

Coming to America

It's a long way from Turkey to Texas, but Dogus Balbay came to Austin from Istanbul and, with the departure of D.J. Augustin, is now ready to take over at point guard for the Longhorns.

How does a Turkish soccer player who's never seen an NBA game become a great basketball player? How does a Turkish basketball prodigy end up as the point guard for Texas Longhorns?

Meet Dogus Balbay.

With D.J. Augustin gone to the NBA, the only true point guard on the roster for the 2008-09 Texas Longhorns is Balbay, who last season as a true freshman was slated to be Augustin's back-up until knee surgery forced him to miss the season.

Now, Dogus (pronounced: "dohj") may be the man to replace the departed All-American. As the star of the Turkish Under-19 National Team, who led his squad in points, rebounding, assists and steals at the World Championship, basketball has always come naturally to Balbay. But basketball is not where he began his sporting career.

Growing up in Istanbul, Turkey, Balbay played soccer and, at only nine years old, was excelling at the sport. He fully intended to follow his dreams of becoming a great footballer, but that summer, his older sister, Derya, was playing a different sport.

"I was pretty good, actually, and what happened is my sister started to play basketball," Balbay told *Inside Texas*. "My club team had a summer basketball school. We both decided to go there because I didn't want to leave her alone, so we decided to go together."

He didn't really understand basketball and didn't have a great desire to play it, but he wanted to take care of his sister. So, Dogus and Derya went to the basketball camp together. When Dogus got there, however, he fit right in. The game intrigued him and, being a natural athlete, he started learning everything he could about how it worked. It became his game.

In 2002, when soccer hit a fervor pitch in Turkey due to the country's Bronze Medal run in the World Cup - it had been 48 years since Turkey had even qualified for the World Cup - and which included an opening round upset of powerhouse Brazil, all of Balbay's schoolmates were playing with soccer balls.

Not Balbay. At only 12 years old he was in the gym, shooting hoops and playing the sport he'd come to love, basketball.

"I kept playing and playing and I got better every day, but I didn't know anything about basketball first when I got the ball," said Balbay, recalling how he had to learn the basic concepts of the game, like shooting and dribbling.

Helping him each step of the way was his father, Mithat, and his mother, Sukran. When Balbay started to play basketball instead of soccer, his parents were immediately supportive.

"They didn't say anything to me like, 'Dogus, you've got to play soccer,' or 'Dogus, you've got to play basketball,' or 'You've got to go to school. You can't play any sport.' They didn't tell me anything like that. They always supported what I want to do," said Balbay.

At each level he played, Balbay was the star of his team. When he was 15, his club team played in a tournament against the top youth teams in the nation. Balbay excelled and the Turkish National Team took notice. They invited Balbay to go to the team's camp that summer and train with the best basketball players in Turkey. He immediately accepted and was made the starting point guard for the Under-16 National Team.

Balbay's game elevated quickly. In 2005 he led his team to the Under-16 European Championship, leading the national squad in almost every statistical category. He was moved up to the Under-18 team ahead of schedule, where he continued to excel.

His youth basketball career in Turkey was flourishing, but his mind was on another country: America. He knew nothing of American culture, nothing of American customs or even of American food and didn't speak a word of English, but there was something else that was drawing him to the States. Balbay told *IT* he wanted to be more than simply a basketball player. He wanted to get a great education and it was becoming increasingly difficult because of his basketball schedule in Turkey.

"We had two practices every day," said Balbay. "They were long, like two and a half hours each. So it was hard to go to school



Dogus Balbay

Jim Sigmon/UT Sports Photography