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Bob Huggins
Pressed for Success

Bob Huggins
with
Mike Bass

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To Mom and Dad for raising me with the values that made me successful, and to June and Jenna and Jacque for putting up with a profession that too often separates us.

B.H.

To Danny and Adam for being with me even when we are apart.

M.B.

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BOB HUGGINS

I'd be remiss if I didn't thank Bob Huggins, first and foremost, for letting me into his world and allowing me not just to record his words but to gain the proper insight into the man and his program

by inviting me to watch him operate. He allowed me to observe closed practices and meetings, to sit with the team on the bench and in the locker room, to travel with him on a recruiting trip (and brave the front passenger seat) and to the NCAA Tournament. It helped me better understand what he is all about and why he is so successful, which made my questions for our actual interviews more informed and made this book more insightful. I appreciate Bob putting up with all my nagging over clearing interview time, not to mention all the hours he spent answering hundreds of questions about sometimes-sensitive topics concerning his life and his coaching style.

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MIKE BASS

Foreword

The first time I remember meeting Bob Huggins was in a restaurant. He didn't say two words. I was on my recruiting trip to the University of Cincinnati from Trinity (Texas) Junior College, and some of the older players were there, but Coach just sat at the end of the table and ate his dinner. It kind of surprised me because I was expecting him to talk a little more. I really didn't know much about him. I had been dealing mostly with assistant coach Steve Moeller. But what really impressed me about Coach Huggins was the little he did say to me on that recruiting trip.

Instead of beating around the bush, he came straight out with the truth that I was going to get a chance to play at Cincinnati and that I would fit in well there. He didn't lie to me. He didn't promise me I was going to start. He didn't promise me he was going to get me to the NBA. He didn't promise me anything. That's what I liked about him.

The first practice of that 1991-92 season was unreal because I'd never seen him explode. It was like night and day. He was so into it, so trying to get guys prepared to play the way he wanted them to play, it was totally unbelievable. I had heard so much from the other players about how he would change that he's not always quiet and calm and cool and I finally got my first taste of it. Basically, it was his way or the highway. No matter how good you are, you're going to have to be a team player, you're going to have to fit into a team concept at Cincinnati. All he wanted from us was to work 110 percent everyday. You can go out and score 20 points, and that won't get it. You don't have to score one basket, just rebound, take a few charges, get a couple steals, create some turnovers for the team, make the team better that was basically all he tried to bring out in his players.

At first, it was tough for me. I was coming from a junior college, and basically my goal was to get to Division I and do well. I struggled in the beginning, but I finally got used to it. Now I can look back and say probably if I had gone to any other program, I wouldn't have been the type of person I am today.

On the court, if it wasn't for how Coach wanted me playing at that level being aggressive, being physical, being a leader, everything there's no telling what

would have happened with me.

Off the court, he made us grow up. "You're not a little kid," he'd say. "You're not in high school. You can't depend on everybody else. You've got to take control of your life. You've got to be a man now. You've got to treat people with respect. You can't go out and dog people." And he'd say, "Don't forget what you came from." And, "Use basketball, don't let basketball use you."

He stressed academics. You get some guys who really don't like to go to classes, and he made them pay for it. If you didn't go to class, you wouldn't play. He'd talk about all the great opportunities the players had away from basketball and say, "If you guys do your job on the court and in the classroom, even if you don't make it to the NBA, even if you don't play professional basketball, you'll get a decent job in Cincinnati." We were playing good basketball and winning games, and people in town just loved us as we went to the Final Four one year and the Elite Eight the next.

But they didn't take to us right away. At first, people doubted us. They thought because we were just a bunch of junior-college guys we were basically dumb, and that was tough for us. But Coach kept us having a good attitude. Nobody really knew us or expected us to do well, and I don't think we would have done well if it wasn't for the way he coached us and the way he wanted us to act on and off the court. He felt so confident in our JUCO players that we could beat anybody any night. He brought in a bunch of guys from all over the country and brought us together, molded us, made us good players made us good people, too. Junior-college players are assumed to have bad reputations for off-the-court reasons, but I don't think you could count five instances in our group when bad things happened off the court to our Cincinnati basketball team. Everybody toed the line, and nobody got into trouble with the law. A lot of people don't give any credit for that.

People ask me constantly what Bob Huggins is really like. A lot of people see him on TV and how he goes off on players, but that's not even half of who he is. That's part of what a coach is supposed to do at the college level. It gets some players motivated, but he doesn't do that to get you motivated; he does that because that's how he is. He's just so much of a competitor that it shows during practices and during game situations. He becomes very emotional. He gets too pumped up. The adrenaline's flowing.

It's like he's out there with you. He's so into the game that he wishes he could be out there with you. You can just see it. He wants to win so bad, he wants you to believe that you can beat that team so bad, and it rubs off a lot. He

gives you so much confidence. He

makes his players play at a rate that's unbelievable. He brings out the best in his players.

Even playing one-on-one, he doesn't like to lose. I've seen a couple guys challenge him, and it wasn't fun. He'd get to fouling them, playing real aggressively. I remember one time when he got mad at us because somebody wouldn't take a charge, so he made all of us stand in a line in practice and take charges. "OK, you guys think you're so tough," he said. "I'm gonna take the first charge."

One of the great things about Coach is, there can be times when you disagree on the court and get into his doghouse right there, but as soon as basketball is over, it's done. He holds no grudges off the court against players for doing bad things on the court. That's why a lot of guys played hard for him, wanted to win so bad, because of the way he is off the court as well as on the court. There were times when he would invite players to his house to watch a game and maybe play a little Nintendo with his daughters, to keep the team close, like a family.

During our 1992 NCAA Tournament game against UTEP, we got into a big argument. He took me out of the game for throwing a pass to Jeff Scott instead of Herb Jones, and we chewed each other out for about five minutes. I told him I was going to transfer, and he said, "Go ahead and transfer." It was a very heated discussion. All the other players on the sideline were telling me to go back in, and Coach was still arguing. Finally, he let me get back in the game, and we won. Afterward, we hugged each other and said, "I love you." It was forgotten, and we went on to the Final Four. That's what you need from a coach. If that had been any other coach I had gotten into an argument with, I probably wouldn't have gotten into that game. Bob is real good at that. He's a coach on the court, but off the court he's like a father figure.

Now that I am playing in the NBA with the Los Angeles Lakers, there are so many people I owe a lot of my success to. At the last level, I owe it to Coach Huggins and Coach Moeller. I still consider Bob a friend. I told him the reason he didn't take the Miami Heat job was that he was afraid to play me twice a year. He laughed. Anytime I'm in Cincinnati and he's in town, I go into his office and chat a little bit. I try to help him out with his camp and sign autographs.

All in all, I think he's a great person. A lot of people know that in Cincinnati,

but they don't know that nationwide. He deserves a lot of respect as a coach and a friend.

NICK VAN EXEL

Chapter 1

On Wednesday, June 16, 1995, I met with the owner of the Miami Heat. If I had been offered a contract that night or the next morning, I probably would have signed it. At the very least, it would have been close. Instead, the delay gave me time to think and to rethink, time to get a different perspective, time I just hadn't had up until then.

Everything had happened just so fast.

The 1994-95 season was long since over, and I was doing what I always do that time of year, talking to NBA people on the phone about this player and that player, including our own LaZelle Durden. Because we play against so many good people at the University of Cincinnati especially that season and because I coached a number of top players at the World University Games in 1993 NBA scouts and general managers wanted to get my input on potential NBA draft picks.

I probably talked to Chris Wallace, the director of college and international scouting for the Heat, as much as I talked to anybody in the NBA because Chris and I had been good friends for a long time. Chris was from Buckhannon, West Virginia, and I was born in Morgantown and am a University of West Virginia graduate, and Chris did the *Blue Ribbon* basketball magazine and was involved in basketball camps for years. One day, Chris and I were talking about prospective players and basketball in general just talking when he asked me about my future.

"Would you ever be interested in coaching at this level?" he said.

"Yeah I don't know maybe at the right time, at the right place, for the right people."

I really didn't think anything of it. I knew Miami was looking for a head coach to replace Alvin Gentry. And I knew it was possible the Heat would consider me for the job. There's a possibility when any NBA job opens up that four or five of us who are fairly successful college coaches and around the same age are going to get called. Roy Williams at Kansas. Kelvin Sampson at Oklahoma. Lon Kruger at Florida. My main man John Calipari at Massachusetts.

My relationship with Los Angeles Lakers executive vice president of basketball operations Jerry West helps, because I've known Jerry for a long time, and Jerry has been a big supporter of mine. Jerry and I are both West Virginia graduates, and Jerry and I would talk a lot during this time of year, too, about players. Jerry also has asked me if I was interested in coaching in the NBA someday, but he's never asked me to coach his team, despite reports that I had been a candidate for the job the previous year.

I wasn't looking to leave Cincinnati that time, anyway, and I wasn't looking to leave this time, either. I had a 10-year contract with Cincinnati all but complete, and I fully intended on signing it once all the details were finalized. But the media thought differently. First, they were reporting that Calipari was a candidate with the Heat, and then they said I had met with executive vice-president Dave Wohl. I hadn't.

"Have you talked to anybody from Miami?" the media would ask me.

"Yeah, I talk to them all the time," I would say. "I talk to Chris all the time."

I don't know how all this stuff got out. All these supposed "sources" are telling Bill Koch from *The Cincinnati Post* and John Fay from *The Cincinnati Enquirer* all these supposed things, and they weren't true. The ironic part is, they turned out later to be true just after they were reported to have happened.

Dave Wohl did call me. He asked if I wanted to sit down and talk, so I met with him one afternoon in Atlanta, and I liked the guy. I think he's a smart guy. I think he's got a pretty good grasp on players. I think he knows what he's doing. He's probably one of the bright new guys in management, and I think he'll do really well because he played and he coached and he

understands both sides. The more we talked, the more I thought he would be a good guy to work for. He stands for the same kind of things I do, wanting his team to work hard and to play hard. He had sent me some tapes of his team, and so we talked about personnel. And he asked me to come back another day and meet with the owner. I did, three weeks later.

I really liked the owner, Mickey Arison. I thought he was really a good guy and, like Dave, shared some of my views. He's not one of those win-at-all-costs guys. I think he wants to win like everybody else wants to win, but he wants people to do their best and work hard and play hard, and I think he'll give you the resources you need to get it done. I was very impressed with the organization, which made it tougher, because I think the Heat can win. So when I left Wednesday night to fly back to Cincinnati, I was feeling pretty good about the situation.

But you've got to understand, everybody I had talked to the last few days was pro-NBA, because I was listening almost exclusively to NBA guys. From the moment I woke up until I went to bed and I didn't sleep very long I was on the phone with NBA people trying to research the team, the league and the decision.

College head coaches rarely go directly to being NBA head coaches, although P.J. Carlesimo had done it the previous year, moving from Seton Hall to the Portland Trail Blazers. I tried to call P.J., but by that time, he had already left to see the U.S. Open golf tournament. I talked to a lot of NBA people, from Danny Manning to Derek Smith to George Karl, and they all said pretty much the same thing: "Don't let people tell you how much different it is to coach in the NBA. You can coach in the NBA. They play a lot more games, and there's less preparation time, so naturally you do things a little differently, but it's a not a matter of you not being able to do it."

When you listen to hour after hour of people telling you how great the NBA is, and how you'd be able to make the transition and how the lifestyle is easier, it starts to sound better and better. There are a lot of appealing aspects to the NBA, if just from a time standpoint. You don't recruit. You don't do alumni gatherings. You can go home and have dinner with the family. In the NBA, there might be some summer workouts with guys, but that's nothing compared to the life of a college coach. This is

a 12-month-a-year job. In the NBA, you can coach the greatest basketball players in the world and not have to worry about guys going to classes and showing up for tutors and making grades and getting the minimum SAT score.

And then there's the money. Although I was never offered a contract, we did eventually discuss a five-year deal that would pay upwards of \$1 million a year with the possibility of another \$500,000 to \$1 million in endorsements. But I didn't expect the university to match what I could get from the Heat or even to up the ante. I didn't ask. I would never ask. I don't believe in that. You hear all the time about someone getting a better deal somewhere else and going back to his employer, who says, "Oh, yeah, we can match that" when maybe two months ago the same employer was saying, "We just don't have any more money. This is the best we can do. We want you to stay. We hope this is enough." It's amazing, isn't it? Somehow, the employer found more money, after all.

I didn't want to get into that. I just wanted what was fair. I had said that with my last contract at UC just give me what's fair. If your employer does what's fair, you don't have to look back and you don't have to wonder what you could be getting, and you feel good about the people you're working for. If Cincinnati's offer was fair before the Miami Heat job came along and it wasn't then it was fair afterwards, too.

And I wasn't going to use the Heat offer for leverage in getting anything we needed for the office or the team or the program. If I believe something is needed, I'll try to get it, and that should have nothing to do with my personal contract. By the same token, I've never complained if we lost that it was because we needed this and this and this and this to win. That's not the way I was raised. I was raised that you do your job to the best of your abilities, people will recognize you're doing your job, and then you will be taken care of for it. People will reward you for doing what's right. I wasn't raised that you're rewarded for not doing a good job or for doing what's wrong.

I didn't get into coaching for the money, and I had never taken or left a job based solely on money, as long as the money was fair. My family certainly wasn't going to starve if I took the 10-year guaranteed deal with Cincinnati, although newspaper reports of \$700,000 to \$750,000 a year were exaggerated. I'd have

to win the NCAA title to approach that but you get used to that. *Cincinnati Magazine* once put my picture on the cover and reported I made about \$500,000, and my wife June was big-time hot about that; she got out our tax returns and wanted to call the editors and ream them out for putting that misinformation on the magazine cover.

In any case, the money the University of Cincinnati was offering in its 10-year deal wasn't going to compare to the money the Heat were talking, and a lot of people were telling me I shouldn't just write that off. I talked for a while to J.O. Stright, who coached Danny Fortson's AAU team in Pittsburgh before Danny came to play for Cincinnati, and J.O. is a very successful businessman. "You've got to do what's best for you and your family," he said, "and the smart business thing is to go." And I thought even if the job insecurity of the NBA caught up to me and the Heat ended up firing me, my family would be financially set, and I'm sure I could have found a prime college job the next year. Then again, I have never taken a job expecting to fail or to get fired. I wouldn't do that.

About the only person I talked to who wasn't pro-NBA was Ed Janka, the manager of basketball sports marketing at Nike, who primarily deals with college basketball. Ed had been a coach himself, and Ed's advice was more along the lines of "You've got to do what will make you happy."

Ron Grinker, my attorney, helped hook me up with a lot of people who know the NBA, because Ron really knows the NBA. He has been representing NBA players for years, and his current clients included Danny Manning and Tyrone Hill, but Ron puts just as much time into working for a LaZelle Durden or a Jim McIlvaine as he would a lottery pick. His big thing is working with good kids, and he won't take on any client unless he'd feel comfortable leaving the player home alone with his daughters.

It's kind of neat to see and hear Ron's guys because they have such a good feeling about him, the way our current and former players do about us; they know you care and did everything you could for them, and they always come back to visit.

Ron's contacts and clients were very honest with me and told me information they wouldn't have told anybody else, not because it was me, but because of the respect they have for Ron.