

Coaching A Passion

Trudi Lacey Offers Her Skills To A Different Kind Of Player

As Trudi Lacey chatted in a SouthPark coffee shop, a woman stopped by her table. The woman's eyes sparkled as she told Lacey how inspired she'd been by a speech Lacey had given at a recent meeting of women executives. "The feeling that gives me is so different from when somebody used to say, 'Good win,' " says Lacey, former general manager and coach of the Charlotte Sting women's basketball team. "Today people come up to me and say, 'That changed my life,' or 'That impacted me so much.'"



When the Charlotte Sting folded in January 2007, Lacey left the world of basketball to become an executive coach, performance consultant and speaker. She had been thinking about it for several years. "I thought there was something more for me," she says. And it allowed her to remain in Charlotte. "I have roots here," she explains. "I'm very involved in the community, have friends here and it's not far from my family in Virginia. I've moved around all my life. This is home."

Still, the decision wasn't an easy one. Should she stay in basketball, something that had been the focus of her life since childhood, or should she try this new career path? "I had lost my identity and my job," she says. "The person I thought I was - a basketball player and a basketball coach - that had been my life."

Courtside Seat

Lacey's talent for hoops emerged as she was a youngster growing up in Clifton Forge, Va., a small town near Roanoke. She went on to star at North Carolina State University and became the first player to make the Atlantic Coast Conference first team four consecutive years.

Duke's Alana Beard, who graduated in 2004, is the only other player to have achieved the distinction.

After graduation in 1981, Lacey had stints as an assistant coach at New York's Manhattan College, James Madison University (Va.), N.C. State and University of Maryland. She also played a couple of years in Europe. In the late '80s, she became a head coach, first at Francis Marion College (S.C.) for two years, and at University of South Florida for eight years.

Lacey then worked for USA Basketball, the organization that selects and runs the country's Olympic and other international teams. There, the seed for what she is doing today was planted. When she sought out former teammates, some of them Olympians, she discovered a surprising reality. "Many of them didn't have a job," she says.

That spurred Lacey to work with a sports psychologist at the U.S. Olympic Training Center to create a life-skills workshop for players. "From 1996 through 2000, all of the athletes with USA Basketball - from those in high school to those at the Olympic level - had to go to my workshop," she says. "I thought this was what I'd do [as a career]." In 1999, she created LifeCoachDesigns, the name she uses for her business today.

Having A Ball

The late John Lennon once said, "Life is what happens while you're busy making other plans." And just as Lacey was making plans to start on the new course she had set for herself, life happened to her. Anne Donovan, the Charlotte Sting's new head coach in 2001, asked Lacey to be her top assistant.

Lacey couldn't resist. The Sting played in the Women's National Basketball Association, the first U.S. professional league for women since the late 1970s. The league, now in its 12th year, was only five years old at the time. She took the job. "It was the excitement of the WNBA!" she exclaims.

Indeed, excitement was the name of the game during Lacey's first year in Charlotte. The Sting started 1 and 10, but won 17 of its next 21 games. The team beat the top two seeds in the Eastern Conference to reach the WNBA finals.

After that, however, the Sting struggled to be a title contender and to grow its audience. Donovan left to coach the Seattle Storm after the 2002 season, and Lacey was promoted to head coach. She coached the team in 2003, 2004 and part of 2005, and added general-manager duties in late 2003.



Creating LifeCoachDesigns was a natural extension of Trudi Lacey's years of motivating on the basketball court.

Lacey stepped aside as coach in late 2005, and the team lasted one more season before owner Bob Johnson pulled the plug. "I was hurt and disappointed," she reflects. "I was not shocked. For several years, I could tell the Sting was moving in a different direction and that I should be prepared." She elected to move ahead with executive coaching as a full-time pursuit.

"I thought it was now or never," says Lacey, who is in her late 40s or early 50s (she declines to reveal her age, saying age is too often a "box" in which people view others). "This was my opportunity to try something different - to stretch myself."

Leading The Way

With her team's lackluster seasons and the uncertainty of her future in Charlotte basketball, Lacey had begun positioning herself for something different several years before the Sting ended. A leadership program she participated in made her think about her authentic leadership style and led her to pursue her certification in executive coaching, a program she completed in 2007.

She also managed to save a year's salary, and she took up yoga to gain time for reflection on her life and goals. "I was always so busy and on the run in my job, which involved trying to please everybody," she remembers. "I really didn't have a lot of space to look at what was important to me. I needed to slow down. I was looking for a different way of being in the world."

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– Trudi Lacey**

Lacey soon realized her new venture was not that different from what she had been doing. "My life has been about connecting with people and empowering them to be their best and perform at their best level," she says. "Basketball was not who I was. It was what I did."

After initially focusing only on one-on-one coaching, Lacey began to branch out into the corporate world. She missed the team dynamics of basketball and looked for a way to apply those skills and interests. Yet, not coming from a business background, she wasn't sure she would be accepted. "Here I was a sports person trying to be a corporate person," she recalls.

She also wasn't sure top corporate executives, many of whom are white and male, would hire her. "Most people listen to people who look like them," she says.

But some timely advice helped her see things more broadly. Mentor Rick Tamlyn, an executive coach and leadership development trainer, told her: "Just be yourself." His comment underscored what she had learned in developing her own authentic leadership style; something she likes to speak about to groups. "Bring your own gifts and talents to what you do," she says. "The greatest accomplishment is to be yourself in a world that wants you to be someone else."

Reaching New Heights

Someone else Lacey met along the way placed an emphasis on authenticity. That person was Mike Boston, who co-developed the sports facility where Lacey lives, at the Palisades. As

she was learning to play tennis at the club, Boston and his partner Tim Wilkison, both tennis teaching pros, were building the Palisades' sports program. "Trudi and I hit it off the moment we met," Boston remembers. "She's that engaging person. You feel close to her as soon as you meet her."

Boston quickly recognized Lacey's leadership ability. "I just think leadership is something not everybody has," he says. "But she certainly has it." That and her people skills, plus a commonality he saw between business and sports, led him to encourage Lacey to work with corporate groups. "Businesses are used to competing, and they need cutting-edge team principles," he explains.

Sally Knight, co-owner (with her husband, Steve Knight) of Yoga One, also spotted Lacey's leadership ability. In early 2007, the two met when Lacey was a student in the studio's first class of a 40-day yoga program designed to help people make transformations in their lives. Knight has since hired her to lead weekly, classroom-style workshops for participants in the program.

"She's so eloquent in how she helps explore ideas," Knight says. "She is a master facilitator. She helps people come into their own power and live in that place. She teaches it and embodies it. We are lucky to have her here in Charlotte."

As Lacey continues to realize her dream of helping others via LifeCoachDesigns, she will soon be back in the public eye, in a big way. On May 20, 2008, it was announced that she was offered - and accepted - the position of head coach for Charlotte's Queens University Royals women's basketball team. Once again, life has happened to Trudi Lacey when she was busy making other plans.