

'Hot Rod'

Stuckey

Named **Freshman of the Year**

A Big Sky championship may not have been in the cards for Rodney Stuckey this year, but he can add another piece of hardware to his trophy case.

In March, Stuckey was selected as National Freshman of the Year in NCAA Division I by CollegeInsider.com.

"He's the real deal," said CollegeInsider.com senior writer Matt Drake. "He can shoot, pass and defend, but his biggest contribution is his leadership. This kid is mature beyond his years."

Perhaps the greatest story behind Stuckey's extraordinary success is academic. If it weren't for what he accomplished in the classroom, he wouldn't be adding to his long list of accomplishments on the court.

Stuckey, a 2004 graduate of Kentwood High School in Kent, Wash., was not eligible to practice or play basketball with the Eastern Eagles in the 2004-05 season because he hadn't fulfilled NCAA core curriculum requirements coming out of high school. He admitted his mistake and vowed to rectify it.

"In high school, I didn't take academics seriously until my senior year. I should have been doing that my entire high school career," the 6-foot-4 guard and business administration major explained in an interview posted on ESPN.com. "It held me back, but things happen for a reason. I'm here at Eastern, and I'm loving it."

"Taking the year off and getting my academics straight has helped me out tremendously. I'm ahead in my (progress toward a degree), and I'm not having to take a heavy load every quarter."

With a solid 3.34 GPA through five quarters of academic work at Eastern, the EWU men's basketball standout was rewarded for his hard work off the court in February by being selected to ESPN The Magazine Academic All-District VIII first team.

"The academic work he had to do to get back on the basketball floor are things we're probably most proud of," said Head Coach Mike Burns. "It says a lot of him not only as a player but as a person."

Stuckey, national scoring leader among freshmen and sophomores, was also named Big Sky's Most Valuable Player. The first-ever freshman to earn the MVP honor, the phenom ranked ninth in division scoring with a 24.2 point game average. He finished with a school record 726 points — the most in the Big Sky Conference in nearly 30 years — and he ranked fifth in the 43-year history of the league.

John Blanchette, sportswriter for *The Spokesman-Review*, had this to say about Stuckey in a December 2005 column: "It's hard to know whether it's more accurate to say that Mike Burns has hitched Eastern Washington's basketball wagon to a mere freshmen or that Rodney Stuckey has highjacked it," Blanchette wrote. "You're watching the early evolutionary stages of the best player in Eastern history."

Joel Willits, staff writer, The Easterner, and Dave Cook, EWU sports information director, contributed to this story.

