

# Josh Pastner Confidential, Part 5: The act of discipline

By Michael Cohen

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*This is Part Five 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.*

The news release announcing Dominic Woodson intended to transfer from the University of Memphis followed a formula head coach Josh Pastner had used before: A quick sentence making public the rising sophomore's departure followed by a quote that matched — word for word — what Pastner said about Damien Wilson's exit from the program two weeks prior.

"Dominic is in good academic standing at the University, but he shared with me that he'd like a fresh start," Pastner said in the release. "We support Dominic and wish him all the best."

Roughly six weeks later, and six hours to the east at the University of Tennessee, Woodson received news that his request for a "run-off" waiver had been granted by the NCAA. He was eligible immediately, and the circumstances surrounding his transfer grew clearer.

Among the stipulations to receive a run-off waiver is the need to provide documentation that the student-athlete "would not have had the opportunity to return to the previous institution's team for reasons outside the control of the student-athlete," according to the NCAA website.

It meant that Woodson had been dismissed from the team, and a public records request by The Commercial Appeal for Pastner's email revealed a confluence of problems surrounding Woodson's status with the program. Woodson, who was twice suspended by Pastner during the 2013-14 season, had been put under the "zero tolerance policy" by athletic director Tom Bowen. He was facing weapons accusations stemming from a series of altercations with a football player at the U of M. He had lied to police about his involvement in the incidents, according to Pastner's email.

Still, Pastner was intent on welcoming Woodson back if he could follow a set of predetermined guidelines detailed in an email penned on July 29, 2014. "I am all for Dom being back this weekend (he would be responsible to get back here on his own) and start

practicing with us and then go to Canada with us,” Pastner wrote to his staff and members of Woodson’s inner circle.

But something changed in the two weeks leading up to Woodson’s transfer announcement on Aug. 14, 2014, though exactly what remains unclear. (Pastner said he was unable to comment on Woodson specifically due to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act.) What is certain, though, is that his departure from the university was never as simple as merely wanting “a fresh start.”

“Just in general,” said Pastner, “I believe in discipline. That’s important to me.”

### **Weighty issues**

Of the many boiling points during Woodson’s tumultuous year in Memphis, two games against Central Florida caused emotions to bubble over.

For years Woodson, rated the No. 90 prospect in the country by ESPN coming out of high school, had battled as hard with his weight as with any opponent on the court. At 6-foot-10 and with the genetic predisposition to balloon the moment dietary caution lapsed, Woodson’s ability to contribute at Memphis hinged on meeting Pastner’s weight thresholds, which hovered well below his freshman metric of 300-plus pounds.

“At Memphis,” said Kevin Robinson, Woodson’s former AAU coach and mentor, “he didn’t get the freshman 15 (pounds). He got the freshman 35.”

Robinson and Raymond Williams, Woodson’s brother, told the newspaper Woodson did not have a working cellphone at the time this article was written, nor does he use email or actively participate in social media. Woodson could not be reached for comment.

As weeks went by during Woodson’s freshman season, and his weight slowly dipped below 300 pounds, playing time remained fleeting at best and nonexistent at worst. He averaged 6.8 minutes per game for the season and 14 times he did not see the floor at all.

Even in two games against Central Florida, a team with a monstrous 325-pound center in Justin McBride, Woodson played just seven combined minutes.

“That was a lot of frustration,” Robinson said. “I understood and (Woodson) understands that it was hard to play against somebody that was smaller and thinner and agile. But when he was playing against Central Florida they had the guy that was (325) or something, at least let him get in there and bang and use his five fouls against that guy.”

And it was during the second game against UCF, a 76-70 win for Memphis, that Woodson earned the first of his two suspensions. Pastner overheard Woodson swearing on the bench — this after he cursed loudly at the scorer’s table a week prior against Rutgers — and sent him to the locker room. An indefinite suspension followed.

Woodson was suspended again prior to the NCAA Tournament and did not make the trip to Raleigh, North Carolina. This time, Pastner cited “personal reasons.”

Over the next few months, his career took a violent turn.

### **Zero tolerance**

At 1:17 p.m. on July 29, 2014, two weeks before Woodson’s transfer went public, Pastner put together a lengthy email summarizing the legal and basketball status of his disgruntled big man.

“Just want us all to be on the same page,” Pastner wrote to Woodson, Woodson’s mother, Robinson and all three assistant coaches.

What followed was the outline of a four-step plan for Woodson to maintain his status as a basketball player at the University of Memphis, a plan that would be put in motion shortly following Woodson’s return from the John Lucas Treatment and Recovery Center in Houston. Lucas has worked with a number of high-profile athletes and coaches, including Tyrann Mathieu, Larry Eustachy and Billy Gillispie, among others. It is not known for what Woodson was seeking treatment.

Step one: Woodson had to abide by the zero tolerance policy put in place by Bowen, the athletic director. Any inappropriate behavior — the email listed failing a drug test, getting caught smoking, drinking alcohol, breaking dorm rules, fighting, being disruptive and being disrespectful as examples — would result in Bowen stripping Woodson of his scholarship and kicking him off the team. “If Dom does not think he could handle all this then he does not need to come back yet. Or if he feels he is not going to abide by the rules then he should not come back at all,” Pastner wrote.

Step two: The zero tolerance concept would carry over to the basketball court, where Woodson could not lash out over playing time. “He cannot get impulsive with his words if he does not play the minutes that he wants,” Pastner wrote. “Again that will result in him being automatically dismissed.”

Step three: On June 30, 2014, Woodson was involved in an altercation with Robert Davis, a football player at the university. Woodson and Davis had a verbal disagreement that became physical, with Davis shoving U of M associate director of athletic academics Kristin Williams and then taking Woodson to the ground. The offense report, obtained by the newspaper, lists simple assault and vandalism as the crimes committed. Davis is labeled the aggressor.

But the email from Pastner and an interview with Robinson, Woodson’s former AAU coach and mentor, reveal that there were multiple altercations between the two athletes. A second incident, according to Robinson, involved Davis and other members of the football team surrounding Woodson outside his dorm. It was then, according to Robinson and confirmed in Pastner’s email, that Woodson was said to have reached for a gun.

“This is a serious process because this is a weapon free campus and people have accused Dom of having a weapon,” Pastner wrote.

Woodson’s explanation of the events, as told to Robinson and then repeated to the newspaper, hinged largely on fear. Woodson, according to Robinson, was scared and pretended his cellphone — a large, black Samsung Galaxy Note 4 — was a gun to get himself out of the situation. “Everybody thought he had a gun and nobody turned around to see him because everybody just took off running,” Robinson told the newspaper.

Woodson decided to proceed with a Tennessee Uniform Administrative Procedure Act (TUAPA) process in regard to the weapon accusation, according to Pastner’s email, which functions like a small trial “without criminal implications.” Pastner wrote that he would help Woodson find a lawyer to aid in presenting his version of the story to the appropriate University Hearing Officer. “It could be from suspended from school for a year or longer to a settlement like community service or it all could be dropped,” Pastner wrote.

Complicating matters, according to Pastner’s email, was a series of lies Woodson told to both the police and the Dean of Students. “Due to that he is in hot water because now he has to prove thru witnesses that he did not have a gun,” Pastner wrote. “Originally he lied to the police and to the dean of Students based on the video evidence regarding one of the altercations Dom had with the football players. He out and out lied to them which killed Dom’s credibility.”

Step four: Woodson would be required to see a counselor multiple times per week, according to the email, and Pastner would treat missed sessions like missed basketball practices. “Again,” Pastner wrote, “if this is something he is not committed to doing then he might not want to come back.”

He still hoped Woodson would return.

“I am totally in Dom’s corner,” Pastner wrote at the conclusion of the email, “but I cannot help too much with the zero tolerance policy nor the decision on the TUAPA. I will do all I can to help Dom with everything as I have said many times I see all the goodness in Dom, but now it is up to him to take responsibility for his actions and his words.”

### **Fresh start**

Sixteen days after Pastner’s email, a news release was issued announcing Woodson’s transfer. He matriculated at the University of Tennessee, where under head coach Donnie Tyndall he slimmed down to 275 pounds and appeared to be stabilizing his career.

But Tyndall’s reliance on a full-court press, according to Robinson, did not mesh stylistically with Woodson’s body and skillset. He played in four games for the Volunteers and never scored more than 5 points.

“He just didn’t fit,” Robinson said.

Flash forward to the summer of 2015. Woodson is done with college, according to Robinson, and has relocated to San Francisco where he is working with former Memphis trainer Frank Matrisciano. He hopes to join an NBA Summer League team or play professionally overseas.

With as many as three workouts per day, Woodson has dropped to 255 pounds, according to Robinson, “which is probably the smallest he’s been since the 8th or 9th grade.”

Perhaps now, two thousand miles from Memphis, he can finally have that fresh start.

“We all love Josh,” Robinson said. “... Josh is good for the kids. I would say this: The city of Memphis is not always good for the kids.”