

## AFTERWORD

It has certainly been a long time from then to now, and most of the players, and the pretenders as well, have scattered from coast to coast. All of our lives have unfolded in unexpected ways, yet we are still connected. Since the guys were delighted to have a chance to express themselves in the original edition of *Players and Pretenders*, I thought it would be a good idea to close the circle by asking them to do the same so many years later. While I greatly value their written updates, the most satisfying aspects of these long-distance reunions were the long phone conversations, the e-mailed photos of their children, and the welcome news that everybody I could locate was doing well. It is too bad that so many teammates are missing in action—and that Jamie Humphrey is no longer with us. But, as it was through our memorable season of routine 40-point losses, the goal is to make the best of what there is and also of what is yet to be.

### *Disco Dodds*

It's been over twenty-five years since the days of *Players and Pretenders*. From here and now it seems like a great time, although living through it all was much more difficult than merely remembering it.

The basketball I played when I was growing up was all about winning. The basketball played by the young men at Bard was about trying something new. At Bard varsity basketball was the same as an elective course.

Being an assistant coach of a basketball team was also a new experience for me. At the time, I didn't have the experience to make speeches to the team, but I could help with the fundamentals and interpret Charley's daily speeches for the players. The players had questions and problems in their real lives as well, which presented a chance for me to express the values that I grew up with in the 1960s and that an education at Bard College seemed to encourage—values like thinking for yourself, tolerating a wide range of opinions, caring for your friends as family, and defining freedom as finding your

way instead of having someone else dictating what you can do. These values have taken a back seat in the Bush era of the early part of the twenty-first century, when religion has become the enforcer—whether at home or abroad—and separation of church and state is attacked on a daily basis by the so-called patriots.

Well, getting back to the team: I learned from these young men that winning isn't everything and that playing the game is what really counts. Although severely challenged to win a game (any game), these young men won by staying together, having fun, and learning, growing, and enjoying their time in the basketball spotlight.

After my time at Bard, I got involved with a basketball friend who had a real estate business—specifically, a real estate appraisal business. Soon enough, real estate appraisal became a type of competition for me, and I worked hard to become good at what was to become my career. And since I worked for someone who loved to play basketball, a good pickup game was always a reason to take time off.

Then four years ago, when I was fifty years old, a serious illness forced me to scale back my basketball playing. While not officially retired, I have been in the process of getting back into shape for the past three years. It's a lot harder than it used to be.

Since my Bard days, I have been in touch occasionally with my friend Lance, also in real estate just across the Hudson River, Steve Okoniewski, a caring soul, and Matt Pelosi, good-natured and probably the one individual most likely to retain contact. I'll always remember the Phillips brothers' sense of humor. Grant Anderson had the sixties sensibility, and Ken Zeiger had the musician sensibility. Willie Pannell was a little distant, and Will Power and Jamie Humphrey were good guys. Rob Grant always kept you guessing, as he was guessing himself, and I hope he has found some answers.

Everyone in the book has their real name, except for me. I learned from Charley that a good story is a good story, and there is no such thing as a nonfiction book, at least when Charley writes it.

Finally, I'd like to say hello to two friends: Barri Holker, a young woman with consistent good humor, good looks, and good friendship, and Art Chandler, a player from year two and a good buddy, who I lost touch with for over twenty years, only to discover that he had used his brilliant mind to become a doctor.

One thing I've learned is that you might not see old friends for a long time, but you can get together with an old friend after twenty years and rekindle the spirit in less than twenty minutes.

### *Steve Okoniewski*

It is difficult to fathom that a quarter of a century has transpired since we last played basketball at Bard. After speaking with Charley regarding the reprinting of *Players and Pretenders*, I reread the book and especially took time to review what my teammates and I had written back then. To say it brought back many memories would be a vast understatement. I would be lying if I said that all the memories were pleasant, but all were equally valid and poignant.

Having gone to Bard College, hardly a bastion of conservative political and social viewpoints, it seems odd that I ended up working for some of the most conservative companies in the country. Out of school, I started my career with IBM. I had a friend who needed players for the IBM-sponsored softball team, so I applied for a real job that happened to be available, was hired, and also played left field. I stayed with IBM for eleven years, most of the time within the tax department. In keeping with IBM's penchant for relocating employees, I got a chance to live in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut during my stint with Big Blue. Coincidentally, I met my future wife, who also worked for IBM. As things typically do, both my time with the company and my marriage came to an end. I left IBM of my own volition, and the dissolution of the marriage, thankfully, was a mutual decision.

Over the course of the subsequent fourteen years, I enjoyed stints with Time Warner and Tiffany & Co. before finally

settling in with the WebMD Corporation. I decided to make a career of corporate taxation. It may sound like a mundane choice, but I find it to be filled with much hard work and exciting challenges.

Since the initial publication of *Players and Pretenders*, I have taken forays through corporate America, marriage, and many valuable friendships. I can say without hesitation that there is a definitive correlation between success on a playing field and success in the corporate world, as well as in marriage and friendship. I take deep pride in my career and my professional accomplishments, as well as the personal relationships that have deeply enriched my life.

I've reflected upon playing college basketball at Bard and tried to discern what precisely I gleaned from that experience. For the first printing of the book, I wrote that being a chronic loser of so many basketball games was, for me, a highly introspective experience. I believe now that I was incorrect in taking that view. Even though we lost a few ball games, we were in no way losers. There is an importance in learning that we will not win, or even partially succeed, at everything we attempt and that there is a growth process in these trials and tribulations. I found that I was able to take the life lessons learned on the court and apply them to my personal and professional life on a daily basis. Teamwork, persistence, constant effort, and doing one's best regardless of the outcome are just a few of the things I learned from playing hoops at Bard. These are traits that will continue to serve me throughout my life. The relationships forged at Bard have faded over the years, but I truly hope all my ex-teammates and coaches are happy, healthy, and succeeding at whatever their endeavors might be.

I appreciate this opportunity to contribute to Charley's work and look forward to doing so again in another twenty-five years.

*Jeffrey Phillips*

I'm just doing my thing, and all is well with me. I've been living in Minnesota for the last fifteen years and am the father of three incredible children. My son Skye is twelve years old,

my daughter, Summer, is nine, and my son Zen is six. In addition to working hard just to keep up with them, my major focus is a program that I wrote called “Chapter 2.”

This program has been created for those of us who don't want chapter 1 to be our whole life's story. Chapter 2 inspires, motivates, and empowers individuals to think and feel that they are worthy of doing more things with their lives than our culture has programmed for them. I go around to schools, correctional facilities, treatment facilities, churches, and even corporations to help individuals rise up. The work is fascinating, productive, and very satisfying.

I still do some acting, and I will appear in a local play next August. After the show I'll be relocating back to the East Coast—Maryland—with Zen, my youngest. I'm not sure what the future will have in store for me once I'm there, but I know that I'll still be working hard on my Chapter 2 program.

I don't know what else to say without writing a book of my own, Charley. It's been great reconnecting with you, and I hope that our paths will cross again.

### *Bill Power*

In 1996 I was a lieutenant with about twelve years in the navy and was stationed at the Navy Inventory Control Point in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania. My family and I lived in base housing, a nice, tight little neighborhood tacked onto the side of a sprawling, 850-acre complex of warehouses and office buildings built during World War II.

One Friday afternoon I was shooting some baskets and gabbing with Mike Shaver, a wiry, fit little guy from upstate New York, who lived down the street from me. We were trading sea stories when I mentioned that I had played basketball in college.

“Yeah, right,” he said as he effortlessly tossed the ball through the hoop.

I suppose, considering the number of bricks I had launched during that session, I had earned his skepticism. I continued nevertheless, explaining that our team had been coached by a well-known sportswriter.

"Oh, c'mon, cut the shit," he insisted, grabbing his own rebound of a rare missed shot.

"No, really," I said. "He wrote a book about our season."

"What?!"

"He wrote a book about the team."

Mike stopped dribbling and looked at me incredulously. He tucked the ball under his arm and walked toward me, slowly and resolutely. "Oh, really? What was the name of the book?"

"*Players and Pretenders*," was my casual response.

"*Players and Pretenders*?" he repeated, thoroughly unconvinced.

"Yup," I responded smugly, gesturing for the ball, which Mike then bounced my way.

"I'd like to read it sometime. Got a copy?" he asked, playing along.

"Yeah, it's somewhere in the house. I'll dig it up for you, if you like," I offered, shooting the ball . . . and missing . . . again.

"Bill, c'mon," Mike began, trying to reconcile my assurance with the implausibility of my claim. "You're telling me that you not only played *college* ball, but you're going to bring me a book about your team, in which you are a featured character? And I'm supposed to believe this?"

"Yeah, but I'm in the book as Will. Guess the coach couldn't resist the name Will Power."

He paused for a moment, as if deeming that an acceptable condition. "Okay," he said. "Will Power . . . you're in the book as Will Power. Fine." After one more pause for effect, he barked, "Gimme a break!"

I thought about getting him to bet some money, just to rub his nose in it, but decided on the magnanimous approach instead. I explained that it wasn't "college ball" as he understood the term. I described the oxymoron that was "Bard athletics" and told him the name of our league, which he'd never heard of. I then pointed out that the whole point of the book was that, even in such a noncompetitive environment, our near-perfect losing record was marred by only one victory, and that was over

a bunch of hapless high school kids enrolled at a junior college named Simon's Rock. I then explained that, as bad as we were, I wasn't even a starter—that on any other team I probably would've been thrown off for all the practices and games I missed. As far as the book went, I explained that I was a minor character with a significant role in only one chapter—and that had more to do with burgers and beer than basketball.

"You missed practices on a regular basis . . . and games?! And you didn't get thrown off the team?"

"Yeah. There's even a team picture in the book, and I'm not in it—just didn't show up for the shoot. I was working two or three jobs and had a lot going on, paying for college, goofing around—sometimes I just forgot. But I didn't get thrown off because if Charley cut people for poor attendance he wouldn't have had enough guys to start the games. I think he was pressed a few times to field a team as it was."

As I put the team in context, the story was starting to become a bit more believable. I sensed that Mike was beginning to soften, but he was still pretty skeptical.

We kept talking and shooting . . . and missing—well, I kept missing. Mike continued trying to poke holes in my story; as he gestured with his head toward my last air ball, he asked how I even got on the team to begin with.

I explained that there were no real tryouts to speak of because they needed players pretty badly. I continued, "I was over six feet tall and in pretty good shape, which made me a target for Lance Lavender's hard-sell recruiting tactics. I finally just ran out of excuses and signed up."

"Lance who?!"

"Lance Lavender," I replied, realizing the extent to which the mere mention of this name could hurt my story's credibility.

"Lance Lavender?! That's the wrestler who fought the Crusher in Bugs Bunny."

"No," I said, "I think that was Ravishing Rollo."

"Oh, yeah, that's right."

"Yeah, that was a good episode, but my favorite was when Bugs played the piano with the mouse . . ."

Mike regained his focus, rescuing the conversation from the Seinfeld realm. He continued his interrogation, "Wait. If you didn't want to play, why didn't you just say no?"

"I don't know if I didn't want to play, but I never would have signed up if it weren't for Lance's hard sell. Back then I always felt as if a no answer had to be accompanied by a reason or an excuse. I guess that may sound stupid, but it's how I ended up doing most things in college. Maybe it was nature's way of compensating for my laziness because if it weren't for my running out of the excuses I thought I needed, I wouldn't have done anything."

"So, did you at least enjoy playing?" he asked, finally suspending disbelief for the sake of the discussion.

"Oh, sure, we had a good time. It was a great bunch of guys, but my heart was never really in the game. I wasn't that good, and I've never really been too interested in team sports. I've always preferred individual stuff—ya know, running, fighting, that kinda stuff. I ran cross-country and did okay for a guy my size."

"Cross-country?"

"Yeah, but that was a few pounds ago," I said, patting my midsection.

"Fighting? You boxed, wrestled, what?" He seemed to be getting a bit agitated again.

"No, I was referring to fighting as a spectator sport. I mean, I'd much rather watch a boxing match than a football game. But I did bounce—ya know, in bars."

"You bounced?! What a loada bullshit!"

I lost him. He declared that, as far as he was concerned, I was too big to have run cross-country, too small to have bounced, and the more he thought about the whole book thing, the less he believed it. "Lance, friggin' Lavender, what kinda goddamned name is that—show me the book!"

We kept shooting. . . . I kept missing. A few other guys joined us, and Mike proceeded to spout off about my "bullshit story." He was on a roll, and I let him go. At that point I definitely should've suggested a wager.

Later, a bunch of families convened on the lawn for beer

and munchies at what was affectionately known in the neighborhood as “Friday happy hour.” It was a good-sized crowd, peppered liberally with senior officers and their wives. Mike took this opportunity to publicly deride me for my claims. I smiled stoically while serving as the object of the crowd’s playful scorn.

When the subject changed, I quietly rose from my lawn chair. I strolled across the street and into my house, as if I were going to use the bathroom. I emerged a few minutes later with a small hardcover book in my hand. As I approached, Mike caught sight of the book, and his playful glance dropped into a solemn stare. I sidled alongside his chair and slipped the book onto his lap while turning toward my own seat, where I would sit for the next half hour in silent glee as he leafed through the pages.

I’d be lying if I said I didn’t enjoy Mike’s public apology that night; I also got a kick out of the minor celebrity I achieved for having my name in a book. But the sweetest payoff by far was knowing that any story I told after that, no matter how embellished, exaggerated, or just plain fabricated, would be swallowed whole, and even attested to, by at least one person; Mike Shaver would never doubt me again.

### *Lance Lavender*

Charley, Charley, Charley . . .

What a ride it was. To think that over twenty-five years ago a group of life-scavengers found a pad to land on. A place where we were all accepted. A place where we were safe to freely express ourselves. A gang was born, and being part of a gang made us feel strong and secure.

Since then . . .

Life is a series of moments, and many moments have taken place for us all. Now a father, owner of a real estate business, and unable to jump over a Sunday newspaper, I continue to search for answers. Back then answers didn’t seem to be very important because we weren’t worried about things like closure, about paying bills every thirty days. Good and bad didn’t exist for us. Only life did.