

LEGENDS

MAGAZINE

20/24 Winter

INSIDE JENNY BOUCEK'S
BASKETBALL JOURNEY

FROM THE INAUGURAL WNBA
SEASON TO COACHING IN THE
NBA TO MOTHERHOOD



WILLIE BURTON

FROM ATHLETE TO EDUCATOR



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CONTENTS

RIK SMITS

AND HIS LASTING IMPACT ON INDIANA

LATE BLOOMER TO BELOVED HOOSIER

p.23



LEGENDS OF BASKETBALL LAS VEGAS INVITATIONAL

THE 2023 LEGENDS COLLEGE HOOPS SERIES

p.32

LEGENDS OF BASKETBALL SHOWCASE

p.35



TABLE OF CONTENTS

NBA IN-SEASON TOURNAMENT

p.2 LAS VEGAS LOOKING LIKE A 'SURE THING' FOR BASKETBALL AND LEGENDS

DARNELL HILLMAN

p.6 DR. DUNK REMINISCES ON WINNING NBA'S FIRST DUNK CONTEST

JENNY BOUCEK

p.10 FROM THE INAUGURAL WNBA SEASON TO COACHING IN THE NBA TO MOTHERHOOD

LEGEND AMONG LEGENDS

p.15 WILLIE BURTON DETAILS HIS TRANSITION FROM ATHLETE TO EDUCATOR

p.20 LEGENDS CARE PROGRAMS

p.21 LEGENDS CARE: ORLANDO MAGIC GOLF TOURNAMENT

p.22 NBRPA HEALTH SCREENINGS

RIK SMITS

p.23 LATE BLOOMER TO BELOVED HOOSIER

p.28 LEGENDS MEDIA & ENTERTAINMENT

p.29 MIXTAPE MONDAYS

p.30 TRILL'S TAKE - TOP 10 MOMENTS IN INDIANA PACERS HISTORY

p.32 LEGENDS OF BASKETBALL LAS VEGAS INVITATIONAL

p.34 CONTINENTAL TIRE SEATTLE TIP-OFF

p.35 LEGENDS OF BASKETBALL SHOWCASE - CLEVELAND

p.38 LEGENDS CHAPTER SPOTLIGHT: DALLAS

p.39 LEGENDS CHAPTER SPOTLIGHT: PHOENIX

p.6

DARNELL HILLMAN

"I UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU DID. YOU TAUGHT ME TO SET YOUR GOALS HIGH ENOUGH THAT YOU HAVE TO WORK FOR IT, BUT NOT SO HIGH THAT YOU CANNOT ACHIEVE IT."



WITH ADDITION OF NBA'S IN SEASON TOURNAMENT,
**LAS VEGAS LOOKING LIKE
 A 'SURE THING' FOR
 BASKETBALL AND LEGENDS**

by **CHRIS SHERIDAN**



**NBA'S IN SEASON TOURNAMENT,
 NBRPA'S LEGENDS OF BASKETBALL
 INVITATIONAL, THE WNBA'S
 SUCCESS AND A POTENTIAL LAS
 VEGAS BASED NBA FRANCHISE
 MAKE THIS DESERT OASIS FERTILE
 GROUND FOR NBRPA MEMBERS**

A'ja Wilson of the WNBA champion Las Vegas Aces did not know she had a tough act to follow, but she came in at the red-carpet entrance of the NBA Cup on Saturday night right after Flavor Flav had finished talking about how he once played against Moses Malone. And how he would like to play one-on-one against Atlanta Hawks superstar Trae Young.

Any NBA player who has reached the finals would recognize many of the trappings: All hands on deck for ESPN, which started bringing in hundreds of staff and crew members eight days earlier; red carpets and VIP's, a press conference with commissioner Adam Silver, just like he does at the NBA Finals and the All-Star Game, a court lighting arrangement during the game, "championship" caps afterward and the honoring of NBA Legends Dr. J, Gary Payton, LaMarcus Aldridge, Shaquille O'Neal, Robert Horry and Carlos Boozer, who were cheered when they were shown on the videoboard throughout this historic weekend - that make it feel entirely different than any NBA game played in any December in years past.



This was quite an event put on by Silver, a game that did not count in the standings, but which awarded every player on the winning Los Angeles Lakers team a cool \$500,000. (Yes, you are correct if you are thinking to yourself “I was born 20-30 years too soon”). As many have learned - not everyone leaves Vegas a winner - but the members of the losing team also took home \$200,000 apiece, which is not the worst consolation prize in the world.

This is an event no retired NBA player – or anyone else, for that matter – had ever attended.

The stands were full Saturday night as the Lakers defeated the Indiana Pacers 123-109 to win the first In-Season Tournament, which Silver and the NBA pulled off quite nicely to an audience of viewers who knew something new



NBA Legends Julius Erving and Avery Johnson talk before the game between the New Orleans Pelicans and Los Angeles Lakers during the semifinals of the In-Season Tournament on December 7, 2023 at T-Mobile Arena in Las Vegas, NV.



Above: The Los Angeles Lakers pose as they celebrate their 123-109 victory over the Indiana Pacers to win the championship game of the inaugural NBA In-Season Tournament in Las Vegas, NV.



Top left: NBA Legend Kevin Garnett attends the game between the New Orleans Pelicans and Los Angeles Lakers. Top right: Head Coach Rick Carlisle of the Indiana Pacers is interviewed during the In-Season Tournament Practice press conference. Bottom right: NBA Legend Andre Iguodala and Head Coach Darvin Ham of the Los Angeles Lakers talk before the game.



and different was happening over the past couple of weeks but were not quite sure exactly what it was, or what the rules were. LeBron James and Anthony Davis taking it seriously and winning that NBA Cup brought an added level of legitimacy to a brand-new idea that was pulled off with very few hitches and further cemented Las Vegas as a basketball destination.

A week earlier, the NBRPA held the Legends of Basketball Las Vegas Invitational at the MGM Grand Garden Arena, where Washington faced off against Colorado State and USC battled Gonzaga in the nightcap. The common threads here - fantastic basketball being played and a formidable showing by NBRPA members. The LOB Invitational boasted participation from Jay Williams, Detlef Schrempf, Nick Young, Sam Perkins, CJ Watson and Dan Dickau and between the two events - there was no shortage of NBA history out and about in Las Vegas.

While "Sin City" has been home to the NBA's Summer League for a while now, our membership's growing presence here has not gone unnoticed. Over the past few years, members and the Legends brand have been somewhat of a staple in Las Vegas - having staged the annual Legends Summer Getaway, WNBA All-Star events, and the Legends of Basketball Las Vegas Invitational on the famed strip. Now, with a yearly event in the IST and the expected addition of an NBA franchise to compliment the WNBA's back-to-back champion Las Vegas Aces - there is no doubt that the NBRPA's impact will only increase in Las Vegas.



What every NBRPA member should realize is that in the years ahead, this is going to be a showcase that gives ex-players a chance to be in the spotlight if they need or want it, because when Silver goes all-in on an event in a gambling town – an event that was a gamble in and of itself – and comes out looking like a winner, his next move will most certainly be a double down.

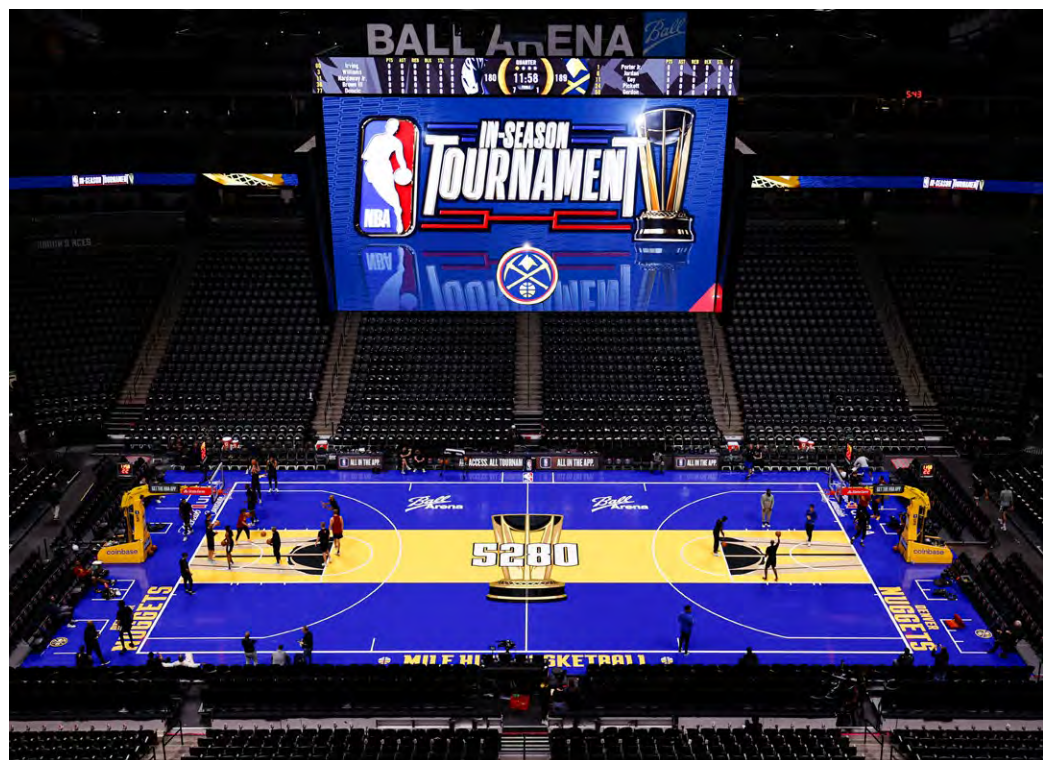
The thing to remember about Saturday night, December 9, 2023 in Las Vegas was that this event was treated in a grandiose manner by ESPN/ABC and the league office. It is going to be a major NBA event in the years ahead. Whatever tournament tiebreaker rules are changed or tweaked will not matter to retired NBA players, but what should matter is this: The opportunity to shine a spotlight on something will be there, and the only trick to getting into that spotlight will be walking into the T-Mobile Arena using the same entrance, the one with the red carpet, that the WNBA champs and the rapper with the huge watch around his neck used.

Shaq, Horry, Boozer, and the other Legends that attended will all remember being there because the NBA made being in the building feel like it was being at a major event – even though it was a new event.

Whether it's the second edition of the IST, played next December, or the NBRPA's events - somebody out there who once played professional basketball may want to bring some attention to something. The best place to do that is now known.

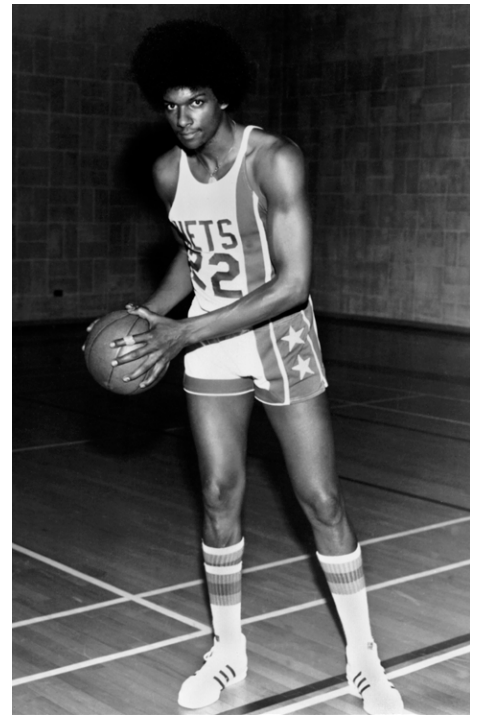
Above: Shaquille O'Neal & Lou Williams looks on during the semifinals of the In-Season Tournament on December 7, 2023 at T-Mobile Arena in Las Vegas, NV.

Below: Head coach Darvin Ham of the Los Angeles Lakers reacts against the Indiana Pacers during the second quarter in the championship game.



*Former Indiana Pacers player
Darnell Hillman is presented with
a trophy for winning the first NBA
Slam Dunk contest in 1977 before
the game against the Detroit Pistons
at Bankers Life Fieldhouse on
March 8, 2017 in Indianapolis, IN.*





Left: Former Pacer Darnell Hillman, Glenn Robinson III and Fred Jones are presented a trophies before the game against the Detroit Pistons on March 8, 2017 at Bankers Life Fieldhouse in Indianapolis, IN. Right: Darnell Hillman #22 of the New Jersey Nets poses for mock action portrait in 1978 in New Jersey.

DR. DUNK: DARNELL HILLMAN

REMINISCES ON WINNING NBA'S FIRST DUNK CONTEST

by CHRIS SHERIDAN

When the NBA's Slam Dunk Contest is held this February at All-Star Weekend in Indianapolis, the winner of the first contest will likely be in the house. But Darnell Hillman will not be kicking the bottom of the backboard or grabbing \$100 off the glass.

At age 74, those days are behind him.

But what is not behind Hillman is the ability to give everyone a Slam-Dunk-Contest history lesson, along with a number of life lessons like the ones he gave to youngsters who attended the Indiana Pacers' basketball camps over the past several decades.

"This was my gimmick: I would start my presentation by jumping and kicking the bottom of the backboard with my shoe," Hillman told Legends Magazine in a phone interview. "That got the kids' attention, and I told the coaches I would be able to take it from there. Once they saw me do that, they were ready to listen."

Hillman has plenty of stories from the old ABA and the first season after the ABA-NBA merger, and listening to him speak is equal parts educational and inspirational. Hillman was a high jumper at San Jose State when he was in college and was teammates with John Carlos, the track star

who became famous along with Tommie Smith for raising their fists in the Black Power salute during the 1968 Mexico City Olympics.

When Hillman was on the San Jose State track team, Carlos saw him practicing his high jumps with the bar set at 6 feet. Carlos came over, grabbed Hillman by the lapels of his shirt and ordered the 6-foot-9 Hillman to set the bar at 7 feet for every single practice jump.

"I was a pretty tough guy, and here he was grabbing me and getting in my face, so I seized him up," Hillman said. "I realized he was a world-record holder, and so I humbly said, 'What would you like me to do?' He said, 'From now on, that bar gets set at 7 feet every single time you practice.' He was always looking at me when I practiced.

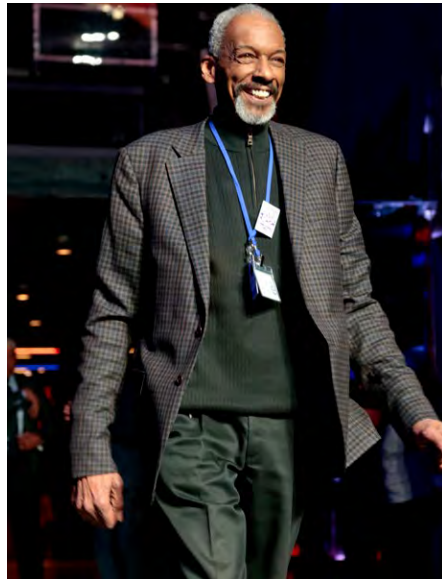
"In the first meet after he told me that, I cleared 7 feet on my first jump. And I went up to him afterward and told him, 'I understand what you did. You taught me to set your goals high enough that you have to work for it, but not so high that you cannot achieve it.'"

Hillman grew up in Sacramento when young men his age were being drafted and sent to Vietnam. In 11th grade, he had a great game and the father of one of the opposing players was on the California state draft

board. Hillman got drafted into the Armed Services shortly after that game, and he believes it's because the father wanted to prevent his son from having to play against Hillman again. Hillman was fortunate enough to make the Army basketball team under coach Hal Fisher and was able to stay out of Vietnam by playing hoops in Germany, Yugoslavia and Italy among other places throughout his military-service time.

After the ABA and NBA merged prior to the 1976-77 season, the NBA borrowed a page from the ABA playbook and had its first-ever Slam Dunk Contest in that post-merger season. Hillman began the 1976-77 season with the Pacers and defeated Moses Malone (Houston Rockets), Richard Washington (Kansas City Kings) and Mickey Johnson (Chicago Bulls) in dunk-offs held at halftime of games televised by CBS, then defeated Kareem Abdul-Jabbar in the semifinals at the All-Star Game on Abdul-Jabbar's home court in Milwaukee.

The finals didn't take place until Game 6 of the NBA Finals in Portland, where the Trail Blazers were playing the 76ers, and Hillman had been traded in the interim from the Pacers to the Nets for "Super" John Williamson. As a result, the NBA would not allow him to wear a Pacers jersey or a Nets jersey, so Hillman competed in a white Adidas tank top after warming up with a "Bottle Shoppe" sweatshirt from the liquor store that sponsored his softball team. (ABA alumni, led by ex-Pacer Mel Daniels, later created the Dropping Dimes Foundation and



Left: Darnell Hillman during the ABA 50th Reunion on April 7, 2018 at the Bankers Life Fieldhouse in Indianapolis, IN. Right: Darnell Hillman poses with 1977 Slam Dunk Championship trophy in the original Bottle Shoppe jersey he wore in the contest. Photo Credit: NBRPA/Walt Thomas.

sold replica Bottle Shoppe sweatshirts to raise money for veterans of the league that used a red, white and blue basketball.) Hillman won the contest, and he spent the prize money on a new car – a Pontiac Grand Prix SJS 2-door for his mother, Winona Irene Hillman. Shortly after, the NBA Slam Dunk Contest was discontinued until 1984, when Larry Nance defeated Julius Erving.

The Pacers, much like the San Antonio Spurs, embrace their ABA roots more than the two

other ABA teams that were merged into the NBA in 1976, the Denver Nuggets and Nets (who were known as the New York Nets and then the New Jersey Nets prior to relocating to Brooklyn). The most famous ABA Slam Dunk Contest happened in 1976 with Erving defeating David Thompson by taking off from the free-throw line and dunking. However, Erving did not participate in the 1977 contest because the prize was \$15,000, and Erving felt it should be higher. Former CBS broadcaster Brent Musburger floated the idea of a winner-take-all contest between Hillman and Erving after the 1977 finals, but it never came to fruition.

Hillman's leaping ability is legendary, and he reputedly won a wager by plucking a \$100 bill off the top of a backboard and putting it in his pocket before his feet hit the floor. His coach with the Pacers, Bobby "Slick" Leonard, often joked that Hillman could pluck a quarter off the top of a backboard and leave two dimes and a nickel in its place.

Hillman first met Erving when the two tried out for the Pan American Games team when Erving was still a student-athlete at UMass. Dr. J made that team along with Paul Westphal and Elmore Smith, and Hillman later played alongside a young Bill Walton on an Armed Forces team that competed in Germany prior to Walton committing to UCLA.

In 1968, Hillman and his teammates practiced at the Presidio base in San Francisco, which was the main treatment center for soldiers returning from Vietnam who lost arms or



Former Indiana Pacers great, Darnell Hillman, reads to students from the Pacers Learning Centers as the Pacers tipped off their Read to Achieve program at the Indianapolis Zoo November 1, 2007 in Indianapolis, IN.

legs in the war and were beginning their state-side rehab. Those soldiers rehabbed in the gym at the same time the basketball players were practicing, and Hillman recalls a tryout involving 60 players for 15 spots during which Coach Fisher motivated the players by telling them that if they did not make the final 15, some of them were going to end up going to Vietnam where they might lose an arm or leg, or come back in a body bag.

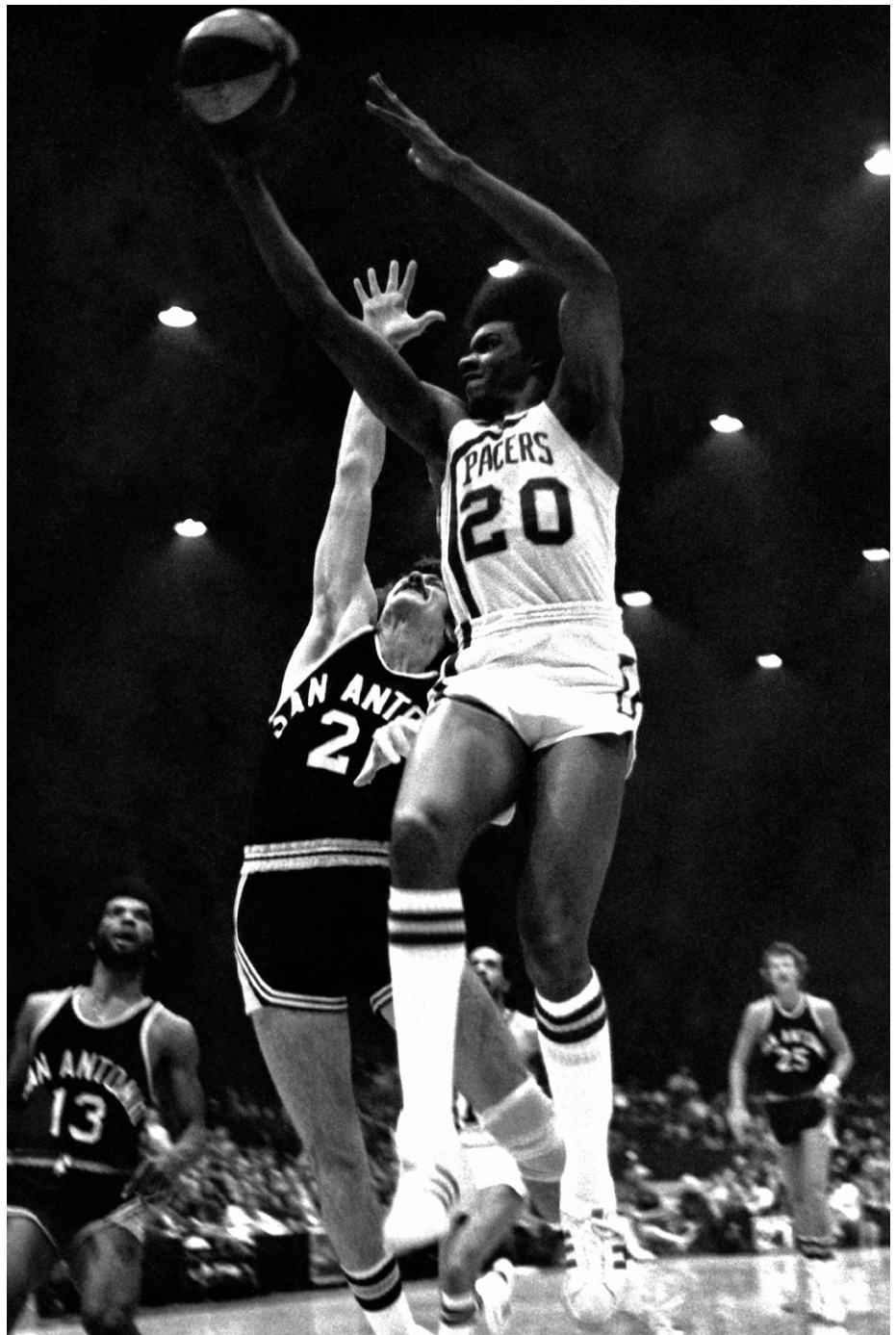
Hillman spent much of 1968 at the Presidio during one of the most turbulent years in American history. Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy were assassinated that year, the Manson murders took place south of San Francisco, and the war in Vietnam was going so poorly that President Lyndon B. Johnson more than doubled the number of American troops being sent to Southeast Asia. Protests over the Vietnam War disrupted the Democratic National Convention in Chicago and led to riots, and Hillman had a front row seat for all of it.

He also recognizes that if it wasn't for Coach Fisher, he might have had a very different journey.

"He had the same kind of pull that a five-star general would have, and twice he kept me from being sent over to Vietnam," Hillman said of Fisher.

Film of the 1977 Slam Dunk Contest can still be viewed on YouTube. Back then, the format called for each competitor to attempt five dunks in a row. Hillman made all of his attempts and won the contest, but the event had no sponsor and there was no trophy. The Pacers made up for that years later by having a trophy made for Hillman. To this day, that trophy sits on his kitchen table. He recently retired as the Pacers' associate director of camps, clinics & alumni relations.

Not all of Hillman's best dunks took place in contests. He said he was able to get his chest even with the 10-foot rim and put his entire arm through the rim after dunking, with his armpit resting on the rim. The ability to kick the bottom of the backboard came from his high-jumping history, and the technique he used was known as the straddle, which went out of vogue when Dick Fosbury won the gold medal at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City with the "Fosbury Flop" in which the jumper goes backward over the bar. Hillman recalled seeing Fosbury use his signature technique at a practice field, landing in between two Styrofoam landing pads and getting stuck until his fellow jumpers lifted him out of the landing pit.



Darnell Hillman #20 of the Indiana Pacers shoots a layup against the San Antonio Spurs during a game played in 1977 at Market Square Arena in Indianapolis, Indiana

The tales that Hillman tells are true, and it remains undetermined what role he may have at 2024 All-Star Weekend when the Pacers host the game. It seems like a no-brainer to have him serve as one of the judges during the Slam Dunk Contest. Hopefully, at the very least, Hillman will be a go-to interview for media covering the event and for the Turner Sports crew, which includes TNT's Reggie Miller – the most famous ex-Pacer of all-time.

Hillman was the NBA's first Slam Dunk Champion, and here's hoping that he is not the last member of the ABA generation who can impart the same type of wisdom and goal-setting that he learned from Carlos on the track at San Jose State. If not for Carlos demanding that Hillman set the bar at seven feet instead of six feet, the history books might feature a different name as the first slam-dunk champion and Hillman's stories would not have been told.



INSIDE JENNY BOUCEK'S BASKETBALL JOURNEY

FROM THE INAUGURAL WNBA SEASON TO COACHING IN THE NBA TO MOTHERHOOD

by **AJ MCCORD**

It was a “yes” that so many women weren’t sure would ever come. And now that it was here, the question for Jenny Boucek, and so many others, was, “What are you going to do with it?”

The year was 1997, and female athletes were beginning to reap the very tangible benefits and opportunities provided by Title IX, the law ensuring entities receiving federal financial assistance couldn’t discriminate against individuals based on sex. The Women’s National Basketball Association was playing its inaugural season that summer and Boucek, now an assistant coach with the NBA’s Indiana Pacers, remembers those early WNBA games vividly.

“[Games] would be sold out and grown women would be in the stands in tears because

of what they had been through,” Boucek remembers. “All the ‘nos’ they had received because of their gender. The WNBA represented a ‘yes,’ and a big ‘yes,’ not just basketball but [that] women can do things they’ve never been allowed to do.

“You can see little girls in the stands almost confused, like, ‘Wow, I didn’t think women could play basketball professionally.’ Even seeing the little boys in the stands with jerseys on and cheering for women, it was like, ‘Okay, this is going to raise up a generation of boys that will grow up into men who respect women differently – their wives, their daughters, their colleagues.’”

It was the start of something big, and every

player on those eight teams in that inaugural season could feel it.

“The WNBA had a tremendous purpose,” Boucek told Legends Magazine. “That gripped my heart.”

And she almost missed out on it.

In 1997, Boucek had just earned a double major at the University of Virginia in sports medicine and sports management, all while earning All-ACC Second-Team honors and leading the Wahoos to four regular-season ACC Championships and three Elite-8 appearances, including going back-to-back in 1992 and 1993.

Despite her collegiate basketball success, and the rumblings of a new women’s professional

league stateside, Boucek had no plans to pursue basketball after college.

“It was not in our paradigm at that time,” Boucek explained. “Some players were going overseas, but I was so excited about going to med school, I never even considered that. I was ready to go to med school.”

In Boucek’s mind, it was time to join the family business.

“Both sides, many generations, were doctors,” she explained. “My mom was a psychiatrist, a social worker, and her father was a neurologist, psychiatrist, and her mother, their whole lineages were physicians as well. My dad’s a doctor, his dad was a doctor, my uncles are all doctors. You go up and out on both sides of the family trees.”

Boucek’s family tree isn’t crowded with branches of just any doctors either, but ones pushing the limits of medicine. Her maternal grandfather, Dr. Robert Heath, founded the department of psychiatry and neurology at Tulane University. Her uncle, Dr. Mark Boucek, was involved in the world’s first baboon-to-baby heart transplant and was renowned in the Pediatric Heart Transplantation Community for the way he advanced the field.

“I was raised to see the world, and life,

through the lens of, ‘Everything that you’re given is to give it back to the world and contribute to the world,’” she said. “All the gifts, experiences and passions that you have are for the greater good.”

She always believed that would be through becoming a doctor. But as she played that first pro season, she realized she wasn’t ready to leave her “first love” just yet.

“I came out of the womb loving athletics, it was my first love, and many people would argue, my primary one, until I had my daughter,” she said.

With the NBA Board of Governors saying “yes” to women’s basketball, Boucek said a “yes” of her own. She felt her purpose tugging her toward contributing in a way she’d never dreamed.

“It was so shaky,” Boucek said of the WNBA in its early seasons. “No [women’s pro league] had ever made it in our country. I wanted to do everything and anything I could do to help this league survive, and not just survive but thrive.

“It could change the destiny of young girls and women all over the world, which it has.”

For more than 15 years, Boucek was immersed in the fabric of the new league, first as a player, for the Cleveland Rockers, then as



Sacramento Monarchs head Coach Jenny Boucek talks with Rebekkah Brunson #32 during a break against the Phoenix Mercury at ARCO Arena June 9, 2007 in Sacramento, CA.

a coach. She joined the Washington Mystics as an assistant in 1999 following a career-ending injury in 1998. It would be the start of more than a decade rising through the coaching ranks of the league, and where she first understood how critical it would be for her to be a student of the game.



Head Coach Rick Carlisle and Assistant Coach Jenny Boucek of the Indiana Pacers high five during the Jr. NBA event on October 14, 2023 at Gainbridge Fieldhouse in Indianapolis, IN.



Assistant Coach Jenny Boucek of the Indiana Pacers talks to Myles Turner #33 during the game against the Milwaukee Bucks during the semifinals of the In-Season Tournament on December 7, 2023 at T-Mobile Arena in Las Vegas, NV.

Boucek credits Tony Fiorentino, who was an assistant coach during her stint with the Miami Sol, with helping her make the transition successfully.

“He took me under his wing as a coach,” Boucek explained. “To this day, he’s like a second father to me. He taught me, which not many women knew at the time, what it looked like to coach professional basketball. Up to that point, the women’s coaches in the WNBA were former college coaches. There was no way around it, you didn’t have any way to get experience as a professional coach before the league started.”

Boucek describes herself as a sponge in those early days of learning the ropes of coaching. And the further she got into the strategy of team play and the dynamics of bringing the best out of her players, the more she realized why this feeling felt so instinctual, almost inherited.



Jenny Boucek #14 of the Cleveland Rockers drives against Jamila Wideman #10 of the Los Angeles Sparks during a game at Gund Arena on July 3, 1997 in Cleveland, OH.



Head Coach Rick Carlisle talks to Assistant Coach Jenny Boucek of the Indiana Pacers during the game against the Brooklyn Nets on October 31, 2022 at Barclays Center in Brooklyn, NY.



“In addition to the larger purpose of the WNBA, I had this smaller purpose for me, which was stimulating both sides of my brain,” Boucek said. “My dad’s research, children’s heart transplants, like mechanism systems and problem solving, with my mom’s family all focused on mental health, so why do people do what they do? Trying to bring out the best version of a human through understanding neurology, psychiatry. I realized coaching was actually hitting both sides of my giftings and experiences and passions and interests. The strategy plus the people element was like, ‘Wow, this is really fun.’”

Boucek coached multiple teams in the WNBA over the span of nearly two decades before deciding to move to the NBA. At this point, the almost-doctor was firing on all cylinders as a coach, bringing out the best in other people’s children. Even as she thrived in her role, there was another tug she couldn’t ignore.

“I thought I wanted to be a doctor,” Boucek said. “I always knew I wanted to be a mom.”

As she moved up and around the coaching ranks, Boucek held that dream close, waiting for a traditional opportunity to fall in love and create a family with someone. Yet, the only thing that marched on as relentlessly as the coaching seasons she added to her resume was her own biological clock.

“I was aware enough of my age,” Boucek explained. “It wasn’t even like my biological clock was ticking in the sense that I wanted to be a mom yet, but I realized I should probably

go talk to a fertility expert to see where things are at.”

At 36 years old, she decided to freeze her eggs.

The years continued and she remained content with the life she’d built and the purpose she was living out, while always checking in with herself, and her doctors, about what to do to keep this other dream alive.

“When I got into my 40s, the doctor and I kept meeting regularly and he asked, ‘Would you consider doing this on your own?’ she recalled. “That was a really hard thought process – physically, emotionally, spiritually. Could I, should I, do this on my own? What would it cost me? It could cost me my career; it could cost me the relationship I’ve always dreamed of because now I’m bringing a kid into it.

“I had to ask myself, ‘Is it worth it if it costs me everything?’ It turned out, I didn’t really care what it cost.”

In 2018, she took an assistant job with the Dallas Mavericks. Within a month of her moving to Dallas, her daughter Rylie was born.

“Every day is literally an adventure and a journey,” Boucek says of life as a mom of a 5-year-old girl and as an NBA assistant. “We are one day at a time over here and we just don’t look too far down the road.

“I think God gave me the perfect kid for this wild ride because we have a lot of different helpers and she’s a very strong, independent, resilient young woman who is very in tune with her emotions and able to communicate them



to me and others. I want her to know that she’s the most important thing in my life, but she also has to share me because the world does not revolve around her.”

So, the woman who laced up her sneakers with the inaugural class of WNBA players is raising a woman who will join her generation in taking the next step forward.

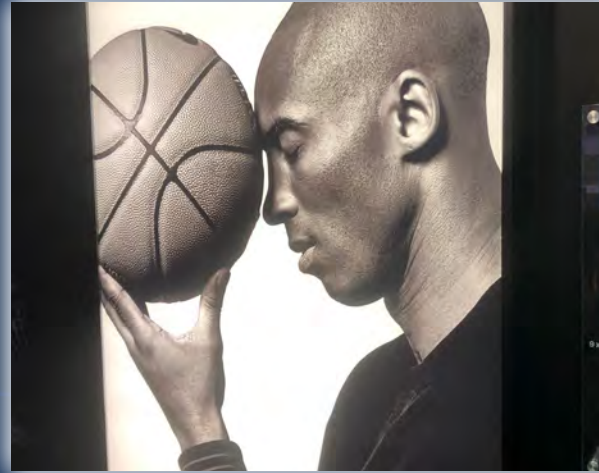
“You want these young ladies to understand how fragile it is, and not to take it for granted. [To] understand part of the foundation of this league is, there was a lot of struggle even before me that led to it being possible for us to have the opportunities we have,” Boucek said of what she hopes the up-and-coming WNBA players take from her generation. “So, you hope to preserve that somehow while also raising a generation of young people, including my daughter, that don’t expect anything less.”

Humility and appreciation for the work that’s been done and the audacity to know that there is much still to do.



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LEGEND AMONG LEGENDS

WILLIE BURTON

DETAILING HIS TRANSITION FROM ATHLETE TO EDUCATOR

by ANDREW POLANIECKI



Throughout the journey of adolescence, a pervasive question arises, presented by parents, teachers or mentors intent on shaping a young person's trajectory and uncovering their aspirations. This question is fundamental to the coming-of-age narrative.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?"

Diverse responses emerge, ranging from aspirations to don the white coat of a doctor or charting a course toward a legal career or dedicating oneself to the noble profession of teaching. But in today's world, one of the most common dreams among young people is the desire to become a professional athlete.

Willie Burton, a seasoned nine-year NBA veteran, has realized two dreams that elude many: a successful basketball career spanning from 1990 to 2004, followed by a transition into education post-retirement. Today, Burton stands on the verge of a highly esteemed achievement — a forthcoming PhD in Exercise and Sports Psychology from the University of Minnesota, where Burton's basketball journey began.

He led the Golden Gophers to the Sweet 16 in 1989 and the Elite 8 in 1990, and then he was drafted No. 9 overall by the Miami Heat in 1990. Burton was swiftly thrust into the whirlwind of NBA life, where he encountered overnight fame and success. In 1995, he scored 53 points on just 19 field goals, which still stands as the second-fewest attempts in a 50-point game. Willie's newfound stardom brought with it a set of responsibilities and challenges that he hadn't anticipated in his transition from college to the professional-basketball scene.

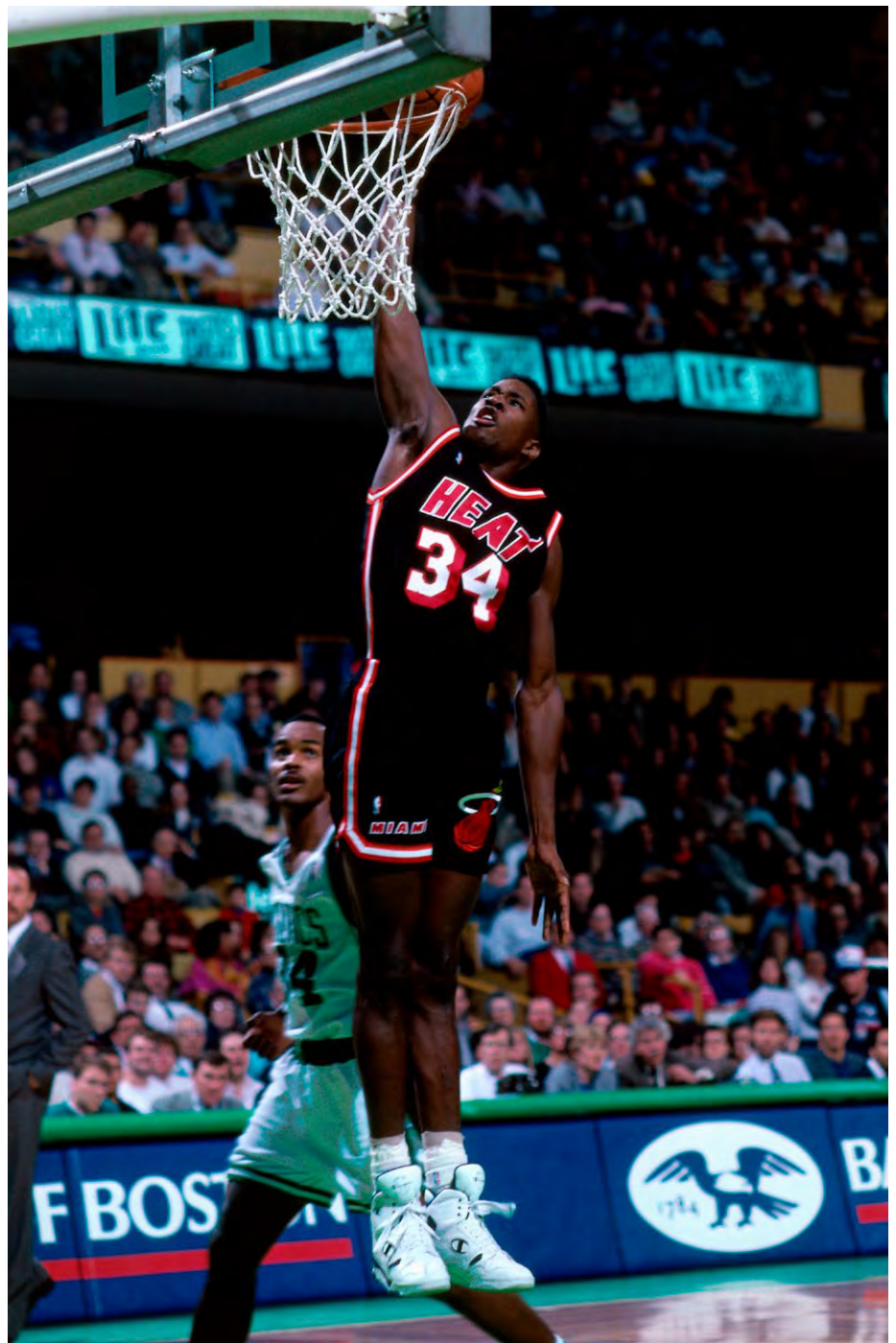
"I didn't realize the visibility associated with playing in the NBA. I had no idea. I had no concept of the responsibilities associated with being in the NBA," Burton said. "All the hours, all the games, all the practices, the number of games — game after game, day after day."

Burton missed out on numerous ordinary facets of being a father and a friend, aspects that are often taken for granted.

"I enjoyed [playing in the NBA], but I really enjoyed being a father," Burton said. "Flying out on Christmas night on a red eye to the West Coast [was hard]."

In 2004, Willie's basketball career ended due to injury. An unforeseen yet revitalizing passion emerged. Life's journey, guided by faith, led him to a renewed sense of purpose as a father and an unexpected role as an educator.

"I asked God, 'After everything that I've been through, I've recovered from, I've come back from... everything seems to be in position...



Willie Burton dunks the ball against the Boston Celtics during a game played in 1992 at the Boston Garden in Boston, MA.

why now are you taking this away from me?" Burton recalls. "And the first thing that came to my mind was clear as a bell: It was time to be a father."

Stepping away from the dazzling spotlights of NBA arenas, Willie embraced his new passion as a substitute teacher in his own children's classrooms.

"One of the things that I've learned is don't do things based on the public perception of what

an NBA player should and shouldn't be doing," Burton said. "I learned to walk into doors and to try things. Even if they don't think I should be there as an NBA veteran, walking in as a substitute teacher, I went there for my kids. I wasn't there for the perception of what people thought I should or shouldn't be doing."

Unbeknownst to him at the time, this unexpected turn in life would become the catalyst propelling Willie toward pursuing a PhD and



NBA Commissioner David Stern welcomes the Miami Heat's first round draft pick Willie Burton during the NBA Draft on June 27, 1990 at the Felt Forum in NYC.



Willie Burton poses with fellow NBA Legends Willie Norwood, Earl Cureton, Terence Wheeler, Derrick Coleman and Gary Payton during an All-Star Giveback event.



Willie Burton poses with fellow NBA Legends Willie Norwood, Earl Cureton, Terence Wheeler, Derrick Coleman and Gary Payton during an All-Star Giveback event.

spearheading the development of Excel U, a “behavioral change program that unifies academic success and health-wellness for students.”

“My first professional job after basketball was working for the Detroit Health Department in community engagement,” he said.

At the heart of Willie's journey are three pivotal figures: Shatreece Gillon, Augustine Sharp and Dr. Calvin Trent.

“Dr. Trent challenged me to leave kids with more than an autographed picture and a T-shirt,” Burton said. “It was a big spark. From there, I went through more professional-development trainings than I had ever gone through in my life.”

Equipped with these newfound insights, Willie translated his lessons into impactful actions, aiming to positively influence the lives of today's student-athletes.

“I was able to finally understand resources that I never knew existed. I was able to

understand programming and intervention,” he said. “From there, it sparked the question: What programs do we have for student athletes?”

In 2011, Willie's company Educating Stars of Tomorrow emerged as an unplanned endeavor.

“I started out trying to just fill a gap and a need that I saw. One of the principals came up to me and started talking to me about Title I and how 80% of the United States gets this money for programs that are outside of the normal curriculum,” he said. “I then spoke with Dr. Gilbert Botvin and he informed me that when you meet the needs of an underserved population, it qualifies for federal funding.”

Under Willie's guidance, along with the assistance of Elaine McCarthur and Aaron Hopson, the Excel U program took shape.

At its core, Excel U is dedicated to fostering collaboration with the K-12 population and the adults who play guiding roles in children's



NBA Legend Willie Burton helps host a youth clinic for the National Basketball Retired Players Association on September 16, 2017 at Urban Ventures in Minneapolis, MN.

lives. It is meticulously designed to amplify the impact of community stakeholders working with children in their respective communities. The program not only imparts essential life skills but also offers education on mental health and well-being. It encompasses health, strength and nutrition training, extending its benefits to include training for parents.

Collaborating with Starr Commonwealth, Excel U's outreach now spans a target population of 26 million. To propel the program further, Willie has broadened his involvement to include working with college students and getting involved on the NIL front.

"College athletes are incredible messengers," Burton said. "If [a college athlete] goes into a classroom and talks to kids using the Excel U programs, it's positive for the university, it's positive for the student athlete because they get to reflect, it's positive for the kids and it's positive for businesses that sponsor those athletes."

Guiding Excel U through his firsthand experiences, Willie realized that his extensive efforts in educating students and developing Excel U in communities reflected the work typically undertaken by individuals with individual PhDs.

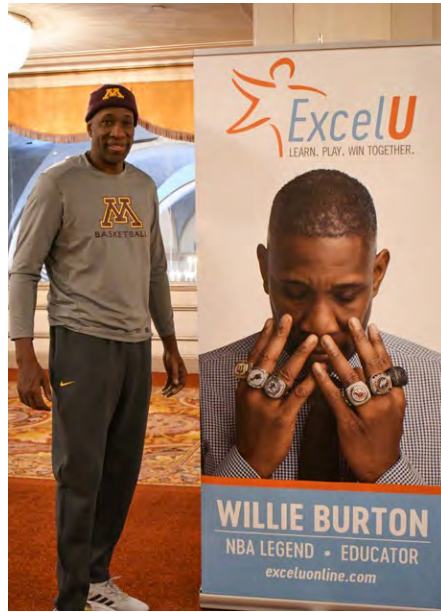
"I was trained pretty much in common processes and protocols of a PhD before I even finished it, unbeknownst to me," Burton said. "So, when I kept getting individuals coming up to me saying, 'You know, you're doing PhD work,' I had no clue. I started to explore, and I started

to look into a PhD. I was already very familiar with a lot of the processes associated with research."

Willie credits the NBRPA for aiding in turning his visions into reality and supporting him in achieving his dreams from the outset.

"They've been there from day one," Willie explained, "They're there to support us as people first, and that in itself gives you the ability to pursue other opportunities. I have been supporting all of this myself for 10 years, and just when it would seem like I was having a heavy lift, they come in to support."

As of today, Willie has successfully completed over half of his coursework toward earning his PhD. The upcoming spring semester will mark his final academic term, consisting of two courses. This fall, Willie will shift his focus primarily to research. His research endeavors will lead him to the Tony Sanneh Foundation, where he will embark on his dissertation, exploring the effects of a mental-health intervention on adolescents ages 9-14 who participate in sports. Upon successful completion, Mr. Willie Burton will forever be recognized as Dr. Willie Burton.



The National Basketball Retired Players Association hosts a youth clinic featuring NBA and WNBA retirees Nancy Lieberman, Khalid El-Amin, Willie Burton, John Thomas, Stanley Jackson and Tamara Moore on September 16, 2017 at Urban Ventures in Minneapolis, MN.

INTRODUCING



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COMING TOGETHER TO SET A NEW STANDARD IN HEALTHCARE



LEGENDS CARE

Legends Care is the initiative of the NBRPA that positively impacts communities and youth through basketball. NBRPA Legends give back through clinics, mentoring, charitable outreach and other grassroots initiatives in the United States and abroad with the goal of educating, inspiring and keeping youth active, healthy, and safe.

Ongoing Legends Care initiatives include the Legends HBCU Scholarship, Full Court Press, and Legends Home Courts. Past initiatives have included international goodwill missions, Thanksgiving Community Assist turkey donation drives, BACK2BACK school backpack drives, and Legends Girl Chats between WNBA Legends and middle school & high school girls.

To learn more about Legends Care or donate to support these initiatives, visit legendsofbasketball.com/LegendsCare



LEGENDS CARE

ORLANDO MAGIC YOUTH FOUNDATION GOLF TOURNAMENT

On Tuesday, December 12, 2023, several former Orlando Magic players took part in a charity golf tournament to raise money for at-risk Central Florida youth and help strengthen their community.

The 33rd annual Orlando Magic Youth Foundation (OMYF) golf tournament included appearances from E'Twaun Moore, Chucky Atkins, Tony Battie, Brandon Bass, Jeff Turner, and Community Ambassadors Nick Anderson and Bo Outlaw.

Over the last 34 years, the OMYF — with huge assists from current and former Magic players — has raised and donated more than \$29 million to more than 500 local Central Florida nonprofit community organizations, impacting more than two million kids.

The 2023 golf tournament at Kissimmee's Reunion Resort & Golf Club raised more than \$200,000 for at-risk youth in Central Florida, perfectly aligning with the Magic's mission statement of "being world champions on and off the court, delivery legendary moments every step of the way."



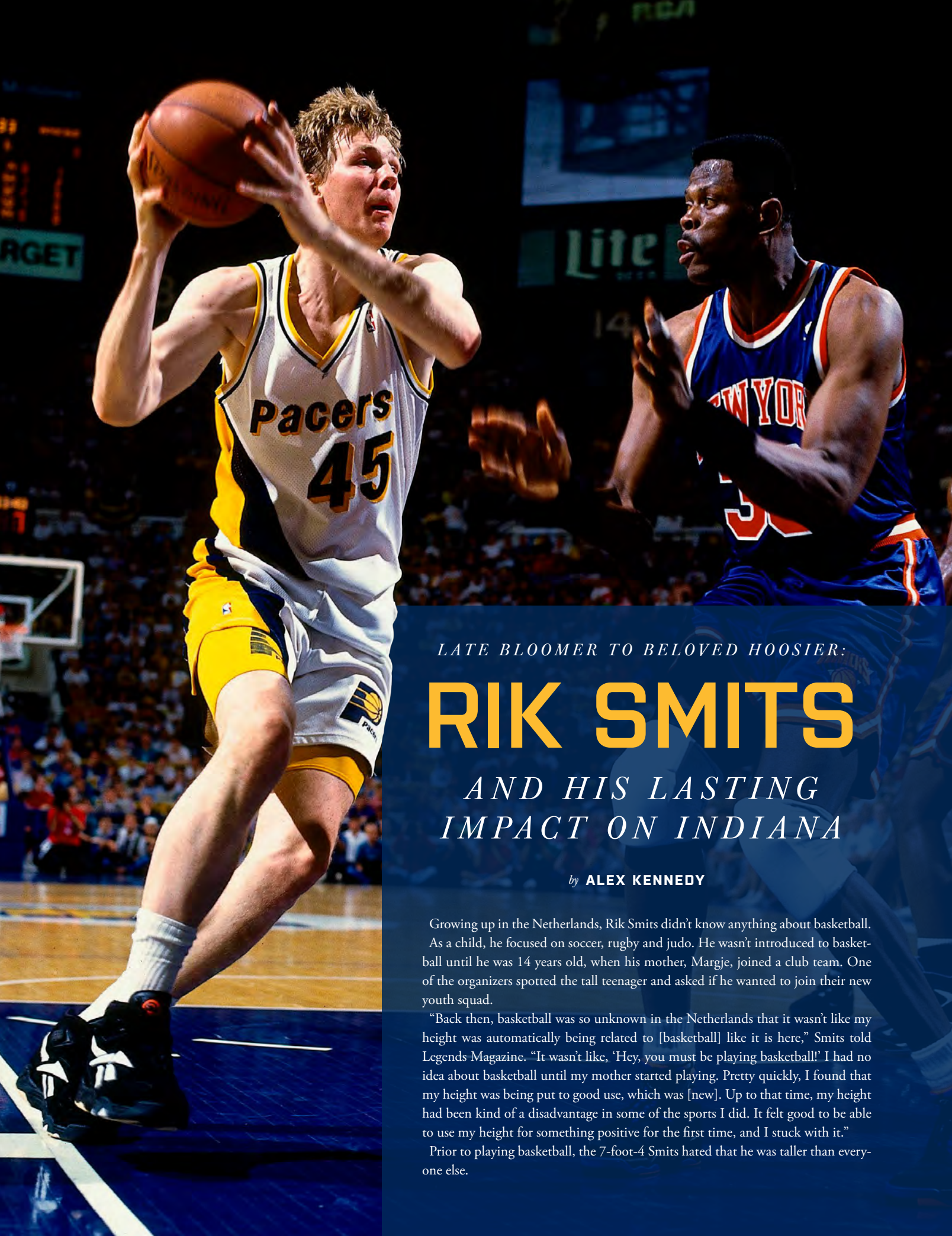


NBRPA HEALTH SCREENINGS

2023 closed out as one of the most impactful years for ensuring the long-term health of former players as the NBRPA took over operations of the Health Screenings program from the NBPA and expanded the number of cities where these comprehensive services were offered. After stops at NBA All-Star in Utah, NCAA Women's Final Four in Dallas and the Legends Summer Getaway and Golf Experience in Las Vegas, the NBRPA Health Screenings tour made additional stops in Orlando, Los Angeles, and Houston to round out the year and provide preventative care for a record number of basketball Legends.

The NBRPA Health Screenings program, under the supervision of NBRPA Chief Medical Director Joe Rogowski, focuses on player health, delivers thorough and cost-effective healthcare to NBRPA members, and addresses many of the medical issues experienced by former athletes, while also educating them on proactive measures that promote a healthy lifestyle. Keep an eye out for NBRPA Health Screenings across the country throughout 2024 and beyond.





LATE BLOOMER TO BELOVED HOOSIER:

RIK SMITS

*AND HIS LASTING
IMPACT ON INDIANA*

by **ALEX KENNEDY**

Growing up in the Netherlands, Rik Smits didn't know anything about basketball. As a child, he focused on soccer, rugby and judo. He wasn't introduced to basketball until he was 14 years old, when his mother, Margje, joined a club team. One of the organizers spotted the tall teenager and asked if he wanted to join their new youth squad.

"Back then, basketball was so unknown in the Netherlands that it wasn't like my height was automatically being related to [basketball] like it is here," Smits told *Legends Magazine*. "It wasn't like, 'Hey, you must be playing basketball!' I had no idea about basketball until my mother started playing. Pretty quickly, I found that my height was being put to good use, which was [new]. Up to that time, my height had been kind of a disadvantage in some of the sports I did. It felt good to be able to use my height for something positive for the first time, and I stuck with it."

Prior to playing basketball, the 7-foot-4 Smits hated that he was taller than everyone else.



Rik Smits #15 of the Indiana Pacers shoots the game winning shot against the Orlando Magic during Game Four of the Eastern Conference Finals on May 29, 1995 at Market Square Arena in Indianapolis, Indiana.

"I was laughed at in the streets. I was pointed at," Smits recalled. "I was a shy kid, and I didn't even want to go out in town because of all the stares and laughter. I was really insecure."

However, the moment he arrived in the United States as a teenager, everything changed.

"As soon as I got to the United States, my first day there, somebody said, 'Wow, man, I wish I was that tall!' I had never heard that in my life! All of a sudden, I get this confidence boost," Smits said. "I heard that several times over the years in college. I loved it. I wasn't homesick for a minute! Not that I didn't miss my family, but I knew that the United States was my country, that I belonged here."

The coaches at Marist College offered Smits a scholarship sight unseen based on his size, and he made the most of every opportunity. As a freshman, just four years after he first picked up a basketball, he averaged 11.2

points, 5.6 rebounds and 2.6 blocks while shooting 56.7% from the field. He quickly earned the nickname "The Dunking Dutchman," which stuck.

"I just loved college, I had a great time," Smits said. "Everybody at Marist was very welcoming and wanted to help me any way they could. It was awesome. I worked hard in college. I had great coaches. We had three different head coaches, and a bunch of assistants. But they all were very positive and were willing to work with me. I wanted them to teach me. I wanted to soak up information. I wanted to get better. I was willing to work at it. I'd get up before school, and we'd be in the gym at 6 a.m. working hard and getting better. And things just progressed."

During his sophomore year, he led Marist to the NCAA Tournament where they faced off against Georgia Tech. While Georgia Tech beat Marist thanks to strong performances from seniors Mark Price and John Salley, Smits put up 22 points (on 9-of-14 shooting) and 4 rebounds.

"[Price and Salley] got drafted after the season, and I did pretty good against those guys, so I was like, 'Wow, I held my own. The NBA might be an opportunity for me as well if these guys can do it,'" Smits said. "That really motivated me to work even harder in college."

By his senior year, Smits was averaging 24.7 points (on 62.3% shooting), 8.7 rebounds and 3.9 blocks and garnering a ton of interest from NBA teams. Entering the 1988 NBA Draft, Smits wanted to be selected by the Indiana Pacers, who had the No. 2 overall pick.

"I had gone on all of the visits – to Philly, to L.A. for the Clippers, then to Indiana – and I did feel best about Indiana. I really liked what I'd seen, and I really liked the people I met," Smits said. "They promised they would pick me, and they did. I was excited! I was glad it was Indiana. ... I was not a big-city guy. I never felt comfortable in L.A. or New York or Chicago. Indianapolis is almost like a small town, really. A small-town big city... Everyone in the front office was always very pleasant, very nice. They seem to care about everybody and they're sincere. You come into the gym and



Members of the Indiana Pacers 40th Anniversary Team and were honored at the Pacers and New Jersey Nets game at Conseco Fieldhouse on April 15, 2007 in Indianapolis, IN.

everybody's greeting you. They made me feel at home right from the beginning."

Over the course of his 12-year career with the Pacers, Smits averaged 14.8 points, 6.1 rebounds and 1.3 blocks across 867 games. He became an All-Star in 1997-98, and he helped lead the Pacers to the playoffs in 10 of his 12 seasons – including an NBA Finals run in 2000 and four other trips to the Eastern Conference Finals.

Smits became a fan favorite, and he's still beloved in Indy. When fans voted on the Pacers' 40th Anniversary Team, Smits received the fourth-most votes behind only Reggie Miller, Mel Daniels and Jermaine O'Neal.

"It makes me feel good," Smits said. "I don't live there anymore, but I visit quite a bit. My daughter still lives there; she actually works for the Pacers. When I'm in town, it feels great to be recognized. When I'm walking on the street or going to a restaurant, people honk their horns and yell my name, and it still feels good. I really appreciated all the support I got over the years. I had a great time in Indy. It was my town. ... I felt comfortable there, in part due to all the fans that supported me over the years. They appreciated me."

Smits spent his entire career with the Pacers – one of just three players to do so, along with Miller and Jeff Foster.

"It means a lot. Once I got settled there, I got comfortable there, I made friends there, I had homes there. I wouldn't have liked having to move. Going into it, it wasn't a goal. But looking back, I think it's something special," Smits said. "You don't see it anymore. And I guess it shows what kind of person I was, that I was good to the franchise, I was easy, I didn't cause trouble. The front-office people liked me and the coaches liked me, I guess! It feels good."

Smits will be back in Indiana next month for NBA All-Star Weekend – his first time attending the event since he played in the 1998 All-Star Game.

"I'm excited! I always said if it comes to Indiana, I'm gonna go," Smits said. "And the Pacers actually invited me. They invited some of the old players to come and I think they're gonna have a little get-together on Thursday or something. I'm excited to see who shows up."

While he's thrilled to reunite with his former Pacers teammates, he's also excited about the organization's current stars like Tyrese Haliburton and Myles Turner. He has enjoyed Indiana's recent success and hopes they continue to climb the East standings.

"In recent years, I like the teams they've had. Of course, I'd love for them to finish a little better. But yeah, they've had a lot of talented guys and hopefully this is the team that will bring them some success again," Smits said. "They definitely have the personnel for it. I'm very excited."

While watching these Pacers, Smits can't help but imagine how he'd fare in today's NBA. As a big man who could shoot the ball and block shots, he'd be a perfect fit in the modern game.

"I would've loved to play in today's NBA! Back then, they didn't want me shooting threes! There were very few big men shooting threes," Smits said. "Toward the end of my career, Sam Perkins was a pretty good three-point shooter – he would



Reggie Miller #31 and Rik Smits #45 of the Indiana Pacers look on during the game circa 1999 at Market Square Arena in Indianapolis, IN.



Danny Manning, Hersey Hawkins, NBA Commissioner David Stern, Charles Smith and Rik Smits pose for a photo during the 1988 NBA Draft on June 28, 1988 at Felt Forum in NYC.



Shaquille O'Neal #32 of the Orlando Magic posts up against Rik Smits #45 of the Indiana Pacers during game 2 of the Eastern Conference Finals on May 25, 1995.

step out and they would run some plays for him, but yeah. I mean, I never practiced threes, but I know I could've done it. I would've loved to! But I still would've been down low too, because I love playing on the block with my back to the basket. But to be able to do both and be a threat from both? That would've been awesome."

When told that he and Miller would form a lethal one-two punch in the modern NBA, Smits agrees: "Yeah, we could really stretch out the defense. That would've been awesome."

Smits was extremely difficult to guard in his era as well. Shaquille O'Neal once described Smits as one of four players he hated playing against.

"Just like in Greek mythology, there's always a guy that's equal or greater than you, and they go by the name of Patrick Ewing, David Robinson, Hakeem Olajuwon and Rik Smits," O'Neal told Sports Illustrated in 2017. "Rik destroyed me every time. Oh my God. Pick-and-pop, jump hook in the post, I couldn't stop that kid. If it wasn't for his foot problems, I probably [never would] have been able to stop him."

This compliment from O'Neal meant a lot to Smits.

"I was pleasantly surprised, it was a heck of a compliment," Smits said. "He's one of the best centers to ever play the game, so I was stoked. That was pretty cool to hear from him. I'd never heard that; I never realized it before. I mean, he's a heck of a player. He's almost impossible to guard. You can't take a charge on him because you're gonna get the foul call. You gotta try to stop him another way – you gotta get him away from the basket as far as you can, which was not an easy task. Heck of a player. I really appreciated that quote."

Which centers were the toughest for Smits to match up against? Three legends come to mind.

"Hakeem Olajuwon. In the early years, they wanted me to guard him and he was just so quick," Smits said. "He's got the speed of a forward and the moves of a center. I just didn't have the quickness to stay with him. I only played one game against Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, and he was something else. Of course, that was my first year, so I was still pretty weak, but I didn't realize how strong he was. He could just do whatever he wanted against me, pretty much. And, of course, Shaq just because of the sheer size, strength and explosiveness. Once he got close to the basket, there wasn't much you could do."

When Smits looks back on his playing days, he tends to think about the battles against the New York Knicks, whom the Pacers faced in the playoffs six times from 1993 through 2000.

"The Knicks [series] are what usually comes to mind. That rivalry was something else," Smits said. "The year we finally beat New York (in 1999-00), that was a heck of a stepping stone to finally get past them."

Smits decided to retire following the 1999-00 season. While the internet would have you believe that nerve damage in his feet caused him to walk away, Smits dispelled this myth.

"No, that never [factored in]; the feet were fine," Smits said. "When Larry Bird came in [as head coach] my last three years, he had a great physical therapist out of Boston, Dan Dyrek, and he took care of those feet. Those were never a problem again. Early on in my career, I had that, and then the rumor got started that [my feet] are why I retired, but that wasn't true at all. I felt it was the right time. Bird was retiring and Isiah [Thomas] was coming

in. There was gonna be some changes. It was just the right time. I considered coming back and gave it some thought, but I was ready to be home with my family and start enjoying life, so that's what I did.

"Part of me regrets that I didn't keep going longer. But then part of me doesn't because I basically retired because my son was 3 years old and my daughter was 6 years old at the time. I had missed so much with my daughter when she was growing up and my son was 3, and he was just so much fun to be around. I was starting to slow down too. I was, what, 33? My goal was to never have to come off the bench. And at times, playing against some younger centers, I felt like, 'Man, I'm having a tough time staying with this guy!' I was definitely slowing down. My goal was always to retire at or near the top. I didn't want to come off the bench. It'd take me half an hour to warm up before the game and luckily, I'd be starting and I'd feel pretty good. But once I'd sit for a while, everything would stiffen up! So, I didn't want to have to sit on the bench. But I would say: play as long as you can because, man, the time goes by so fast."

After Smits retired from the NBA, he continued playing basketball several times a week in a rec league. He also began racing dirt bikes and vintage motocross motorcycles. In 2008, he won the AHRMA National Vintage Motocross Series in the Premier 500 Intermediate class.

"Being competitive [again], it was great," Smits said of motocross racing. "It's not a team sport, but I worked hard to stay in shape, and I wanted to win at every level. I'm up to expert class; I got there when I was 40. That was cool, and I still

enjoy that. I still do that a lot... I also restore motorcycles and cars."

Smits also tried coaching, helping out during practices for his son's teams in middle school and high school. However, he quickly realized that it wasn't for him.

"I'm not coaching material," he said with a laugh. "When I'm on the bench, that shy Rik Smits comes back. I don't want to talk and it's tough. I did some one-on-one stuff with guys and I enjoyed that. ... I'm still too shy and insecure even now to do that in the NBA or even college."

If Smits' mother had never joined that club team back in the Netherlands, he believes he would have turned his love of cars and motorcycles into a career.

"I'd probably be a mechanic, kinda like Mark Eaton used to be," Smits said with a laugh. "I always had a love of cars and motorcycles, and I still do. That's what I spend most of my time on now. But that probably would've been it. My grandpa gave me a small 50cc moped when I was 7 years old. ... That's how my love of motorcycles started. Then, I started tinkering with engines and stuff, and it evolved into cars."

If he was growing up in the Netherlands today, he likely would've found basketball much earlier. The NBA has prioritized globalization over the last 20 years, so it's no surprise that many of the league's biggest stars are international players these days.

"I think it's awesome. I think it's all positive," Smits said. "The best players in the whole world are still coming over here. Europe's



Rik Smits shoots against the Atlanta Hawks during a game played circa 1990 at the Omni in Atlanta, GA.

definitely got some awesome leagues, some awesome teams, some awesome players, but still, the best players are going to end up over here. America is really the showcase of worldwide basketball talent. I think it's awesome. Look at the success of the NBA because of it, you know? It's good for everybody, I think."



Left: Former player Rik Smits and his wife Donna, serve up a dish as part of the Pacers "Come to Our House" Thanksgiving Diner at Conseco Fieldhouse on November 21, 2011 in Indianapolis, IN. Right: Rik Smits poses for a portrait during NBA All-Star Weekend on February 6, 1998 in NYC.





LegendsTM STUDIOS

Legends Studios, presented by the NBRPA, is the #1 podcast destination for basketball fans who want to hear from NBA and WNBA Legends.

Episodes of the All-Access Legends Podcast, On Deck with Scott Rochelle, Legends Live, Hoop du Jour with Peter Vecsey, and Legends Lounge with Trill Withers can all be found in one place at Legends Studios.



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NBRPA INTRODUCES

MIXTAPE MONDAYS

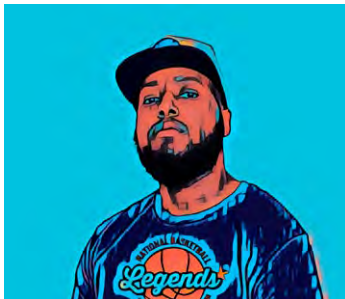


Follow @NBAalumi on Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, Threads and YouTube and be the first to see the newest #LegendsMixtapes every Monday.

On Monday, September 18, the NBRPA debuted a brand-new and highly anticipated content series across all @NBAalumni social media channels, remixing some of the best moves in NBA history as part of countdown to the start of the 2023-2024 NBA season.

Mixtape Mondays, also known as "Legends Mixtapes," reimagine old-school NBA highlights set to unexpected music from a different era, starting with a contemporary showcase of 6x NBA Champion Bob Cousy accompanied by M.O.P.'s "Ante Up." The Houdini of the Hardwood himself loved seeing the new interpretation of his ball-handling talent and said: "What a treat!"

In the first 24 hours after its release, the inaugural mixtape produced over half a million views on @NBAalumni social media. The series has also featured Isiah Thomas's legendary handles, "Pistol Pete" Maravich's smooth moves, "Nick the Quick" Van Exel's timeless highlights, and Larry Bird proving why he'll forever be called "Larry Legend." The Legends Mixtapes series has, to date, produced over 2 million views and hundreds of thousands of engagements, and counting.



TRILL'S TAKE:

TOP 10 MOMENTS IN INDIANA PACERS HISTORY

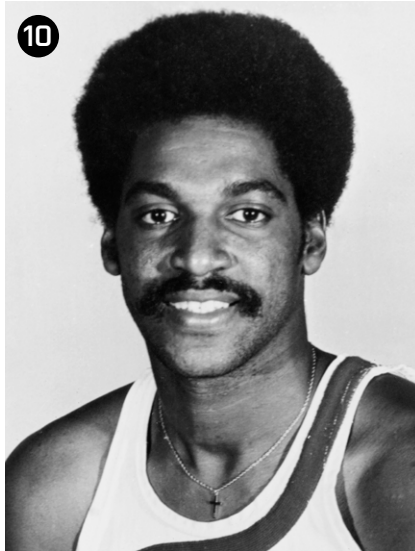
by TRILL WITHERS

We have made it to All-Star break and for the first time since 1985, the festivities make their way back to Naptown! With that in mind, let's take a look back at some of the best moments in Indiana Pacer history:

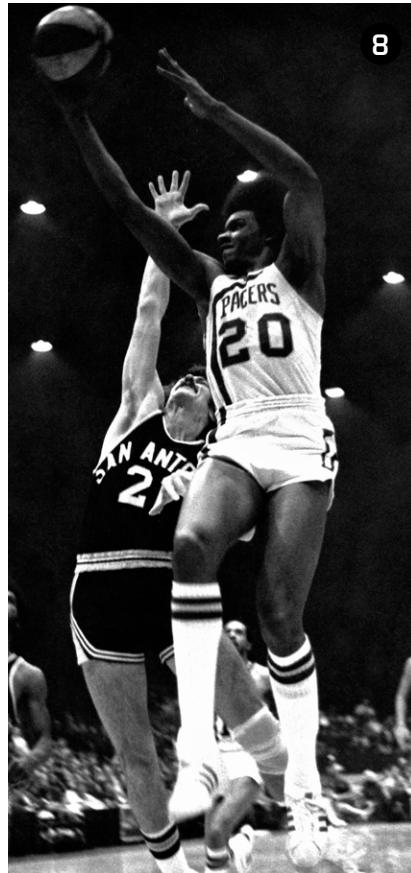
TOP 10 TOP 10 MOMENTS IN INDIANA PACERS HISTORY

10. MAKING ROGER BROWN THE FIRST PLAYER TO BE SIGNED BY THE ORGANIZATION. HE WOULD GO ON TO HAVE HIS NUMBER 35 RETIRED BY THE TEAM (1967)
9. TRADING DOMANTAS SABONIS TO ACQUIRE TYRESE HALIBURTON BEFORE THE TRADE DEADLINE (2022)
8. JOINING THE NBA AFTER A HIGHLY SUCCESSFUL RUN IN THE ABA (1976)
7. DRAFTING REGGIE MILLER 11TH INSTEAD OF THE HOMETOWN HERO, STEVE ALFORD (1987)
6. OUTLASTING THE KNICKS IN SIX GAMES TO MAKE IT TO THEIR FIRST NBA FINALS (2000)

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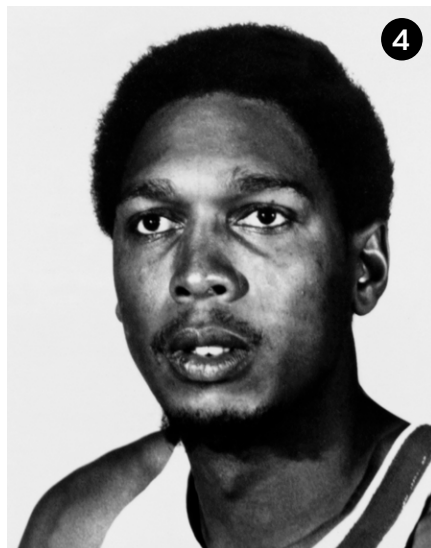


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7





TOP 10

TOP 10 MOMENTS IN INDIANA PACERS HISTORY

5. **REGGIE MILLER SCORES 25 POINTS IN THE FOURTH QUARTER TO SHOCK SPIKE LEE AT MADISON SQUARE GARDEN (1994)**
4. **MEL DANIELS WINS HIS FIRST OF TWO ABA MVP AWARDS (1969)**
3. **REGGIE MILLER SCORES EIGHT POINTS IN 9 SECONDS IN FRONT OF A STUNNED MSG CROWD (1995)**
2. **INDIANAPOLIS NATIVE GEORGE MCGINNIS WINS ABA MVP, AFTER SHARING THE HONORS WITH JULIUS ERVING (1975)**
1. **ABA CHAMPIONSHIP NUMBER THREE, THEIR THIRD IN FOUR YEARS AND LAST BEFORE THE MOVE TO THE NBA (1973)**



LEGENDS OF BASKETBALL

LAS VEGAS

INVITATIONAL

BY ERIN LAW

While the NBRPA's headquarters may be based in Chicago, it's clear that Las Vegas is slowly becoming our home away from home. Whether it's for NBA Summer League, WNBA All-Star, the Legends Summer Getaway and Golf Experience, or now for college hoops, Las Vegas loves Legends and we love Sin City right back.

To tip off our 2023 Legends college basketball series, which later included stops in Seattle and Cleveland to round out the year, the NBRPA hosted the Legends of Basketball Las Vegas Invitational at the MGM Grand Garden Arena on Saturday, December 2. The doubleheader featured an electric showdown between Colorado State and Washington on CBS Sports Network followed by the primetime matchup between top-ranked Gonzaga and USC on ESPN.





The arena opened its doors 90 minutes prior to the first game for eager ticketholders who had upgraded their game day experience to include VIP hospitality in the SKYY Vodka Lounge. Fans of all four participating teams stopped by to enjoy premium food and beverages, mingle with some of their favorite basketball Legends, and snap iconic photos with the NCAA Championship trophy.

As game one got set to tip off, NBA Legends Detlef Schrempf and Sam Perkins found their seats courtside to enjoy the game action. Across the court from Schrempf, a fellow Huskies alum and local Legend was getting ready to cheer on Washington as well — Kelsey Plum of the Las Vegas Aces. Gonzaga alum Dan Dickau prepared to call the game and found his seat at the

scorers table as fans and Legends alike continued to flood into the arena, and at 4pm PST game one was under way.

Colorado State and Washington traded baskets like punches in a hard-fought bout throughout the entire matchup, keeping fans on their feet and the energy levels high. In the end, the unbeaten Rams found the edge over the Huskies, and Colorado State prevailed with a score of 86-81.

As game one concluded, a sea of navy blue, white, cardinal, and gold flooded MGM Grand Garden Arena as Gonzaga and USC fans prepared to watch their teams go into battle. Many in attendance clamored courtside with phones in hand as Bronny James took the court with the Trojans for pre-game warmups, eager to

see the prodigal son of LeBron James near his return to game action.

Game two tipped off in front of a lively crowd ready to see another great matchup, including USC alum Nick Young and ESPN's Jay Williams on the call. Gonzaga took the early lead held onto it throughout the game, with six Bulldogs finishing in double figures and the Zags notching their fourth straight win with a score of 89-76. At the conclusion of the exciting doubleheader, many fans — whether disappointed or celebrating — made their way to Flanker Kitchen + Sports Bar for the official after party.

The Legends of Basketball Las Vegas Invitational drew 8,116 attendees to MGM Grand Garden Arena, the highest attendance across all Las Vegas college basketball events and a testament to the impact that the NBRPA is having in the college basketball space — especially in Las Vegas. While the NCAA season will soon come to an end, more college hoops action is just around the corner in 2024. And if that doesn't come around soon enough for you, you know where to find us in the meantime. Did someone say "Legends Summer Getaway and Golf Experience 2024"? Until next time, Vegas!



NBRPA SUPPORTS THE

CONTINENTAL TIRE SEATTLE TIP-OFF

by **BENNETT SCHRAMKO**

Don't you just hate that lull between Thanksgiving and Christmas? There isn't a lot of do while waiting for one of the most anticipated holidays of the year. Well, right smack in the middle of that, the NBRPA assisted with hosting a top 10 college basketball matchup. Amid a cold and overcast December day in Seattle, the number five ranked UConn Huskies battled against the number ten ranked Gonzaga Bulldogs. Inside the Space Needle Lounge at Climate Pledge Arena, the NBRPA hosted a pre-game hospitality lounge for two hours prior to tip-off. Fans of both teams mingled with Legends of the game, entered to win prizes, and prepared to watch a great basketball game between two powerhouse schools.

In the lounge you could find former Seattle Supersonics stars including NBRPA Board of Directors member Sam Perkins, Steve Hawes, and Vladimir Stepania in attendance to watch some top tier collegiate hoops. If that wasn't enough, the NBRPA also enhanced the experience for fans by featuring two autographed basketballs signed by local Spokane and Gonzaga Legend John Stockton available for auction and raffle, with all donations and raffled tickets sold supporting the NBRPA's charitable mission and Legends Care programs.

Like the Legends of Basketball Las Vegas Invitational in early December 2023, the Gonzaga faithful once again showed out in full force. The energy was high and the atmosphere was electric as the game got started. Even though the reigning NCAA men's basketball champion seemed to be too much for the young Bulldogs, the Gonzaga fans rooted for their team until the very end. While Gonzaga hung right in there with the experienced UConn team throughout most of the game, the Huskies eventually pulled away near the end of the second half and won this highly anticipated matchup by a final score of 76-63.

Great hospitality, Legendary company, and a hard-fought game — what more can you ask for? We would not be surprised to see a rematch of these two teams come March.



LEGENDS OF BASKETBALL

SHOWCASE CLEVELAND

BY JULIO MANTEIGA

As many of us have experienced at one time or another, end of year celebrations sometimes do not measure up to the hype that accompanies them. This year, however, that was certainly not the case. The NBRPA hosted a red-hot basketball bonanza at Rocket Mortgage Fieldhouse in Cleveland for the 2nd edition of the Legends of Basketball Showcase in the waning days of 2023. With top tier basketball programs Akron, St. Bonaventure, Ohio, Davidson, and the main event featuring West Virginia taking on Ohio State University, this industrial city on Lake Erie was home to a must-watch for college hoops lovers nationwide. The event, with its sizzling atmosphere, that featured not one, or two, but three incredibly close and energetic games, managed to make fans inside the raucous arena forget the 40-degree, drizzly conditions outside.

The weekend started with what is the crown jewel of so many of the NBRPA's community efforts: the NBRPA Full Court Press Clinic at the Case Western Reserve University, Veale Center. With the incredible help and drive of the NBRPA's Cleveland Chapter, over 100 local youth from the City of Cleveland organization were treated to Legends leading basketball drills and offering off the court advice to the participants. Jr. NBA coach Frank Lopez, along with NBRPA members Greg Bell, Bonnie Dove, Lawrence Boston, Derrick Polk, Stan Kimbrough, Manny Leaks, Dennis Hopson, Janice Braxton, and Brad Sellers, expertly directed youth through proper dribbling techniques, rebounding drills, and fundamental defensive positioning and capped the event with a heart-to-heart discussion on the importance of life skills. The fact that these instructions were coming from such an accomplished group was not lost to the youth or their parents as they watched and captured images from the sidelines in amazement and gratitude.



That evening, the NBRPA and their Legends were out in full force again, showing the camaraderie that is omnipresent in this organization and were given the royal treatment as special guests of the Cleveland Cavaliers at their game vs. the Milwaukee Bucks. Legends like Greg Oden were feted by the Cavs on the jumbotron as an arena chock full of the Ohio State faithful proudly chanted their famed O-H-I-O calls that have become synonymous with the university and their sporting events. Current NBA

players Giannis Antetokounmpo, Damian Lillard, Donovan Mitchell and Max Strus did a double take and came to greet these Legends that built this game of ours when they spotted them taking in the pregame action during warmups. Fans, players, teams and mascots were all fully aware of the significance these individuals have in the long history of basketball and boy did they show the love – did they ever.

On Saturday, December 30, game day arrived, and it arrived in a huge way. The on-court





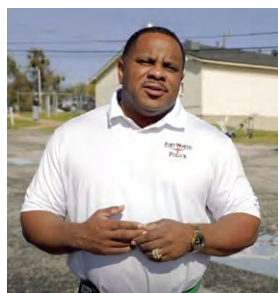
action tipped off with Davidson holding on to top Ohio 72-69 in a hotly contested back-and-forth affair. Game two of the event featured the Bonnies of St. Bonaventure edging the Akron Zips 62-61 and setting the stage for the Ohio State vs. West Virginia headliner. Prior to the final game, the NBRPA hosted its Legends of Basketball Showcase Tip Off Party at Barley House, a famed Cleveland watering hole. The party, presented by the imitable Maker's Mark brand, was highlighted by fans mingling with NBRPA Legends Greg Oden, Jim Jackson, Brad Sellers and Derrick Polk, who were representing their beloved Buckeyes, along with authentic signed memorabilia from Mountaineer Legends Jerry West and Rod Thorn being raffled off to support the NBRPA's charitable efforts and Legends Care programs. Now it was on to the main event: The Ohio State University taking on West Virginia in a prime-time game that was nationally televised on FOX. Energy filled the building during the warmups and reached a crescendo when the refs tipped the contest

off. After many runs by both teams and a sensational comeback by West Virginia in the final minutes of regulation, the clock struck 0:00 and we were all knotted at 65-65. It's only right that this weekend didn't finish in regulation. We, the fans, and the players all wanted more basketball, so to overtime we went. In the extra period, Ohio State and their star Roddy Gayle Jr.'s 32-point career high outburst proved to be

just a bit too much for the upstart Mountaineers as Ohio State emerged victorious in the 78-75 OT thriller.

Three close games, great food, drinks and laughs, Legends galore, and maybe most importantly of all: Legends getting together like family for the holidays. We can only hope that 2024 continues how 2023 ended, with all of us together around this game we love.






*LEGENDS CHAPTER
SPOTLIGHT*
DALLAS



The giving season reminds us all how important it is to give back — a core value that the Dallas Chapter of the NBRPA has always exemplified. As in past years, the Dallas Chapter teamed up with H-E-B/Central Market and local law enforcement to host hunger drives in Dallas and Fort Worth on November 18, 2023. Over 250 turkeys and dry goods were provided to local families, totaling over \$7,000 worth of food for bountiful Thanksgiving feasts.





LEGENDS CHAPTER
SPOTLIGHT
PHOENIX

To help spread the spirit of the holiday season throughout Arizona, the Phoenix Chapter of the NBRPA participated in the second annual One Team One Dream Foundation's Children's Christmas Event on December 16, 2023. Phoenix Chapter members, along with current and former NFL players including Michael Pittman Jr, Zach Moore and Ben Patrick, hosted local youth to enjoy holiday treats and receive Christmas presents provided by Toys for Tots.





LEGEND SIGHTINGS

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. DAY

In honor of Martin Luther King Jr., the Memphis Grizzlies, the National Civil Rights Museum, the City of Memphis and Shelby County hosted their 22nd Annual Martin Luther King Jr. Day Celebration Game on Monday, January 15. As part of this celebration, NBA Hall of Famer Alex English and WNBA Legend Renee Montgomery participated in the Earl Lloyd Sports Legacy Symposium, highlighting the significant contributions to civil and human rights they have made through their career in sports. Following the symposium, both basketball Legends — alongside former NFL running back Calvin Hill (father of NBRPA Board Secretary Grant Hill) and MLB Hall of Famer Ozzie Smith — were honored pre-game at half-court and presented with the National Civil Rights Museum Sport Legacy Award.





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