone call He'd hoped the Altoona that he had no comment on the story. However, the Daily Collegian continued to pursue his side of the story.

His mother, Penn State women's basketball coach Rene Portland, called the Collegian office to question the nature of the story written by what she referred to as "a newspaper that doesn't Mark Librizzi who he is or what he let facts get in the way of a

good story. "Let's be serious," she said. "You would not be test in over- writing this story if his time. Altoona name was Steve

fouled. The Lions go up 78-75. The a "little test of journalistic freedom." In the public spotlight for more than 20 years, she is weary of people prying. She acknowledges that her son chose

the Altoona campus because of basket-"He wanted a chance to keep playing," Rene Portland said. "He wanted to

A former reserve for Bishop Guilfoyle counselor, which he has been doing for e missed only one foul shot as a fres man.

"We saw a lot of upside in him," said Macklin, who recruited Portland. "He was a great shooter and a kid with leadgame. He's been around it his whole life. He has some deficiencies, but we "You watch the NBA now and you see thought he was the type of kid who could these Allen Iverson-types taking 30 or 40 take it to the next level because of his mental ability."

> Div III basketball is filled with this type of player. But there are also kids with the physical ability to play at a higher level and for some reason — maybe

academics, maybe attitude — never do. Steve Portland has not spoken to the with Ingold to discuss the situation. It Gazzette, said that Portland was the perthe AMCC.

"He would show up at practice," Gilliam says. "Just stand there. He'd call weeks, he would not let it go."

A smile comes to Gilliam's face. "But, hey, I like his tenacity."

Part of Rene Portland understands what Gilliam had to do with his team. "I've been there before," she says.

"You have to make your mark." understands that

her son is hurt. reason, she does 🛛 to do so." not want him talking about what happened this season.

to avoid a probcell phone from a high school parking throat. lot in New Jersey while on a recruiting

trip. Portland said of her son, "He does not want to be a part of the article." Then she continued, "He said to me, 'Mom, let me defend myself.' But I home game that it led by have realized over the so I told him to press the ball over 20 times. delete. I told him to press delete."

BASKETRAT

be objective and rounded, even though her son wouldn't tell his side. "Your facts better be factual." she

said. "That's what I am strongly suggesting. It had better be the truth. enny Macklin is tired of talking about Altoona basketball. He is

still on campus as an admissions

The Florida State graduate Altoona from New Jersey to build a program a decade ago. And that's what he thought he had

been doing all along, until the job was opened up last spring. According to Ingold, Altoona wanted

to hire another full-time coach for the iump to Division III. "When I looked at where we could

make a change, it was clear," she said. "The women's team had just won two AMCC championships, and we knew the most recognition in the community" Macklin's only problem with that is

that he felt the school and athletic recognition it brings. department did not communicate with him "I was told it was open, and that I

could apply," he said. "Nothing else was longer taking the leftovers or scroungsaid. I've been here nine years and nothing else was said."

He maintains that he never convinced his former players to buck Gilliam's new system. He also refutes Gilliam's claim enced his players with hand and facial gestures.

"I don't know why he would say that," he said. "I was very hurt that he said that. I stayed at practice a few minutes. But it's in the past."

Just like Gilliam cannot understand why he is the victim of the attacks, The other part Macklin cannot comprehend why he is cast as a villain.

"I've been nothing but supportive of And, for some the team," he says. "And I will continue

But there's more to it, obviously.

"Listen," he says, "it's almost like there's a line and it's in this gray area ... or maybe that they're trying to put peo-"I am looking ple in a box and that doesn't work and it never will. I don't want anything I say to lem for my be taken out of context. I don't want it team, and my seeming like I'm not supportive of things family" she says via going on around campus. He pauses and lightly clears his

> "Everything is going to play out," he says. "I don't have to have a hand in it at all. Things will play out."

hings played out for the Lions. They lose the rest of their regular season games, including one at Mount Aloysius and a

18 at the half. Frostburg years that you will pick State pressed in the second and choose what you write stanza, and Altoona turned But hope remained.

"We still believe we can win Her main worry, it this tournament coming up, seems, is that the story says Justin Page, a wiry 5-foot-11

guard and graduate of Bishop Guilfoyle This is a kid that means it. He means it when he plays: running into walls, scrapping with guys easily 40 pounds heavier, sliding across the floor making that noise of gym on skin that, simply by hearing it, makes you feel the painful burn. This kid can't hold back.

Neither can the Lions. They head to LaRoche, a small school outside Pittsburgh, and upset the No. 2 seed on their own court and become the first Altoona team to win a the move to Div. III began with provisional status five years ago

In the next game they lose 60-55 to eventual champion Pitt-Bradford. "You don't want to say that you're ever satisfied with losing," says Page. "You want to win your last game. But that tournament win was huge. It proved to other people that we can do something in the league next year."

About next year: Altoona will be a vastly improved basketball team. Not men's team was going to give us the only because of experience but because of Gilliam's recruiting. Part of the reason for hiring a big name is the instant

> There are more than 200 letters and forms from possible recruits that substantiate that. And the Lions are no ing for hidden talent. Instead, they're recruiting against low-end Div. II schools and top-tier Div. III programs.

> All of which has not gone unnoticed by the freshmen of the Altoona basketball team. They are all planning to try out for the team again next year. But they've had a lesson in beginnings and endings, and they know how these things go. "I think we have something," says

Stewart-Smith. "If this team stays together, we can win. But coach is going to bring in his own guys, so we'll have to wait and see what

happens."



Brandon Battles