

CROSSES GLOBE FOR GAME

Australian Fan Realizes Pacers Dream

TEAM NEWS



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Jermaine O'Neal autographs one of his shoes for Chris Manson and sister Jess, who traveled from Australia to see the Pacers play. (Frank McGrath/Pacers)

Australian Fan Realizes Pacers Dream

Chris Manson knows what it's like to be in a long-distance relationship. After all, he lives 9,288 miles away from the team he loves. But Wednesday night, the Australian who crossed the globe just to see the Pacers play in person got a surprise bonus: a visit with his favorite player, Jermaine O'Neal.

Chris Manson knows what it's like to be in a long-distance relationship. After all, he lives 9,288 miles away from the team he loves.

But on Wednesday night, the Australian-born Manson found himself far from home and inches away from one of his idols, Pacers forward Jermaine O'Neal. Even though Manson's legs were still stiff from the 13-hour flight he just endured, the 20-year-old fan couldn't keep his knees from knocking as he stood on the Conseco Fieldhouse floor next to O'Neal before the Pacers-Celtics game.

“I tried to keep my cool when I found out I was going to meet him,” Manson said. “But as soon as it happened, I felt like a little schoolgirl.” When O’Neal heard that Manson had made a pilgrimage to Indianapolis just to see the blue and gold, he agreed to take care of the traveler, sending one of his biggest fans back to Sydney with several souvenirs, including an autographed jersey and sneakers.

“I’m a huge J.O. fan, and anyone who knows me is aware of it,” Manson said. “The first time I actually saw him play was a televised game between Pacers and Toronto in 2001. He had such a fierce game that day, including a savage baseline dunk.”

It was love at first sight for Manson. But then again, that how it’s always been for him and the Pacers.

“I’ve been a huge fan since pre-school, being the proud owner of a Chuck Person jersey at that time,” said Manson. “One of the first games that I saw was a Pacers game. I was particularly impressed with Chuck Person shooting so far out and hitting it every time.”

From that day forward, Manson dreamed of the day he could see the Pacers in person. He refused to let the distance or the money keep his trip from becoming a reality.

“The second I started working,” Manson said, “I told myself that the moment I saved enough for the trip and tickets, I’d be on a plane over there.”

Manson’s airfare cost him several thousand dollars and his courtside seat to the game sold for \$300. The only thing set back further than his wallet may have been his watch.

To get from Sydney to Indianapolis, Manson passed through seven time zones. Wednesday night’s 7 p.m. tip translated to 9 a.m. Thursday morning in Australia.

Manson usually watches Pacers games from his computer shortly after arriving to work at Universal McCann in Sydney. Although he takes his job as a media assistant seriously, he concedes his favorite team can sometimes be a bit of a distraction.

“The Internet has been my savior,” said Manson. “In the morning, I get to work, turn on the computer, log straight onto NBA.com and have it open all day. Once the Pacers game begins I listen to the live version. I do tend to get pretty crazy at work.”

Manson can’t hide his affliction. Lately, his enthusiasm has proved to be contagious.

“A lot of my mates who I constantly enlighten with Pacers news have now become fans,” Manson said.

Even though cricket, rugby and Australian-rules football are the biggest draws down under, Manson believes basketball is gaining ground.

“Basketball is huge in Australia,” Manson said. “It's become one of the most popular sports that students play during school. But to tell you the truth, I couldn't name more than two players in the Australian League.”

For Manson, it's all about the NBA. Now, if he could only get his local ESPN network to stop showing Australian-born Andrew Bogut's games all the time. He's only had three chances to watch the Pacers on TV all season.

Even though Australian TV has steered clear of the Indiana this season, the tube has brought some of team's finest moments Manson's living room.

“My all-time favorite moment would be Reggie's performance against the Bulls with his buzzer-beater shot during the conference finals in 1998,” Manson said. “That game I saw, and couldn't stop jumping around the room.”

Of course, after attending his first Pacers game and meeting O'Neal, Miller's moment has already been knocked down a peg.

“I knew it was going to be the greatest night of my life from the second I stepped into Conseco Fieldhouse,” said Manson. “It was just incredible.”