

THE WINCHESTER STAR

Remembering the 'mayor': Winchester's Bigelow leaves lasting impression on young athletes

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Robert “Bob” Bigelow passed away suddenly on Aug. 18 at age 66. He was known worldwide for playing in the NBA and for his contributions to reforming youth sports, but within the Winchester community, he will be remembered most for his generous and loving spirit.

“Every great basketball player that came through Winchester after him, he mentored them,” his wife, Nancy, said. “The kids at Winchester High School that went on to have great careers in college, Bob had something to do with that.”

“He was like the mayor of Winchester,” Winchester Basketball Association President Gary Grasse said. “He was just so affable and friendly and connected to the town.”

In life and basketball

Bigelow was born in Boston on Dec. 26, 1953. His family moved to Winchester when he was 2 years old, and he grew up there with his older sister and two younger brothers. He played sports throughout his childhood, but he didn't start playing basketball on a team until he was 14.

According to his older sister Kit, Bigelow spent a lot of time playing on the public courts in Roxbury. She described that experience as “key” to his ultimate success in basketball because he learned many techniques from the people he played against there.

Bigelow was recruited to play basketball with the University of Pennsylvania Quakers in 1971. From 1973 to 1975, the Quakers earned three consecutive Ivy League Championships and invitations to the NCAA Basketball Tournament. In the 1974-1975 season, Bigelow led his team in field goal percentages and earned First Team All-Big 5 honors.

In the 1975 NBA draft, Bigelow was selected in the first round by the Kansas City Kings as the 13th overall pick.

“It was truly a dream come true,” Kit Bigelow said, “but the other side of that is he had a phenomenal work ethic. He was constantly practicing and honing his game. There was not a part of him that felt entitled to it.”

Bigelow played in the NBA for four seasons before retiring.

“He was never a superstar, and that was very disappointing to him,” Kit Bigelow said. “Anyone who works hard to make it to the NBA ... wants to play once they get there, especially if they love the game as much as Bob did. And for him not to play as often as he would've liked was very difficult.”

Returning home

Bigelow moved back to Winchester in 1980 and lived there for the rest of his life with his wife and two sons. He founded the Winchester Basketball Association in the early 1990s. According to Nancy, he formed his ideas about how youth sports should change when their children started playing sports.

“He felt it was too parent-centered instead of children-centered. He wanted to give the game back to kids. He thought there was a better way to [run youth sports] to let the kids enjoy themselves and have fun,” she said.

Bigelow created research-based practices to help coaches follow his vision. He conducted over 2,500 talks and clinics about youth sports worldwide. He wrote two top-selling books on youth sports, “Just Let the Kids Play: How to Stop Other Adults from Ruining Your Child's Fun and Success in Youth Sports” and “Youth Sports: Still Failing Our Kids - How to Really Fix It,” as well as multiple training DVDs.

Bigelow also mentored students who wanted to play basketball in college or professionally. He mentored Doug Miller, who went on to play basketball professionally in Germany. According to Miller, Bigelow taught him how to train properly and practiced with him.

“Playing basketball with him was unbelievable. You’re playing two-on-two full-court with a 55-year-old guy, and you’re in college, and he’s beating you every game,” Miller said.

Not only did Bigelow help children and teenagers hone their basketball skills. According to Grasse, he cared about their whole development. He got to know their families and stayed involved in their lives, attending their games long after they moved out of Winchester.

Grasse also noted Bigelow’s unique ability to remember faces, names and details about people.

“I remember running into principals, secretaries, anyone you could name in the town of Winchester while going for a bagel. And Bob knew everyone by name, he knew their families, he knew what connected them to Winchester,” Grasse said.

Bigelow often worked with older children and teenagers, but according to his oldest son David Bigelow, he also loved babies and toddlers.

“It was crazy to see this 6-7 man get onto his knees, onto his butt, to get down onto their level just to play with a baby,” he said.

David and his wife, Noelle, had Bigelow’s first grandchild, Benjamin, four days before Bigelow passed.

“He didn’t die of a heart attack, it was some sort of heart failure, but I like to think that his heart just exploded of happiness over the birth of his grandson,” David said.

Grasse and others are currently contemplating ways to publicly honor Bigelow’s life, such as retiring his jersey, naming a tournament after him or erecting a plaque. His family will hold a memorial service at a later date when larger gatherings are allowed.