

INDUCTEE PROFILE

Student of the game

Bower climbed basketball ladder all the way to NBA



As general manager of the New Orleans Hornets, Jeff drafted Chris Paul and coached him, too.

By Neil Rudel
Altoona Mirror

Detroit Pistons General Manager Jeff Bower laughed when it was suggested that his high school coaches felt he was better in football than basketball.

"I don't know if I was considered better at anything," he said.

Bower was sure, however, that his path to stay in sports would be outside, rather than

inside, the lines, and it was that realization that started his journey from student manager on the Saint Francis men's basketball team, in 1979, to the highest level of the game.

During his senior year at Hollidaysburg Area High School, Bower decided to attend Saint Francis with the idea that he'd try to get involved in some capacity — any capacity — with the Red Flash program.

The guest speaker at Hollidaysburg's all-sports banquet that year was Dave Magarity, who was completing his first season as the Flash's head coach.

Jim Pfungstler, the Tigers' basketball coach at the time, introduced Bower.

"By this time, I had this happen a dozen times — kids that want to help out," Magarity said. "I said, 'Sure, come by,' and they'd show up for a couple days, and they'd disappear."

Bower's reliability became his hallmark.

"This kid wouldn't go away," Magarity said. "He's at every practice. I had given him all the mailouts and stuffing envelopes. By the time he was a sophomore, he was traveling with us. He was just a reliable kid, and his basketball acumen was clearly good."

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At one point, Magarity — himself just 28 years old and the nation's youngest head coach when he succeeded Pete Longeran — found himself in Bower's dorm room.

"I'll never forget this," he said. "For some reason, he took me into his dorm room, and he had every basketball book imaginable — Dean Smith and Bobby Knight. I said, 'Have you read all these?'"

Bower nodded.

"He had more books than I did," Magarity said. "His junior and senior year, he was running practices with me."

The only thing that didn't impress Magarity was Bower's driving ability.

During the 1980-81 season, the Flash had just won at George Washington, and Magarity was speaking at an alumni event after the game. The team returned to Loretto, and Bower stayed with Magarity for the function.

"I had made that run from D.C. a million times," Magarity said. "I drive almost all the way. We get to Breezewood, and I'm really tired so I say, 'Can you get us home?' We switch places, and I sort of nod off, and all of a sudden, I hear this noise, and he's asleep at the wheel — and we're going through a cornfield."

Magarity told his young assistant "Stop the car!" and Bower said, "I'm sorry, Coach."

That was about the only time Bower gave Magarity cause for concern.

The two separated in 1983, Magarity going to Iona and Bower landing on Bruce Parkhill's staff at Penn State.

"That was my first coaching job out of college," Bower said. "Bruce was the head coach, Brian Hill and Jerry Dunn were the assistants. That was a great staff and an incredible opportunity for me to learn from guys who were all successful head coaches."

When Magarity was named Marist's head coach in 1986, he said Bower "was the guy I wanted to bring with me. He's always had a great feel for the game, and he's a very good teacher. He really grew those three years at Penn State, and once we got to Marist, he hit the ground running."

It wouldn't be long until Bower's attention to detail, eye for talent and meticulous scouting reports had grown



Jeff graduated Hollidaysburg Area High School in 1979. He was a member of the basketball and football teams.

his reputation among his peers, and by 1995, the NBA was taking notice.

Bower was offered a position as an advance scout by the Charlotte Hornets, where he worked with Bob Bass, Bill Hanzlik and Allan Bristow. There were late nights and early flights, but the taxing travel didn't deter him.

Dave Cowens was the head coach and when he was let go, Paul Silas took over, and Bower was promoted to assistant coach.

"Bob Bass was a tremendous influence as far as learning the business and giving me opportunities and responsibilities," Bower said.

The Hornets' director of scouting from 1979-2009, Bower ascended to the Hornets' general manager position, actually holding it twice, in 2002-03 and from 2005-10.

Among the players he drafted or traded for include Baron Davis, Chris Paul, David West, J.R. Smith and Peja Stojakovic.

Bower helped lead the transition in 2002 from Charlotte to New Orleans, and in the summer of 2005, more adversity came when Hurricane Katrina hit, and the team moved for two seasons to Oklahoma City, predating the Thunder.

"The theme that went through all the those guys, the West and the Paul eras in New Orleans, they understood they were part of something bigger than themselves," Bower said. "When we were forced to go to OKC because of Katrina, only the right type of guys would have handled that kind of upheaval and chaos and then go back to New Orleans and play a role in giving a little bit of a rest from the cleanup."

After the Hornets advanced to the Western Conference semifinals and lost to San Antonio in seven games in 2008, Bower finished third in the NBA executive of the year voting behind household names Danny Ainge (Boston) and Mitch Kupchak (Lakers).

"Jeff not only understands the game and talent, but he understands character and chemistry and how it relates to the team," Stan Van Gundy, the Pistons' team president and head coach, said. "He's always able to make the best out of whatever situation is handed to him. What really impressed me and why I wanted him here was the job he did in New Orleans in turning their roster around. He was able to transform a roster and a culture, which is what we had to do here."

In 2009-10, Bower coached the Hornets, taking over for Byron Scott, and posted a 34-39 record before



Bower bio

Sport: Basketball

High school: Hollidaysburg Area

College: Saint Francis

Hall of Fame achievement: The current general manager of the Detroit Pistons and past GM and head coach of the New Orleans Hornets, Jeff has coached in college basketball since 1979 and, with the exception of one year as Marist's head coach (2013-14), he's been in the NBA since 1995.

Current residence: Oakland, Mich.

returning to his GM duties and later parting company with the organization in the summer of 2010.

He remained close to the game, through scouting and maintaining relationships, and after a one-season stint as Marist's head coach in 2013, Van Gundy brought Bower to the Pistons a year later.

The two had known each other nearly 30 years, dating back to when SVG was an assistant at Fordham.

"I was always impressed with his work ethic and his knowledge of the game," Van Gundy said. "He is extremely organized and has a very even demeanor. He's always on to what needs to be done next. I'm more emotional so he's been a good balance. I think Jeff's as good a basketball person as there is in this league, and he's done most of the jobs. We are really, really lucky to have him."

High praise, indeed, coming from one of the royal families of NBA coaches.

While Bower is appreciative of his current position, induction into the Blair County Sports Hall of Fame has made him brought him back to his roots.

Along with friends Bill Waryck, Brian Schmitt and Greg Griffith, he remembers honing his game in the alley behind his house on Jones Street and sneaking into the gym at St. Mary's School in Hollidaysburg.

"It all depended if the doors were chained tight or not," he said.

He remembers Pflugstler and Dick Gooderham running an open gym in the summer and junior high coaches Glenn Stevens and Herb Groce.

"I'm so lucky," Bower said. "I realize what an advantage I had because of where I came from and who I grew up around and who I was influenced by. I had a great family, a great school with great teachers and coaches that cared about you. I had people who were disciplinarians. Every step along the way, I had people helping me for no benefit to themselves. I was always surrounded by people that values mattered and compromises weren't accepted — and that is an advantage I had that isn't always available to young people."

When he got to high school, he was mentored by Pflugstler and the

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— Stan Van Gundy

late John Wiberg in basketball and Tom Irwin and Harold Price in football.

"Both of my football coaches have already been brought into the Hall of Fame," Bower said. "That hasn't been lost on me. Both were very different. I can still hear Tom Irwin talking about counting on your teammates, and (saying) 'the first thing that we have to do was become a team before you can be a good team.' That's stuck with me at every level.

"And coach Price wanted to do things right, over and over and over, every day, and the value that can create."

Once Bower got to Marist, Pflugstler and Wiberg used to drive to Poughkeepsie and spend several days watching practice.

Wiberg passed away in October — "one of the most unique men you've ever been around in his ability to make an impact with so few words, and they were never about himself," Bower said — and Pflugstler is assisting his son-in-law in the Brockway program.

"I just used Jeff as an example," Pflugstler said earlier this season. "We had a couple kids walk off and quit.

Jeff was a substitute and probably didn't get to play as much as he would have liked, but he worked hard and contributed. If a kid isn't playing first string today, it's not as worth it for them to be on the team.

"It wasn't that way with Jeff. He really loved the game and stuck with it — and now it's paid off."

Though he's no longer coaching side-by-side by Magarity, Bower remains closely in touch.

"I wouldn't be involved in basketball if it wasn't for him and the introductions and opportunities that he gave to me and the influence he had on me," he said.

Bower's parents, Paul and Miriam, have passed away, but he said, "They would really be honored and happy about this."

He certainly is.

"I'm deeply humbled," he said. "It's an honor I would not have expected or feel I necessarily belong. I know the names of past individuals who have been a part of it. I always thought it was something unique and special. To me, there's no greater honor — more for the chance to recognize all the people who helped me."

That includes his wife, Lisa, a former trainer for the WNBA's Charlotte Sting, and their 12-year-old daughter, Lindsey.

"When I see something or I'm talking to my daughter or my wife about things she may be going through in school, I think of the influences I had growing up," he said. "I only hope people can touch her like they did me."



Jeff (far left), under the tutelage of Dave Magarity at Saint Francis and Marist, blossomed into an NBA coach and general manager. He now works for Stan Van Gundy (right) in Detroit.