

Josh Pastner Confidential, Part 4: The secret of recruiting

By Michael Cohen

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This is Part Four 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.

On or before Aug. 8 of last year, the difficult reality of life outside a Power 5 conference surfaced in the form of a request from athletic director Tom Bowen. He asked each of the head coaches under his employ at the University of Memphis to meet with their staff, according to an email written by Josh Pastner, and remind everyone “that we are currently being audited and all expenses are being looked at.”

To the men’s basketball program, led by Pastner, the head coach, Bowen offered an additional nudge.

“He made a personal mention to me regarding our recruiting travel,” Pastner wrote to his staff. “... He wanted to remind me and all of us that due to layoffs across campus and within the athletic department we have to be mindful of travel spending.”

Bowen’s message last summer about watching costs foreshadowed his comments regarding various “efficiencies and adjustments” within the athletic department earlier this spring. The men’s basketball team, an eternal breadwinner for the university, was no longer flying charter to every game, and the resulting “hybrid” arrangement has been explained by Bowen to The Commercial Appeal in different ways. It was first cast under the efficiencies and adjustments umbrella in March, though as recently as May Bowen said it was not a cost-cutting move.

The pep band’s absence from the American Athletic Conference tournament in Hartford, Connecticut, was as much a punch line on Twitter as a sign of the times.

And so on the afternoon of Aug. 8, 2014, Pastner wrote an email to his assistant coaches in regard to spending. Hotels, he said, had to be booked at the best possible price, even if this meant using a government rate. Overly expensive rooms would require a written explanation to be made available for the audit. Rental cars should always be returned with a full tank of gas.

“It is a sensitive issue due to the fact of layoffs at our university,” Pastner wrote, “and us being the most highly visible in this city.”

The combination of Pastner's travel tips and Bowen's department-wide adjustments have largely protected the overall recruiting budget for the men's basketball program, which turned a profit of several million dollars during the past fiscal year. It has allowed Pastner, revered as one of the game's best recruiters, to continue zigzagging the country in pursuit of elite prospects.

A broad public records request by The Commercial Appeal for Pastner's email offered a trip inside the mind of a recruiting savant, a man whose phone call lists resemble grocery receipts and whose obedience toward NCAA compliance verges on an obsession. The budgetary trims, he said, haven't limited him at all.

"Because," Pastner explained, "I won't let it."

It must be the phone

As Pastner leans back in his chair on a Tuesday morning in mid-June, entertaining questions about recruiting from a reporter, he shifts his gaze to the cellphone on the left side of his desk.

"The first time I didn't hit 20 wins was because I got the iPhone," he says with a laugh. "So I blame a lot of last season on the iPhone to be honest with you."

Long considered a recruiting specialist, Pastner's mystique was enhanced by his devout loyalty to a prehistoric Samsung flip phone. Year after year, class after class, the recruiting success never wavered — five top-100 players in 2010, five more in 2013 — even as the man behind the messages relied on a T9 keyboard.

His recruiting efforts have been described as tireless, relentless and tireless again. Comparisons between Pastner and the Energizer Bunny have actually become old hat.

But what exactly does it mean to be recruiting genius? How can it be quantified in real life?

An email composed on Aug. 4, 2014, is a good place to start.

Doing his homework

"recruiting update," Pastner wrote in the subject line of a message addressed to his three assistant coaches — Aki Collins, Robert Kirby, Keelon Lawson — and Julian Swartz, director of player development. It was 9:41 p.m. on a Monday, and Pastner hashed out a summary of recruiting calls he had made.

"No answer from Dwayne Bacon"

"I talked to Eric davis uncle. Had good talk. Said Eric really likes us a lot. I left a message with Eric. His uncle said he would have him call me back later."

“I left messages with Noah Dickerson’s mom and Noah”

“I left two messages with Steve Enoch mother and I called Steve as well but didn’t get an answer”

“I left a message with Gerald Hamilton”

“I talked to Nick Marshall’s mother and had a good talk. I left a message with Nick”

On and on the email goes, spilling onto a second page before coming to an end with the 17th described recruiting effort, which happened to involve transfer Calvin Godfrey, a player who later committed to Memphis. In all, Pastner made 25 calls, left 10 voice mails, gathered seven new phone numbers and sent one text to Caleb Swanigan, a five-star center whose inbox was full.

All in a day’s work, right?

“A lot of people look down on recruiting and say, ‘Ah, I’ve got to go do this,’ ” Pastner told the newspaper. “I enjoy it.”

Pastner built a network of trusting high school and junior college coaches — remember, he needed a new phone because he reached the limit of 999 contacts on the old one — by “doing his homework,” as multiple coaches described it to the newspaper.

Among those who praised Pastner was John Wardenburg, formerly the head coach at Indian Hills Community College in Iowa, a school that has advanced dozens of players to the Division I level. Wardenburg has known Pastner for years and didn’t hesitate to place him among the nation’s very best recruiters.

Pastner, Wardenburg said, is the type of person who arrives at the gymnasium with the background of the coach he is visiting already memorized, a broad outline of the person’s life story. He also knows how the season is progressing, whether a team is struggling or surging, and he takes the time to acquaint himself with a handful of players in addition to the target recruit.

“It’s not a joke or a trick what he’s doing,” Wardenburg said. “He’s working hard.”

Their interactions grew more serious last summer, in August, when Memphis rekindled its interest in Stevie Clark, an elite point guard dismissed from Oklahoma State after a pair of arrests, one of which was drug-related. Pastner called Wardenburg at Indian Hills, where Clark had enrolled in junior college, and investigated the potential drug problem.

“His (junior college) coach said he does have a marijuana problem but a great kid though,” Pastner wrote in an email to his assistants. “One of the most competitive kids he has been around. Will get on his teammates if he feels they are not getting after it. He is trying to help him about delivery of message. Can score and shoot it as well (as) anyone

in country. Been great in the community. Just has a marijuana problem and Stevie is aware of it”

These types of conversations — between Pastner and the prospect’s coach, between Pastner and his coaching staff — all contribute to the decision-making process behind whether to offer someone a second chance. Players like Geron Johnson (multiple arrests, including marijuana possession), Michael Dixon Jr. (accused of sexual assault at Missouri) and Dominic Woodson (multiple suspensions) are indicative of Pastner’s belief in reform, though each situation, he says, comes down to “my feel.”

In Clark’s case, Wardenburg said Memphis cooled and decided the situation was not going to pan out. Clark lasted fewer than six months at Indian Hills and has since enrolled at another junior college.

“I have to see them,” Pastner said, “really find out from their heart that they’ve hit rock bottom and they’re willing to make a change. It’s a feel thing.”

Safety concerns

Yet for as much effort as Pastner expends attracting elite players to Memphis, and he’s done so at a rate akin to Syracuse, Kansas and Louisville since 2010, he must also dispel the reputation of the city itself — a violent and hostile stigma heightened by events like the viral video of a teenage parking lot brawl outside a Kroger supermarket in 2014 and “The First 48” television series.

“What I get asked about the most from a kid, from a prospect from an outside locale, is about safety,” Pastner said. “And I think part of it is the perception of Memphis, which isn’t true.”

Enter Bruce Harber, chief of police at the University of Memphis and Pastner’s secret recruiting tool.

“Chief,” Pastner wrote in an email in September of last year, “Can you give me a quick summary of good stats that I can share with our recruits parents.”

In less than two hours Harber responded to Pastner with five pages of data detailing campus safety statistics.

He included a bar graph of incidents per 1,000 students for the 10 large schools in Tennessee (the U of M had the lowest rate); a chart indicating that crimes reported to the Department of Education were down 4.07 percent in 2014; a slide from the Memphis Police Department demonstrating crime around the U of M campus had dropped by 11.1 percent; and another bar graph using FBI Index Crimes per 1,000 students to compare the U of M to schools in the Southeastern Conference (the U of M had the fourth-lowest rate).

An additional page of safety facts included bullet points reminding parents that the university has a full-service police station, a 24-hour emergency line and more than 600 digital web cameras across campus.

“Contrary to what was reported last week,” a note on one of the charts says, “we have not experienced ‘a rash of campus crime.’ ”

Pastner has even brought recruits to the police station to take them through seminars held for campus police officers. The purpose, he said, is to allow potential student-athletes — and perhaps more importantly their parents — the opportunity to hear statistical information about crime firsthand. They can see the numbers and graphs with their own eyes.

“I talk to Chief Harber a bunch,” Pastner said, “and he actually sends me every time they have new statistics come out. Because our campus, if you look at it, is the safest campus in the state of Tennessee.”

This is Pastner at his best, always making a pitch.

Do’s and don’ts

But sometimes even the great recruiters make mistakes, and Pastner laughs about a secondary violation he committed a few years back.

He was recruiting Tony Parker, a burly 270-pound forward from Georgia who was a McDonald’s All-American and would later enroll at UCLA. (Parker will be a senior this season.) They were trading direct messages on Twitter around 10 p.m. one evening — turns out Pastner has been using Twitter for years — when he accidentally addressed Parker by name in a public form, which constitutes a violation.

He turned himself in to compliance and halfheartedly blamed his wife, who was pregnant with their second daughter. She was yelling at him, Pastner said with a smile, and contributed to the mistake.

“With social media and stuff accidents can happen,” Pastner said.

But Pastner is a compliance freak, and a startlingly large percentage of his emails are dedicated to the enforcement and explanation of NCAA rules. He is constantly sending reminders to his coaching staff about the guidelines for communicating with potential student athletes, or sending numbered lists with “things to remember,” or notes in caps lock to hammer home Level 3 violations that would result in suspensions and a public news release by the NCAA.

“I send these a bunch,” Pastner wrote, forwarding one of his public service announcements to Bowen and former deputy athletic director Wren Baker, among others. “And obviously like to keep you all in the loop.”

He's gone so far as to report a potential violation for merely saying hello to Isaiah Stokes, younger brother of Grizzlies forward Jarnell Stokes, while recruiting Skal Labissiere at Lausanne Collegiate School last September. As a member of the class of 2017, Stokes was too young to have contact with collegiate coaches. Pastner, according to an email, self-reported a greeting to Stokes that lasted "a mere 5 seconds."

His compulsive vigilance was especially prudent as Memphis recruited Labissiere, an uber-talented 6-foot-11 forward who ultimately signed with Kentucky and is now projected by some as the No. 1 pick in the 2016 NBA Draft. Labissiere's guardian, Gerald Hamilton, complicated the recruitment process when he created his own school, Reach Your Dream Prep, after Labissiere was ruled ineligible for his senior season by the Tennessee Secondary School Athletic Association. That he sought donations for his school made recruiting Labissiere a slippery slope for college coaches.

Pastner ate lunch with Hamilton on Sept. 9 of last year, and later that night he typed an email to his coaching staff and a few additional members of the athletic department. The email said Pastner had advised Hamilton of the "do's and don'ts with what is allowed and not allowed" in regard to NCAA rules and the formation of RYD Prep.

He reminded his staff that "we cannot be involved in any way directly or indirectly of helping him secure donations, raise money, or getting sponsorships."

And then he repeated himself.

"Since the prep school will be red flagged and looked at very closely," he wrote, "just want to remind all not to be involved directly or indirectly with anything with the funding."

This is Pastner the recruiting wizard, always doing things by the book.