

Josh Pastner Confidential, Part 2: The craft of coaching

By Michael Cohen

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This is Part Two of "Josh Pastner Confidential," a five-part series offering an unfiltered look at the University of Memphis men's basketball program via the emails of coach Josh Pastner obtained through a public records request. The newspaper examined more than 2,000 pages of Pastner's correspondence, and each story focuses on a specific aspect of the program, such as scheduling, recruiting and coaching.

As 11 o'clock came and went on a mid-November night in 2014, Preston Laird pecked away at his keyboard somewhere between Wichita, Kansas, and Las Cruces, New Mexico. Eyes flitting between a computer screen and notes scribbled during a basketball game hours prior, Laird, a former walk-on at the University of Memphis, hashed out an email to Josh Pastner.

"Coach," Laird began, "Their lack of size is deceiving. Do not get caught up on that. The ball and lane pressure combined with their 3/4 Fronts (which I am sure you will see) prevented us from running our stuff and taking advantage of their front line."

What followed was an important set of observations from one of the first college basketball games of the 2014-15 season, a nonconference matchup between New Mexico State, where Laird is a special assistant to the head coach, and Wichita State, the team Memphis would open its season against four days later. Laird's insight, which he recalls was gathered at Pastner's request, focused on verbiage used by the Shockers to initiate their offensive sets. The words and phrases would aid Pastner in his film study to prepare for the upcoming game.

"I didn't do that good of a job because we didn't win the game," Laird said in good humor. "But at least for a small period of time I felt like I was helping."

The message from Laird, gleaned by the newspaper in a broad public records request for Pastner's email, is one of several intriguing documents that offer a portrait of Pastner the basketball coach away from the public eye. They show a meticulous impresario whose practices are planned down to the minute; a man as likely to employ NBA concepts as he is a life lesson about domestic violence; a 37-year-old basketball lifer whose digital correspondence is as high-strung and breakneck as a Pastner press conference.

Welcome to the Larry O. Finch Center behind closed doors.

Seeking an edge

The legend Laird shares with a reporter begins at a cabin in Kentucky. He can't remember exactly when he heard this particular coaching yarn, nor can he remember who told him, which only adds to the mystique.

As the story goes, three famous coaches — Adolph Rupp from Kentucky, Phog Allen from Kansas, Henry Iba from Oklahoma A&M (now known as Oklahoma State) — have gathered for their annual offseason retreat. Minutes turned to hours turned to days as basketball wisdom was openly shared.

Juxtaposed with the modern game, where strategy is guarded like currency, Laird's tale seems borderline crazy. Coaches today are more competitive, he said, and peer-to-peer assistance is often predicated on past relationships.

Which is why Laird, who played his final three seasons for the Tigers in Pastner's first three years as head coach, emerged as a resource for Pastner. That Memphis and New Mexico State had a common opponent offered a chance for Laird to "return the favor" to the man he describes as the driving force behind his entrance into coaching.

"It was actually kind of neat," Laird said.

The email from Laird to Pastner contained a list of numbers or terms that corresponded to plays run by Wichita State. Laird recorded the name of the play — the Shockers ran mostly numbered plays, though some like "3+" and "Fist Low" were more identifiable — and the time of the game each play was run. Pastner could use this information when watching film to match particular offensive sets with verbal play calls.

"Honestly, that's the biggest piece in the coaching community is what play calls can you get," Laird told the newspaper. "... You have to do that stuff because everybody's terminology and jargon is different."

While Laird said the sharing of information among head coaches is rare, Pastner downplayed the scarcity of such exchanges. Pastner said it happens quite often, though he believes the proliferation of televised games with myriad camera angles has made the importance of coach-to-coach assistance less valuable.

"Does it really help you?" Pastner said. "You maybe get a call or you maybe get a feel. I believe in basketball so much — unlike football — everybody knows what you're going to do. There are no secrets."

Still, the correspondence with Laird was one of two instances in a limited window in which Pastner or a member of his staff reached out to another coach for strategic purposes. Aki Collins, who had been Pastner's longest-tenured assistant until his departure this summer, traded emails with Bart Lundy, the head coach at Queens University of Charlotte about a particular defense referred to in the subject line as BLOB Zone. Rather than asking about a specific opponent, Collins' inquiry appeared to be more

general, and other emails between Pastner and his staff expressed their belief that the Tigers could be a successful zone team.

Lundy's response included a diagram of a defensive alignment labeled 25 Red, and Collins forwarded the message to Pastner.

"Sorry this is late," Lundy wrote. "I had put an extra letter in the email address and it came back."

The NBA way

Two months before the four double-digit losses — to Wichita State, Baylor, Stephen F. Austin and Oklahoma State — Pastner was already peeved, frustrated by an article appearing on the website DraftExpress.

Published on Sept. 17, 2014, the story detailed the best NBA prospects in the American Athletic Conference. A section about Austin Nichols, written by Jonathan Givony, stated that the Tigers lacked ball movement the year before. Pastner, by his standards, fumed.

"Does he know we assisted over 62% of our made FG's and were 3rd in the country in assist," Pastner wrote in an email to the rest of his coaching staff. "Of course not. All these national guys think we don't move the ball. Drives me nuts."

Pastner's numbers are correct, and this is exactly the type of story that he says "drives me up the wall." Criticism without actual facts, he calls it, meaning stories or columns or verbal diatribes that, in his mind, are not reinforced by data.

His frustration is amplified by the minutes and hours the team devotes to offensive fluency in practice. A scan of Pastner's emails reveals lengthy philosophical questions posed to his assistants about the most efficient ways to initiate particular offensive sets. ("Are the staggers away the best for our team as the action to flow into cycles if we have not attacked from the pass ahead on the drive to go into drive and kick or the pass ahead and sticking it in the post?") He organizes his practices down to the minute, with one particular session in September of 2014 dedicated nearly 50 percent of court time to working on offensive "cycles."

Of particular interest was Pastner's tendency, at the time, to draw motivation and concepts from the San Antonio Spurs, fresh off their dissection of LeBron James and the Miami Heat in the NBA Finals. As practice was ramping up in early September, Pastner asked Tyler Benson, the team's video coordinator, to splice together a video of the Spurs' secondary actions that related to the offensive cycle drills he pushed in practice.

Two months later, less than one week before the start of the regular season, he sent Benson a link to an 8-minute video produced by the NBA titled *Champions Revealed: The Spurs Way*. "Good video to show our team one day," Pastner wrote.

The NBA influence also seeps into Pastner's practices in the form of the Van Gundy Drill, a teaching tool named after former Knicks and Rockets head coach Jeff Van Gundy, who is now a TV analyst. The drill, which Pastner referenced multiple times in his practice plans, emphasizes both pick-and-roll offense and pick-and-roll defense.

It is designed, according to Van Gundy, who spoke to the newspaper in a telephone interview, to "get the right habits defensively" in terms of communication and coverage when facing pick and rolls from various spots on the floor. It flows continuously, with one pick and roll after another, similar to how a game of Keep Away never really ends.

"Your players are being taxed — their concentration, their communication and their intensity," Van Gundy said. "So hopefully in the game, you're able to sustain your ability to go from one action or one coverage to the next.

"But I have to say this: If there's a drill named after me, it's (expletive) scary."

Added Pastner, laughing at Van Gundy's response: "It's our staple. I love it."

And it works. Memphis finished second in the AAC in assists per game last season, even with persistent point guard woes.

Going uptempo

As 12 o'clock came and went on a Sunday afternoon in September of 2014, Pastner typed out an email to his coaching staff with the following subject line: "Thoughts to think about"

"Staff," Pastner began the message, "Food for thought."

What followed was confirmation that Pastner the public speaker matches Pastner the writer, his thoughts resembling a game of hopscotch with sentence fragments. He bounds from one talking point to the next amid run-on explanations and long-winded questions, his mind pin-balling three ideas ahead of his mouth. Decipher at your own risk.

"Theory vs Reality," Pastner wrote to his staff. "We all know our team and we have a lot of new guys. We know blast/motion/strong and weak/chase actions/horns/X will be our staple for our main half court actions so with that I want us to be really good at what we do well and because of the make up of our team that might be less than more. So adding a new transition action does that complicate anything with our team. The only thing on quick is that we can post our big wings making that flex cut action to the other block and it keeps us in triangle rebounding position."

But nothing subverts the message penned on Nov. 10, 2014, a note that contains 22 ideas — separated like bullet points — that Pastner wanted his team to work on. The bullets say things like "Our bigs have a horrible time losing there (sic) man and looking at the ball," or "All of our plays we must screen the defender. Slob and blob," or "Pin down

screen must head hunt defender. Stop screening air. We need to break this down on screening action.”

Addressed to his office coordinator, Melissa Norris, the email contains an instruction along the top. “Print this and put in my box,” Pastner said. The frantic, scrambled message was actually written for himself.

Yet as practice draws to a close and the Tigers gather at midcourt, time begins to slow. It’s mid-June 2014, and Pastner pulls out an article from CBS Sports that he previously emailed to director of player development Julian Swartz.

A three-star recruit from South Carolina was arrested and charged with aggravated battery and domestic abuse by battery. Pastner, who asked Swartz to print the story, had found his message for the day.

“Every time at the end of practice when we come together,” Pastner said, “I go through something that I believe is important to life.”

The doors to the Larry O. Finch Center open. Another day is complete.