

Bigelow was a champion

By Bob Ryan, Globe correspondent

The list does not exactly stretch from here to the New York border. Not many locally bred high school basketball players go on to become first-round NBA Draft picks.

Hall of Famer Patrick Ewing is the most accomplished, of course. Born in Jamaica, he was developed into a great player by Mike Jarvis at Cambridge Rindge & Latin. Before him, there was the great Jimmy Walker (Boston Tech), one of the great college players ever. Ronnie Lee (Lexington) may have been the best local high school player I've ever seen. Terry Driscoll (BC High) was the fourth pick of the 1969 draft. Dana Barros (Xaverian) was a legendary 3-point shooter.

There was one more, and he has kind of fallen through the cracks of local basketball history, but not Boston social history, where he stood far taller metaphorically than his actual 6-7 height. That would be Winchester's Bob Bigelow, chosen by the Kansas City Kings as the 13th selection in the 1975 draft.

Bob Bigelow died Aug. 18. He was 66. He was a terrific athlete, sure, but it was what he did after he was finished playing that distinguished him even more. For after wending his way through the business world, he became a tireless custodian of youth sports.

If you were a parent of a youngster involved in athletics, Bob Bigelow was a ferocious ally. He made it his mission in life to see that your son or daughter would learn to enjoy sports in the proper manner, not the win-or-lose, survival-of-the-fittest manner.

He honestly thought youth sports were far too structured and far too competitive. He believed with every fiber of his body that the idea when kids took up sports was to have fun, period. Radical thought, huh?

But before he arrived at that station in life, he had, in fact, accomplished a great deal on the basketball floor. Despite not picking up a basketball until he was 14 — yup, no “travel team” for him — he became a standout player at Winchester High, a star at the University of Pennsylvania, and as I said, the 13th pick of the 1975 draft by the Kansas City Kings.

He was chosen behind the likes of David Thompson, Alvan Adams, Darryl Dawkins, Lionel Hollins, and one ahead of Joe “Jellybean” Bryant, father of the sainted Kobe.

He got there through a classic application of hard work and dedication. He was not all that naturally gifted, but he was industrious and totally team-oriented. He knew instinctively that a suburban white kid needed to test himself where the *real* action was, so he spent many a summer hour playing against the city talent.

This was the era of the famed “Boston Six,” the nickname applied to a superb group of local players: Bobby Carrington (Archbishop Williams), Billy Collins (Don Bosco), King Gaskins (Catholic Memorial), Wilfred Morrison (Boston Tech), Carlton Smith (Boston English), and Ronnie Lee himself (Lexington’



is still remembered by many as the Golden Era of local high school basketball, and Bigelow belonged right there among them.

Chuck Daly was in the process of making Penn a perennial national power, and he took a liking to the kid from Winchester. In Bigelow's three varsity seasons (no freshman eligibility at the time), the Quakers went 65-18 while winning three Ivy League titles. Teammates included NBA first-rounder Corky Calhoun, Celtics second-rounder Phil Hankinson, Ron Haigler, and eventual Italian League great Bob Morse.

Bigelow averaged 12 points and 7 rebounds a game while shooting 57 percent from the floor, augmenting this with tough defense. It was enough to make him a first-round pick.

It was an overreach. His NBA career would consist of 94 games over parts of four seasons, including a four-game stint with the Celtics at the end of the 1977-78 season. Hey, that would give him a chance to tell the grandchild he had been a teammate of John Havlicek (Sidney Wicks we won't mention).

But if his NBA impact was limited, not so at Penn. He was inducted into the Big Five Hall of Fame, and the Penn community was truly saddened to hear of his death.

"He was the embodiment of a Penn basketball player," said current Penn coach Steve Donahue, "spectacular on and off the court. He was so giving to me when I arrived on campus 30 years ago.

"His passion for the game of basketball was surpassed only by his incredible kindness to so many young players and coaches."

After concluding his NBA career, he earned a master's degree at Babson and founded a Service Quality firm called the MarComm Group. But his true calling was youth sports, or, should I say, the abuse thereof.

He would give more than 2,500 talks and clinics and co-author two books: "Just Let The Kids Play: How to Stop Other Adults from Ruining Your Child's Fun and Success in Youth Sports" (with Tom Moroney and Linda Hall) and "Youth Sports: Still Failing Our Kids — How to Really Fix It" (with Doug Abrams).

Accolades included being named one of the "100 Most Influential Sports Educators" by the Institute of International Sport at the University of Rhode Island. To say he had a warm, disarming manner is a vast understatement.

And that voice ... I'd have paid serious cash money for that voice. My wife Elaine was a nursery school teacher who heard him speak many years ago, and she and the rest of the staff talked about it for years.

He was married for 36 years to Nancy, the longtime swimming coach at Tufts. He leaves behind sons David and Stephen, and grandson Benjamin.

Let the world know that they had a husband, father, and grandfather who was both a first-round NBA pick and a human being first-ballot Hall of Famer.

