All of our lives have important intersections, moments that cement relationships or irrevocably break them. For Nick Fazekas and Ramon Sessions, fall 2005 was one of those times. The two standout University of Nevada men’s basketball players had become teammates the season before.

Fazekas was a coltish, yet strangely and singularly talented 6-foot-11 forward who had led the Wolf Pack in scoring and rebounding. Sessions was the quick, experienced-beyond-his-years freshman point guard who had stepped into a starting role immediately for the Wolf Pack.

Continues on page 32
Together, the two players had shown that Fazekas’ freshman season, when Nevada shocked the college basketball world with a Cinderella trip into the Sweet Sixteen of the NCAA Tournament in 2004, was not a fluke. In March 2005, the Pack again produced a notable NCAA Tournament victory over Texas, followed by a loss with honor in the Round of 32 to No. 1-ranked Illinois.

Heading into their second season as teammates, expectations for the Wolf Pack were even higher.

Yet by early October 2005, as the team began preparations for the season, Fazekas knew his teammate was hurting. In late September, Sessions received news that his former high school coach, Buddy Rogers, had died of a heart attack.

Fazekas, whose laid-back demeanor can sometimes belie an industrious and insightful nature, could see the pain in Sessions’ eyes, which are normally alert as a small owl’s.

“Definitely, I could see that Ramon wasn’t the same Ramon,” Fazekas says, recalling the days when his teammate would come home and shy away from the well-worn couch the two players had shared in the living room of the home they rent in northwest Reno.

It was on the couch where the two had played video games — Madden NFL was one of their all-time favorites or watched SportsCenter together. It was the place where the quiet Sessions would come alive during longtime ESPN broadcaster Chris Berman’s “Two-Minute Drill” segment during the NFL season. Fazekas, normally the outgoing one, would shake his head in wonder as his smaller, yet more stylish teammate would suddenly drop all the artifice of cool and imitate Berman’s bellowing, over-the-top call during a long touchdown run that “HE … COULD … GO … ALL … THE … WAY.”

For Fazekas, the joke was always that someone who could move so fluidly on the basketball floor — and indeed, Sessions with a basketball can be something magical, full of feints and fakes and opponents vainly grasping for air — could suddenly turn so uncool, and not worry about it in the least. Then again, they were friends. “And friends do goofy stuff like that all the time,” Fazekas says.

“Losing his high school coach was a big shock for him, and definitely you could tell that almost from the day Ramon found out,” Fazekas adds. “I was really hurting for him.”

Sessions had developed a close relationship with Rogers, a 64-year-old who had spent more than half of his life as a coach and teacher at his alma mater, Myrtle Beach (S.C.) High School. Rogers was a special person to all who met him. He wasn’t just a basketball coach. He had a rare ability to relate to all types of young people, black or white, male or female.

In Sessions, the coach had found a kindred spirit.

“Is Ramon sensitive in that way?” asks Nevada men’s basketball coach Mark Fox, who met Rogers while recruiting Sessions in 2003. “Well, the great thing about Ramon has always been that he has always known how to love. That’s one of his greatest strengths.”

So what did Fazekas do? Instead of letting Sessions shut himself off from the rest of the world, trying to work through the pain on his own, the big forward took it upon himself to remind Sessions that life was still good — and that loss, as painful as it can be, is part of life.

“I tried to keep the stress as low as I could for Ramon,” says Fazekas, who is quick to point out that Sessions’ own inner strength, as well as the support of Sessions’ mother, Ann, were also keys in the player surviving the ups and downs of his sophomore season. “I just always tried to keep things loose with Ramon, be the guy who if he needed someone to talk to, I could be there for him. I tried to keep things as low-key and not as stressed-out as I could around the house … a joke here, trying to get him play video games there … anything to help loosen his mind, and keep the stress out of there a little bit, that was important for me to try to do.”

As with almost anything Nick Fazekas has done in his life — from leading the program to an unprecedented four straight NCAA Tournament appearances, chalking up 100-plus victories in four years (a team record he shares with fellow senior Kyle Shiloh), becoming the school’s all-time leader in scoring — he was successful in helping Sessions.

“It was a tough year, but without having Nick around, it would’ve been a lot tougher year,” said Sessions, who rebounded this season with a vengeance. In 2006-2007, Sessions, scoring in double figures and leading the team to an unprecedented four straight NCAA tournament appearances, chalking up 100-plus victories in four years (a team record he shares with fellow senior Kyle Shiloh), becoming the school’s all-time leader in scoring — he was successful in helping Sessions.

“I mean, Nick is more than a friend to me. Whether it’s making my passes look a lot better than they really are with those great hands of his, or with his friendship away from things … I don’t know … what can you say about somebody who’s always got your back, who’s already a true friend?”

THE TEMPTATION, OF COURSE, would be to turn the Fazekas-Sessions friendship into a pseudo-scientific exercise of comparison and contrast. Fazekas is 6-foot-11 and Sessions is almost a foot shorter at 6-3.
Fazekas is from the West, in the cold shadow of the Rocky Mountains, in Arvada, Colo., a suburb of Denver. Sessions grew up in the South, in Myrtle Beach, S.C., what is called the “Grand Strand” of the eastern portion of South Carolina where the beaches are wide, sandy and warmed by the influence of the Gulf Stream.

Fazekas is laid-back, a jokester and prankster. “I’ll always remember,” Fox says, “having practice on Christmas Day, and I said, ‘We’re going to do this drill.’ And Nick said, ‘I’ve got a drill for us.’ And I said, ‘What drill is that?’ And Nick said, ‘How about we just go home?’ … Nick’s demeanor is always that way … nothing is ever too serious that he can’t enjoy the experience, whatever it might be.”

Sessions has a quiet intensity — “the quiet storm,” Fox says. Sessions’ ability to be singularly possessive of important moments was apparent from the beginning. During his freshman season, Fox was so struck by this quality that he began calling his freshman point guard “Little Cassius,” after boxing great Muhammad Ali.

And yet, for all the differences, it is the similarities that clearly have defined the friendship. Fazekas’ father, Joe, was a college basketball player himself for two seasons each at Wyoming and Idaho State. From a young age, it was obvious that his son would do the same.

“Joe’s a great father, and he’s really wanted his son to accomplish important things in his life,” Fox says. “I remember the first game Nick played for us, and Joe came to the game and watched. Nick didn’t start. I remember seeing Joe the next day, and Joe said, ‘You know, Nick shouldn’t start. He’s not better than those kids.’ Most basketball fathers are not that way.”

Sessions, too, took to the game as a youngster. He can remember playing as early as 4 years old. Just as Joe Fazekas had a strong influence on his son’s playing, Ann Sessions, a former standout high school basketball player herself, had the same influence on her son.

“She helped me set up a little basket in our yard when I was barely tall enough to shoot the ball,” Sessions says, remembering hundreds upon hundreds of games against a multitude of neighborhood kids and nearby cousins.

And, interestingly, basketball and sports in general come naturally to both of them, though in different ways. At first glance, one would never think that about Fazekas. Though Fazekas often runs with a distinct hitch in his stride, moving with a rocking, almost teetering gait, he is extremely dexterous. His hands, for example, are exceptional.

“Once we were teaching another kid on the team how to juggle, to improve his handwork,” Fox remembers. “And Nick said, ‘Gimme those balls,’ and he just started to juggle and it looked like something right out of Circus Circus, where you see the guys juggling balls and plates and all sorts of things all at the same time. It’s a terrific gift.”

More than once, in the open court with a basketball in his hand, Sessions’ ability to summon a sweet press of acceleration is often seamless opponents have little time to react. His game is one of deep, plaintive attack.

“A huge heart and a great, competitive spirit,” Fox says, sounding as if he is describing a champion racehorse. “He has a unique ability to know when the game turns and comes back to you, and when you need to seize that moment for good.”

And then there is the matter of the roommates’ give-and-take. Fazekas is the cook. Sessions will rarely, if ever, cook. “I try to entice him into the kitchen,” Fazekas says, his grin widening, “promise him pancakes and stuff like that, but Ramon usually wants no part of it.”
him into the kitchen,” Fazekas says, his grin widening, “promise him pancakes and stuff like that, but Ramon usually wants no part of it.” On the other hand, Sessions is constantly straightening their home, joking that it would probably take a bomb to go off before the much more laissez-faire Fazekas would actually pick up his practice jersey or sweats from the floor. “And even with a bomb going off, I don’t know if I would or not,” Fazekas adds, smiling.

“They are such a good balance to one another,” Fox adds.

When the coach speaks of Fazekas, he speaks of a happy warrior, a young man who is comfortable in his own skin, a player who is rarely rattled, even as his senior season has progressed and he’s had to face the prospect of double- and triple-teaming … either with or without the ball.

With Sessions, Fox sees the fire, the determination, as well as the inquisitive ability to look at tasks and ask nuts-and-bolts questions like a fine watchmaker puzzling over the inner workings of a clock. On team charters, for example, most of the team regularly falls into iPod-induced sleep at the back of the plane. Not Sessions, who often sits in the jump seat in the cockpit — with the crew’s permission — and eagerly observes the mechanics of flying a major piece of metal and machinery.

A prebusiness major, Sessions says he hopes to one day own and operate his own firm. Fazekas, whose major is general studies, has a pronounced creative side. He says Fox isn’t too far removed from projecting Fazekas’ post-NBA life when the coach says he could see his forward involved with digital media some day. “I definitely love video games, and at some point, to be able to work with other people in creating something like that, that would be a pretty cool thing,” Fazekas says, tugging at his knees and smiling at the irony that he very well could become the world’s tallest video-game programmer.

“They’re both intelligent, sensitive and creative young men,” Fox says. The 38-year-old coach’s eyes are often like ping pong balls, so intense that they seem to jump back and forth, serving as exclamation points, emphasizing one important basketball point or another. He is also a keen observer of human nature. And perhaps this is why his eyes grow still. They slowly fill with tears as words escape him. It is a moment of deep contemplation. A moment where a young man like Nick Fazekas, who clearly knows how to savor the moment, would tell his coach that it is perfectly all right to consider what has been, to consider what the two players have meant to their program and their university.

“When you think about what those kids have accomplished … when you think about the pride they’ve had about their program … their hard work … how they’re such great friends … It’s just hard to put in words.”

The young coach has to adjust his glasses. “It really has been a special time,” he says. “More than anything else … these kids inspire me.”

LOOK ONLINE
Read Nevada grad Ty Cobb’s story on Nick Fazekas’ grandfather, Albert Fazekas, and his challenging journey from Hungary to the United States, online at http://www.unr.edu/nevadasilverandblue.

Can’t find the image you’d like? Email Jean Dixon at jdixon@unr.edu

Capture the Action!

Want a memento of the Nevada Wolf Pack’s exciting run to its fourth consecutive NCAA basketball tournament? You can find Pack basketball images on customized mugs, mouse pads, refrigerator magnets, note cards and many other items from the Senior Night celebration to the postseason tournament excitement at the University’s online photo print gallery http://www.unr.edu/nevadaphotography.
The Wolf Pack broke a 61-year-old school record for overall wins in a season March 16 in its opening-round NCAA tournament victory against Creighton. The Pack’s 29th win topped the 28-5 record of the 1945-46 Nevada team. The Wolf Pack compiled a perfect record in February games for the third straight season in 2007, and the team won 20 contests before the second month of the year had even begun. Two of its nonconference wins in 2006-07 were in the home states of teams judged in midseason power ratings to be among the top fifth of all 336 Division I men’s college basketball programs (beating California in San Jose and Gonzaga in Seattle).

Even the most skeptical college basketball fan would have to rate the Wolf Pack’s success in road and neutral-court games as amazing. From the beginning of the 2004-05 season through the 2007 NCAA tournament, Nevada tallied a 36-12 record away from Lawlor Events Center. This past season the Wolf Pack was 10-2 on the road and 14-4 in games not played at Lawlor.

The latter statistic includes the Dec. 3 Cal and Dec. 30 Gonzaga games, neutral-site contests in name only. The 77-71 win over the Bears was played before a clear majority of fans wearing blue and gold among the 7,833 people in attendance. The Pack’s nationally televised 82-74 triumph against the Bulldogs entertained, and then appeared to physically drain many of the 13,000 Gonzaga and approximately 2,000 Nevada fans who packed Key Arena. It was the largest crowd to attend a regular-season college basketball game in Washington state history.

The Wolf Pack also ended Akron’s 21-game homecourt winning streak Dec. 22, at the time the fourth-longest such streak in the nation.

What was the greatest team or sports moment in the history of Wolf Pack athletics? Email your answer to silverblue@unr.edu or send it via regular mail to Nevada Silver & Blue, University of Nevada, Reno, Reno NV 89557-0108. Include a phone number where you can be reached.