



Lace 'em Up

The Foundations of Success

THE OLD LOCKER ROOM expression *lace 'em up* means “get ready to play!” For me during my playing days, that literally meant to pull my sneaker laces up tight and get ready to do battle. Tightly laced sneakers gave me the feeling of having a strong, solid base from which I could run faster, jump higher, and make quicker changes of direction.

In life, we all have to lace 'em up every day of our lives. Every day is “game day.” There are no off-days or travel days, and there is no end of the season. No matter what we do in life—whether man or woman; homemaker or breadwinner; white- or blue-collar worker; craftsperson, tradesperson, or politician; artist or athlete; student or new graduate—we each have a job to do and we must be ready to give every day our best effort. To do that well, we must have a passion for what we do and strive to do it to the best of our ability. Lace 'em up tight!

Master coach, John Wooden, thought lacing one's shoes was so important that he always taught a session on the manner in which players should lace their sneakers. Coach Wooden felt that unless a player's feet

were sound and secure, he couldn't be expected to perform the game's basic functions. When I coached the Trail Blazers, I noticed that Bill Walton, one of Wooden's prize pupils, always pulled his laces tighter just before practice began. He still adhered to Wooden's message: Lace 'em up tight!

Be Yourself

A foundational principle of success—in any endeavor—is to be yourself. Every person has his or her own personality, and though shaped by genetics, by environment, and by experience, essentially we are who we are. That is not to say we can't improve certain aspects of our personalities—such as making an effort to be more outgoing, less critical, or more cooperative. Self-improvement is certainly beneficial, and we should all strive to be the best person we can be—but by being ourselves. Trying to be someone else, no matter how admirable we may think that person is, just doesn't work. Others will easily see through that facade, and the result can be disastrous.

Bruce Ogilvie, one of the pioneers in sports psychology, who worked with the Trail Blazers all the years I was with that organization, called it having a *transparent personality*. He listed it as one of the primary traits for success for those in authority. "Be who you are," Bruce said. "You may be Mr. Nice Guy or you may be an SOB, but you must be that person all of the time."

Develop Self-Confidence; Set Goals

Self-confidence goes hand in glove with being yourself. Confidence is tangible and must be sincere. It is the product of knowing what the task is and that you can accomplish it. It comes from successfully completing the task over and over again. False confidence will ultimately reveal itself, whereas true self-confidence is constant and won't evaporate under pressure.

One-of-a-Kind Leader: Mark Cuban

I coached for four owners during my career in the NBA. All were eminently successful in their chosen fields: Irv Kosloff (Philadelphia 76ers) started his own paper business (Roosevelt Paper Company); Paul Snyder (Buffalo Braves) founded Freezer Queen, which specialized in the preparation of frozen foods; Larry Weinberg (Portland Trail Blazers) began a real estate development business in the Los Angeles, California, area, taking advantage of the great demand for housing following World War II; and Herb and Mel Simon (Indiana Pacers) ran an international land development business that specialized in the construction of shopping malls.

Mark Cuban is not like any of them. Simply put, he is the most unique owner in the history of the NBA. On January 4, 2000, he paid the most money ever (\$280 million) for an NBA franchise and set about revitalizing the struggling Dallas team—which, in its four most recent seasons, had a combined 89–207 record and was currently 9–23. His upbeat attitude and total personal involvement immediately breathed life into the moribund organization, and without changing any players or coaching personnel, the Mavericks became a winning team. They went 31 and 19 the rest of that season to finish with a 40–42 record. Seemingly overnight, the Mavericks had become a hot-ticket item in Big D.

As it turns out, engineering dramatic successes is something of a specialty for Cuban. Mark was born and raised in Mt. Lebanon, Pennsylvania (near Pittsburgh), the oldest of three sons. His father upholstered car interiors for a living, while Mark grew up loving basketball and developing a fascination with ways to make money. (He once sold garbage bags—\$6 per hundred—door-to-door to earn money to buy basketball shoes.) When he finished high school, he enrolled at Indiana University after his research of the top 10 business schools showed that it was the least costly to attend. Mark finished his senior year at the University of Pittsburgh, then moved to Dallas to join some of his college friends. He started working for a computer software company (Your Business Software), but quickly

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grew tired of the menial details of the job (opening the store and sweeping up), so he opened his own computer consulting firm, MicroSolutions, Inc. It didn't seem to matter that Cuban wasn't especially knowledgeable about computers; he took on any jobs that came his way, then studied texts to find out how to do them. A basic rule for him was "Make the effort to learn as much as you can. Real success comes from giving more than you thought you could, and preparing yourself for every opportunity. In a lot of things, I taught myself. I wanted to make sure that I knew how to do everything myself." In seven years, the company's gross earnings reached \$30 million a year and he sold out to CompuServe.

His next venture developed as a result of helping out one of his friends (Todd Wegner) from Indiana who wanted to listen to the university's basketball games. Cuban figured out a way to receive those broadcasts over the Internet, then formed a company called Broadcast.com. That company went public and was eventually purchased by Yahoo.com; 300 of the company's employees became millionaires. Cuban is estimated to have come away with \$3 billion.

With that background in mind, it should not be surprising that after buying the Dallas Mavericks, Cuban quickly jumped into every phase of its operation. He personally took part in a telephone ticket-selling campaign that required each caller to make 100 calls a day. "I told them that anyone mentioning the team's [won-lost] record would be fired on the spot."

He also came up with a mantra: "Every minute of every day is selling time." To make good on that, Cuban tripled the size of the sales force and brought in a new sales director and marketing manager. He instructed them that they weren't selling basketball, they were selling fun at the games. He found new ways to entertain the fans with dance teams, up-tempo music, and video presentations.

It didn't take long to see the wisdom of his approach. The team soon began to play better and fans began flocking to the team's new arena, the American Airlines Center.

He prioritized personnel. When he met with Coach Don Nelson, the first question Cuban asked was, "Are you having any fun?" When Nelson told him no, Cuban responded, "We'll have to

change that.” That same day, Cuban held a meeting with the players before practice. A self-described “5–10, 200-pound basketball junkie,” he broke the ice by challenging star player Dirk Nowitzki to a one-on-one contest. Needless to say, he came away a loser, but it served his greater purpose: to open the doors of communication.

Accentuating the positive, Cuban told the players that the franchise was going forward from that day. Then he asked them what he could do to help change things for the better. Gary Trent (now with Minnesota) was the first to speak, essentially saying that the players felt that nobody cared. Other players expressed similar thoughts. A laundry list of complaints followed, from the quality of team travel to parking availability at the arena. Cuban noted all their gripes and assured the players that they would be taken care of. He said, “Let me prove to you that I’m going to do everything possible to make this the best franchise in the NBA. In return, I expect your best effort.”

This was in stark contrast to the previous owner, Ross Perot, Jr., who was primarily concerned with the bottom line and had cut expenditures to the bone. Cuban went in the other direction: He provided luxury air travel, five-star hotel accommodations, and numerous other amenities. He had each player’s locker equipped with a flat-screen, 13-inch television monitor, a stereo, DVD player, CD player, and a PlayStation. He catered a fine-dining buffet for players of *both* teams after home games in Dallas. Returning from road trips, players found their cars washed and waiting for them. Cuban also added nine coaches to Don Nelson’s staff, to provide specialized instruction and more one-on-one teaching opportunities.

Not only did these changes dramatically affect the morale and performance of Cuban’s team, but he regards the additional costs as having been a good business investment as well. “We had a payroll of over \$40 million at the time. It made sense for me to spend a little more money to get 150 percent return in production.”

Cuban spares no expense when it comes to improving the player roster. Since taking over in 2000, he has signed off on a number of significant player deals after conferring with Nelson. By the

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2002–2003 season, only four players remained from that team: Nowitzki, Steve Nash, Michael Finley, and Shawn Bradley. Roster additions, which include Nick Van Exel, Raef LaFrentz, Tariq-Abdul Wahad, Eduardo Najera, Adrian Griffin, and Walt Williams, plus the contract extensions to Finley and Nowitzki, have pushed the Mavs' payroll (about \$80 million) over the league salary cap and into luxury tax territory. Cuban is willing to spend that to improve the team and plans to work hard in other areas to make up the difference in dollars.

Cuban has a hand in everything that happens with the Mavs. He confers with Nelson about player personnel, oversees contract negotiations, organizes game promotions and ticket sales, creates new souvenir clothing items, and even sees that the arena restrooms are spotless. He is on hand for almost every game that the team plays, home or away. He travels with the team, sits near its bench at games, and sometimes sticks his head into Coach Don Nelson's timeout huddles ("I don't meddle in the coaching. I just want to know what's going on").

Cuban is, without doubt, the Mavericks' biggest and most visible fan, highly elated in victory, a subdued sufferer in defeat. A now-favorite focus of television camera operators, he's often caught leaping up, pumping his fists in the air on key scoring plays, or shouting out his dismay and/or disdain at an official's call that went against his team.

The team has responded positively to Cuban's approach. In 2001, the Mavs' record jumped to 53–29, and they finished second in the Mid-West Division. In 2002, the record improved to 57–25, again finishing second in the division. In 2003, Dallas won 60 and lost 22, and tied for first place in the division with San Antonio.

Mark Cuban's goal is to win an NBA championship, something that Dallas has never done; but he says, "I have no timetable for that. I just want us to keep moving forward." The Mavs are doing just that. In the 2003 playoffs, Dallas reached the Conference Finals with a gutsy effort before losing to the eventual champion, San Antonio, in seven hard-fought games.

Cuban's leadership concepts are serving him well. "If you want to get the most from the people working with you, it's important to acknowledge their efforts, make them feel appreciated. I like to surprise people with nice things. Having the players' cars washed when they get back from a trip is one of those. These are little things, but they show people that we care about them. I also try to put people in a position to succeed. It gives them responsibility and challenges them to make their best effort. It shows that I have confidence in them."

"Having fun is important, too," he emphasizes. "We have a nice environment for our players and a beautiful, new arena. Our locker room is first-rate. Our players like playing here. I want our fans to enjoy the total experience of Mavericks basketball. We work hard to make that happen. When they have fun, we have fun."

As to his renowned visibility, he says, "I think it's important to be out front where people can see you. Most NBA owners are removed from the scene. Their [teams'] fans don't even know who some of them are. I want our players and fans to see that I'm totally involved with this team and that I really care about it and them."

He's adamant, too, about the value of knowledge: "Have all the information possible before reaching a decision. You've got to know everything that's going on if you're going to make smart judgments." Likewise, he says, "Preparation is very important. Everybody has the will to win, but only those who prepare are going to get there."

In life, confidence comes from feeling secure about your relationships with family, friends, and associates; your job; your leisure-time activities; and your religious faith. Those characteristics are not innate; they are the products of good nurturing, careful guidance, and the will to achieve. There is a resultant satisfaction with the present and a sound basis for continuing that lifestyle or improving on it in the future. You can meet head-on the inevitable problems that arise, with a strong expectation of solution. You can approach each day with interest and energy. Faced with dissatisfaction with their station in life, confident

people analyze the situation, make logical plans to improve it, then go to work to achieve their goals.

The legendary Larry Bird was well known for his thorough and regular practice regimen. I recall bringing my team into the Boston Garden two hours before a Celtics game and hearing the swish of the net and an occasional bounce of the ball as we walked down the corridor to the visitors' locker room. One of my rookie players asked what was going on. Without looking, I told him that it was Larry Bird getting ready for the game. We stopped and could see the dimly lit court through a tunnel in the evenly spaced sections of seats. There was one player shooting and a ball boy retrieving. It was Bird—the best shooter in the game at the time—honing his skills for yet another test. He always followed the same routine—starting inside the free-throw line, concentrating on his form, then moving out, eventually to three-point range, working from one side of the floor to the other. He rarely missed from any distance. He performed that ritual before just about every game he played and acquired the utmost confidence in his shooting ability.

The Boston Celtics took Larry Joe Bird as the sixth pick in the first round of the 1978 NBA Draft when he was a junior at Indiana State, knowing that he was returning to play his senior year and wouldn't play for them until the 1979–1980 season—or possibly not at all. NBA rules governing the signing of underclassmen stipulated that the Celtics had until the date of the following draft to sign Bird to a contract. If they didn't sign him, they lost their rights to him and Bird went into the pool of players eligible for that draft. The Celts signed Bird—a decision, like the one to acquire Bill Russell from St. Louis in 1956—that turned out to be among the wisest in the storied history of the Boston franchise.

In the year they waited for Bird to finish his college career (1978–1979), the Celtics finished 29 and 53—dead last in the Atlantic division. The following year, Bird's first season with the team, the Celtics won a league-best 61 games, finished first in their division, and reached the Conference Finals before losing to Philadelphia. The personnel was essentially the same—except for the addition of Bird and Coach Bill Fitch. Bird averaged 21 points and 10 rebounds that season, was selected Rookie of the Year, and was named to the All-NBA First Team. In the

next season, Boston added Robert Parish and Kevin McHale to the roster and won the NBA championship. The front line of Bird, McHale, and Parish became the best in the NBA. Later additions of Dennis Johnson and Danny Ainge to the backcourt gave the Celtics one of the greatest starting lineups of all time. Bill Walton, the former Trail Blazer center, although hampered by injuries, also joined the Celtics roster in 1985 and helped Boston to one of its finest seasons.

Making the transition from college ball to the NBA is difficult for most players (some highly touted prospects never make it). But Bird made the adjustment easily. I asked him when he knew that he could play in the league. He said, "It was before training camp. Some of the veterans were having workouts—Dave Cowens, Tiny Archibald, Rick Robey, and some others. They were good players, but the first time I played with those guys, I made the plays I wanted to make. I knew right then that I belonged."

Bird had a great career with the Celts. During his 13-year tenure in Boston, the team won three championships and made it to the Finals two other times, but lost. He made the All-NBA First Team nine consecutive times and was the league's Most Valuable Player three times. He's known as Larry Legend in Boston for good reason.

Bird always demonstrated enormous self-confidence and made a habit of winning close games with last-second shots. He did it several times to my Portland team. In one such game at Boston, the lead changed constantly in the last period. It came down to which team would make the last field goal. Clyde Drexler put the Blazers up by one, with about four seconds left in the game. Boston took a timeout. I assigned two defenders, Jerome Kersey and Steve Colter, to play Bird, with the purpose of denying him the ball. On the inbounds pass attempt, Kersey deflected the ball out of bounds. It was still Boston's ball, but with only two seconds remaining. This time Bird positioned himself, leaning over the sideline to take the pass from Dennis Johnson (Bird knew no defender was permitted to touch the pass from Johnson). Once he had the ball in his hands, he turned toward the baseline and lofted an arching shot from the deep corner. The shot hit nothing but net. I stood watching with awe and amazement while the Celtics celebrated their win.

I asked him recently if he remembered that game. "Oh yeah. I remember it well. I knew that I'd get the shot off. Two seconds is plenty of time, and when I turned I got a good look at the basket. And it wasn't from behind the board like some people said. I kind of fell to the baseline after I shot it. But I had a good look." He smiled as he recalled the moment. I'm still in awe. Where did that confidence come from?

"When I was in high school (Springs Valley High School, Indiana) I could do everything but shoot. In my sophomore year, we were playing in a Christmas tournament and were winning the game by a few points at halftime. I thought I was playing all right, but my coach, Jim Jones, said to me, 'If you don't start scoring, you're not going to play for me.' I wanted to play, so I started shooting more. I felt that if my coach had that much confidence in me, I should have confidence in myself. I think that's where that started." He carried that confidence through high school, college, and into the NBA.

Bird remembers an incident prior to the three-point shoot-out contest in 1986, when he asked the other contestants, "Which one of you guys is coming in second?" He admits, "There was a little gamesmanship in that, but they [the other contestants] weren't full-time players; they didn't take big shots with the game on the line in front of 20,000 people. I was used to taking those shots. I knew if I could get by the first round, I'd win it." And that's what he did.

Another of countless demonstrations that show how confidence paid off for Bird came in a last-second game situation when K. C. Jones was the Celtics coach. "Case" drew up a play on his clipboard that involved several screens for the game-winning shot. Bird, standing on the edge of the huddle, looked at the Xs and Os that K. C. had just finished drawing, took his towel, erased the play, and said, "Just give me the ball." According to Bird, at least part of that tale is apocryphal: He denies erasing K. C. Jones's play from the coach's playboard at the end of the game timeout. "I did say, 'Just get me the ball.' But I didn't erase the board. You know how it is: When you draw up a play with one or two options, and you end up not getting the ball to the player who's supposed to shoot it? Well, I wanted to be sure the ball got in my hands."

And once the ball was in his hands, things almost always turned out right for the Celtics.

In sports, confidence comes from successful repetition in practice under simulated game conditions. That base enables the performer to feel comfortable participating in live games. Competence there leads to success in critical game situations. Practice should provide individual and team competition in all the drillwork, with time taken to focus on end-of-game situations. Real game conditions cannot be truly duplicated, but simulations help players to get ready, and then each successful game performance fortifies the confidence base.

Hundreds of big, game-turning plays linger in your mind when you've coached over 35 years, but some stick out more than others. I recall one such play that occurred when St. Joseph's played in the Queen City Tournament (Buffalo, New York) during the Christmas holidays in 1961. We met the tournament host, Canisius, after we had both lost to first-round opponents. The game was close throughout, and in the final seconds, my point guard, Jim Lynam (later an NBA coach), was fouled driving to the basket. We trailed by a point at the time, so the free throws were critical. Bob MacKinnon, the Canisius coach, took a timeout to put more pressure on Jim. During that period, I talked to my team about what to do if we were ahead or behind after the free throws, but didn't say anything to Lynam directly. He was well aware of the importance of his upcoming shots. As the horn sounded to resume play, he looked me in the eye and said, "Don't worry coach, I'll make them both." And, against the din created by the partisan home fans, he calmly netted both shots that enabled his team to win. Jim knew he could make those shots. He had done it in practice countless times; and he had done it in other games.

When I coached Philadelphia, Billy Cunningham had developed into an unstoppable scorer with excellent poise, and I had come to rely on him to score down the stretch of close games. He seldom failed to deliver. Billy always saw the big picture. I recall a game in Seattle when the Sonics had rookie Gar Heard defending Cunningham. At a timeout in the first half, Billy said, "Coach, we're going good right now, but if we need a hoop later on, I can take that kid [Heard] every time." Later in the game, he did what he said he'd do.

Bob McAdoo was another extremely confident player. Mac was a scoring machine when we were both with the Buffalo Braves (now the LA Clippers). He had great range, a lightning-quick first step when

driving to the hoop or back-cutting his man, and an accurate turn-around jumper from the low post. He was too fast for centers and big forwards, and jumped over smaller defenders. He led the NBA in scoring three straight years and was the league's MVP in 1975.

In Buffalo's opening round of the 1976 NBA playoffs against Philadelphia, the series was tied at a game each, and the deciding game was in Philly. We trailed by 2 points in the closing seconds when McAdoo was fouled taking a short jumper in the basket area. As he took the ball at the free-throw line from referee Jake O'Donnell, he noticed the backboard was swaying side to side. A Sixers' fan was pulling on one of the support cables attached to the backboard and was causing the board—and basket—to move laterally.

Jake spotted the overzealous rooter, ordered him to stop—which he did—then gave the ball back to McAdoo with orders to shoot. But even though the fan had ceased pulling on the cable, the board was still swaying. Mac looked at Jake, who again signaled for him to shoot. So McAdoo eyed the moving target, hit it twice to send the game into overtime, where the Braves won to advance to the next round.

What was there about Jim Lynam, Billy Cunningham, Bob McAdoo, and Larry Bird that made them such successful clutch performers? They were all fierce competitors who relished game-deciding situations. They all had an intense desire to win, and each exuded self-confidence.

Inspire Confidence in Others

Once you have confidence, it behooves you to inspire it in others. When my Portland team fell behind Philadelphia 0–2 in the 1977 NBA Finals, I talked over several approaches to our plight with my assistant coach, Jack McKinney, on the red-eye flight back to Portland. Jack suggested returning point guard Dave Twardzik to the starting lineup in place of rookie John Davis. Twardzik had sprained his ankle badly in the Denver series, and Davis had stepped in to do a nice job in his absence. But Dave's ankle was now healed, and since he had started most of the games in the regular season, McKinney's thought was a sound consideration.

We also talked about using our zone press more often to up-tempo our offense, as it had done frequently in the regular season. We considered other changes before Jack returned to his seat, and I sat by myself in the darkened plane, trying to decide on the best course of action for the Blazers in the upcoming, critical Game 3.

I knew that we had not played well in either of the first two games. We were a bit out of sync from a nine-day interval between the Western Conference Finals and the start of the Championship Series in Philadelphia. I also detected a bit of nervousness among our players—most of whom were experiencing their first taste of NBA playoff competition. The Sixers, on the other hand, were a veteran team led by the superb Julius Erving, and they were playing at the top of their game. Before we landed, I decided that changing the lineup would send the wrong message to my team. It would say, in effect, that we weren't good enough to beat the Sixers. I didn't want to send a negative signal, so I decided not to change anything *except* the way we played. I was convinced that what we needed was to get back to playing our best game. We had blown out the Sixers in a regular season game in Portland. I wanted my players to feel confident that we could duplicate that kind of performance.

So in the team meeting we had prior to practice later that day, I said as much to the players. I stressed that we had to defend and rebound at our best level; fast-break, push the ball at every opportunity—even after the Sixers scored—and if we didn't have the break, then to execute our half-court sets with sharpness and precision. My parting statement to the team: "Let's play *our* game!"

The message seemed to be what the players wanted and needed to hear. We had a great practice, then won the next two games in Portland by 22- and 32-point margins. With our confidence restored, we won Game 5 comfortably in Philadelphia and returned to Portland to hold on and win Game 6 by a 2-point margin—as well as the NBA Championship.

The players win games on the court, of course. I am not about to imply that my locker room talk was the reason we came back to win. But it may have helped Walton (the Series MVP), Lucas, Gross, Davis, Hollins, Neal, Twardzik, Gilliam, and Calhoun regroup with the confidence they needed to get that job done.

Confidence to Spare: Air Jordan

Michael Jordan, arguably the greatest clutch player of all time, traces his championship-making confidence to a single moment early in his career: “The thing that made me realize—and made everyone realize—that I was capable of playing on the highest level was when I hit that [game-winning] shot in 1982,” he said, referring to the jumper he made to win the NCAA championship against Georgetown. “I think that gave me the confidence [to believe] that I belonged on the highest level in basketball at that particular time—which was college, Division I, at the University of North Carolina. From that point, the confidence just continued to build.”

Indeed, as MJ continued to grow as a player, he developed so much confidence that he didn’t hesitate to spread it around to his teammates. Jordan had a history of making decisive, last-second shots and relished the opportunity to hit gamewinners. However, he also appreciated and showed great trust in his less-talented (by NBA standards) teammates who played big in the clutch—players like Bobby Hansen, John Paxson, and Steve Kerr, all of whom made game-winning plays orchestrated by MJ.

One of those occasions was in Game 6 of the Bulls-Jazz NBA Finals in 1997. Chicago needed a hoop in the closing seconds of the game to end the series, and Phil Jackson took a timeout to set up the last-shot play. Everyone knew Jordan would get the ball, and that was the play that Phil drew up. I was doing the broadcast for ESPN Radio and watched closely from our courtside position near the Bulls bench as the Bulls broke their huddle with the score tied and scant seconds on the clock. Michael stood still as the others moved out onto the court, then pulled Steve Kerr back and said something to him. Steve said something back, and then both went to their assigned spots on the floor to put the ball in play from out of bounds.

Jordan ended up with the ball on the left side of the floor, top of the circle extended, drove toward the middle, and was double-teamed hard by two Jazz players. He passed the ball to Steve, who was standing alone inside the top of the circle, and Steve nailed the game-winner to give the Bulls their fifth NBA Championship. Michael wrapped him in a bear hug as the game ended.

In our postgame interview, I asked Steve what Michael had said to him after the timeout. He answered that Michael told him to be ready, because he thought he'd be doubled. "And what did you say," I asked. "I told him that I'd make the shot." Two confident guys: one (Kerr) feeding off the good vibes coming from the other (Jordan).

Tap the Power of Positive

Add self-confidence to a positive attitude and you've got a winning game plan. If you think you can, you can. If you think you will, your chances of success increase even more. You can gain much by taking the negative out of your thought processes altogether. Think in terms of dos instead of don'ts. Every golfer has watched players miss a 4-foot putt, then listened to them say, "I just can't make those short ones." Of course they can't: They don't think that they can.

In coaching and leading, a positive approach makes all the difference. A positive outlook on the team's ability permeates the atmosphere for everything that happens with that team in meetings, practices, and games. I recall stopping a training camp scrimmage following an especially brilliant segment of play in my first season with Portland (1976) to say to the players, "We can win if we play like that! I mean win the whole thing . . . the NBA championship." I saw belief in their eyes. Players know when they're playing well, but I wanted to reinforce their positive feelings with my sense of where we were and where we could go.

Positive thinking applies not only to the big picture, but to detail work as well. It is much more productive to stress dos than don'ts. In drillwork with point guards, "Head up—see the floor," is a positive statement when you want them to keep their eyes off the ball while dribbling. And a short "Head up" call during scrimmages or games gets the message across quickly and positively. "Block out!" tells your rebounders to find an opponent and use the proper footwork to make solid, balanced, butt-to-front contact; and to hold that position before jumping in the

Rebound from Rejection: Dave Bing

At the 1966 NCAA Eastern Regional semifinals I sat with my assistant, Jack McKinney, at the scorer's table near midcourt in the Raleigh Arena watching Syracuse play Davidson. Our St. Joseph's team was scheduled to play the winner of the game and we wanted to get one last look at our future opponent. Syracuse, under Coach Fred Lewis, used a half-court trapping defense in which Dave Bing played a wing position. Bing's first responsibility was to double-team the opposing player in possession of the ball after he crossed the half-court line.

In one sequence, the Davidson point guard brought the ball into the front court, hoping to draw Bing to him, then pass to a teammate in the corner. As the ball crossed half-court, Bing juked back and forth a couple of times, then came hard at the Davidson player. When the Davidson player was a step away from Bing, he went in the air to pass. Bing also went up . . . and up . . . and up. It happened right in front of McKinney and me. From my seat at courtside, I was looking at Bing's sneakers—he had to have been four feet off the floor! Bing caught the ball a split second after it was passed, landed on the floor, took one dribble, and fired a scoring pass to a teammate going to the basket. I looked in amazement at McKinney, who was slack-jawed. Neither of us had ever seen another play like that. Syracuse beat Davidson that night, and later lost to Duke in the finals, but that play by Dave Bing stands out in my memory yet.

Bing graduated from Springarn High School (Washington, D.C.) in 1962 (where a few years earlier the great Elgin Baylor had starred), and was among the most sought-after players of his year. He had his sights set on Princeton, and although he was a very good student, admissions officials thought he was not well enough prepared by his inner-city school to succeed at Princeton, and so they turned down his application. Dave was crushed by the rejection—it had never happened to him before. But in what would become typical of Bing's winning approach to all challenges, he quickly moved on.

Bing's second choice was Syracuse, anything but a basketball power at the time; indeed, it had just experienced a 29-game losing streak. However, Coach Lewis told Dave that he was going to rebuild the Syracuse program around him and that he had other outstanding recruits entering in the same year. Dave was further impressed by the two student-athletes who showed him around the campus: football greats Ernie Davis, the 1962 Heisman trophy winner, and John Mackey, who later starred for the Baltimore Colts as a tight end. Neither emphasized athletics; instead, they talked mostly about the educational opportunities that Syracuse afforded. Bing bought in.

Syracuse was a wonderful experience for Bing. He was confident he could make it as a basketball player, but he wanted to be sure he would make it as a student, too. He learned a lot about how to study from his roommate, Frank Nicoletti, also a freshman basketball player. Frank had come to Syracuse from St. Peter's Prep—an excellent academic school—where he had learned good study habits, and Dave followed his example. Dave didn't want to fail—the rejection from Princeton was still in his mind, and he wasn't about to let it happen again.

Dave recalled, "I went to every class—which some of the athletes didn't do," he said. "Then when I got back to the dorm, I studied what had just been covered in class. That allowed me to keep up with the rest of the class."

In his first year, when freshmen were ineligible for varsity competition, the frosh beat the varsity decisively in practice games before enthusiastic throngs at the new Manley Fieldhouse. (Jim Boheim, coach of the 2003 NCAA championship Syracuse team, was one of Bing's teammates.) Bing led the Orangemen to postseason tournaments in three highly successful seasons. He was captain all three years and was the team's leading scorer. He was an All-American selection in his junior and senior years, and in 1966 graduated from Syracuse with a major in economics.

Bing was the number-one draft choice of the Detroit Pistons in 1966—the second player chosen. He was named the NBA Rookie

(continued)

of the Year for that season and led the NBA in scoring the next year with a 27.4 average. Dave was an All-NBA first team selection twice (1968 and 1971) and second team once (1974). He played in seven All-Star games and was the game's MVP in 1976. He was the recipient of the J. Walter Kennedy Citizenship Award for 1977.

Bing played nine years at Detroit and was the first Piston to have his number (21) retired. He played two more seasons at Washington, then one at Boston before retiring with a 20-point career scoring average. He was elected to the Naismith Basketball Hall of Fame in 1990 and was included among the Top 50 players in NBA History in 1996. That is quite a resume for any athlete—but it was only the beginning for Dave Bing (more on Bing in Chapter 10).

direction of a missed shot. “Block out” and “Head up” are cryptic and positive. They carry a “do this” message, rather than a “don’t do that.”

It is also important to be aware of implicit negativity, a lesson I learned early in my NBA career from something I overheard the great Celtics coach Red Auerbach say: “Ramsay may be a good coach, but he doesn’t talk to anybody when his team loses.” I had long admired the rapport that Red had with his players; and his record for winning was unmatched. After hearing his comment, I made it a point to say something constructive to my team immediately after every game—win or lose.

Cultivate a Winning Attitude

It’s one small step from developing a positive attitude to cultivating a winning attitude. The will to win is in all of us, but it burns more fiercely in some than in others. There have been innumerable NBA players with a powerful will to win (they wouldn’t have made it to that level of competition without it), but the most determined that I observed in the NBA over the years were—in chronological order—George Mikan, Bill Russell, Jerry West, Dave Cowens, Larry Bird, Magic Johnson, Michael Jordan, Hakeem Olajuwon, Shaquille O’Neal, and Kobe Bryant. These

players demonstrated not only a tremendous will to win, but an absolute refusal to lose—special character traits limited to a relative few.

An important aspect of a winning attitude is the recognition that there are different definitions of winning, depending on the situation. The will to win is no less meaningful when it garners only a very personal sense of achievement, as opposed to public acclaim. I recall when Wayne Cooper (Coop), a veteran Blazer center, came to the LA Summer League to work on his game. It was an ideal setting for coaches to give individual instruction and to get to know players more personally. I really enjoyed that time; it was pure coaching. The rookies and free agents worked hard to learn the Portland style of play, and veterans came voluntarily to sharpen their games. It also was a more relaxed atmosphere in which coaches could improve their own physical conditioning. In the early morning hours, I joined hundreds of runners, swimmers, and cyclists out in the warm southern California clime, getting ready for upcoming competitions.

Coop learned from trainer Ron Culp that I was at the beach before practice each day, running in the sand and swimming in the ocean, conditioning for triathlons later in the summer, but specifically training for an upcoming annual pier-to-pier two-mile swim race held at Manhattan Beach. The night before the race, I bumped into Coop coming out of the hotel dining room. “Are you going to win it?” he asked. When I told him that I didn’t expect to, that there would be about 300 contestants—some at the world-class level—and that I’d be satisfied to finish the race within the two-hour time limit, he looked shocked. “I can’t believe I’d ever hear you say that you didn’t think you could win!” But for me and many others in that event, the definition of winning was finishing the swim in less than two hours. I tried to explain that to Cooper, but he had watched me go all-out as a coach to win too many basketball games and couldn’t imagine that I’d be any different in other competitions.

Another important aspect of the will to win is to stay focused on what you’re trying to win, even if others misinterpret your objective. When the Blazers championship team started to break up after the 1978 season, the author David Halberstam (whose book *The Best and the Brightest* I had truly admired) asked if I thought Portland management would permit him

to follow the team closely so that he could do a book on that franchise and the NBA in general. I had become friends with David Halberstam through another noted writer, Gay Talese, a friend from Ocean City, New Jersey, with whom I played tennis when I was coaching Buffalo, so I felt comfortable taking the matter to team president, Harry Glickman, who gave the project his blessing.

For several weeks, beginning with training camp, Halberstam attended practices, sat in on team meetings, and traveled to games with the team. He interviewed all the players and management personnel extensively. He took copious notes and spent long hours holed up in his hotel room transcribing and filing his material. He also kept saying that he wanted to sit down with me and talk about my role with the team, but we never got around to it.

When the book was nearly ready for print, Halberstam called to tell me that he had finished the part in the book about me, and would send me those galley proofs. I reminded him that we had never really sat down to talk about it, but he felt he had gotten a good insight into my function by observing me and talking to others.

I am not an especially introspective person, so I was interested to see what David had written; and I admit I awaited the galley proofs with a mixed feeling of curiosity and trepidation. After reading the proofs, I had no serious objections except for one small part that I felt needed clarification. At the time, I was second in total NBA wins to Red Auerbach, and David had written that I was so obsessed with gaining more career wins than Red that, when the Blazers played Boston, it wasn't the Celtics that I thought about, "... it was Auerbach, Auerbach, Auerbach."

When I called Halberstam with my feedback, I told him that when we played Boston, I never thought about Red (who was not the Celtics coach at the time and often didn't attend games between the two teams) and that I was totally focused on what my team had to do to beat Boston, not what I had to do to beat Auerbach's record. I added that I didn't think a lot about career wins, and certainly not during the season, because if the Blazers didn't win enough games, my career could be over quickly.

David listened without comment, and when I was finished, he said, "You have to allow me a little poetic license. But I'll see what I can do to

Man to Watch: Bill Russell

One good reason I had to keep my focus on beating Boston—as opposed to Auerbach’s record—was named Bill Russell. When I was coaching Philadelphia in 1968–1969, he was still player/coach of the Celtics. In a game at the Boston Garden that season, the Sixers managed to get a 2-point lead going down the stretch of a closely played game. The Celtics had possession with about 20 seconds left to play and worked the ball to Sam Jones, who missed a corner jumper. Darrell Imhoff got the rebound and outlet the ball to Archie Clark near half-court, with no Celtic between him and the hoop. In retrospect, Clark should have dribbled out the clock and taken the win. But since no one was in front of him, he continued in for the layup.

From nowhere came Russell, the only Celt to pursue Clark. Archie never saw him coming, and when he released his shot at the basket, Russ smacked the ball off the backboard, grabbed the rebound, and fired a length-of-the-court pass to Jones. Sam, not one to miss two big shots in a row, nailed the jumper to tie the game as the horn sounded.

We were stunned. I tried to rally my players’ spirits during the ensuing timeout, but Russell’s incredible play had sucked the life out of us and resuscitated his own team. The Celtics went on to win the game in overtime. That extraordinary play was typical of the fierce intensity Russell brought to every game he played.

fix it.” When *The Breaks of the Game* was published, Halberstam gave me an autographed copy. I scanned through the book to find the section about me coaching against the Celtics. Halberstam’s “fix” was to drop two Auerbachs, so it now read that I was focused on “Auerbach.” (We’re still good friends.)

The vast majority of people that I’ve met want to do well in what they consider to be essential tasks. That in itself demonstrates a will to win. When we apply that principle to our daily lives, then we’re striving to be the best that we can be. How much better would the world be if everyone accepted that as their personal goal?

