

Calling the SHOTS

Notre Dame basketball coach Mike Brey, BS '82,
found his game in Foggy Bottom.

BY THOMAS R. NOIE | A plan was in the works for weeks, something secret and special to help Mike Brey, BS '82, commemorate August 2009, an important time in his life.

Weekends away seldom surface for college basketball coaches, who rarely have a lot of free time. It's no exception for Coach Brey, now in his 10th season at the University of Notre Dame. The 2008-09 campaign was especially taxing. It started two and a half months premature—early August—in preparation for the team's 10-day foreign tour of Ireland. Upon return, another school year had already commenced.

In November, Notre Dame went to a tournament in Hawaii with a stop to play in Los Angeles. A return trip to California beckoned in early February. Winter included the most grueling Big East Conference schedule in school history with many big games and long nights.

As another season faded in the rearview mirror, spring offered Coach Brey little down time. There were National Association of Basketball Coaches board of directors meetings and weeklong sessions on the NCAA rules committee, appointments that Mr. Brey values in his role as a coach, educator, and mentor. Summer recruiting then revved up, which kept him on the move for a chunk of July.





Mike Brey was a guard and team captain for the Colonials during the 1981-82 season.

August provided a brief break before the treadmill started again. On one of his lone free weekends, Coach Brey knew exactly what to do and where to go. His wife, Tish, had no idea.

"She didn't know what we were doing," Coach Brey says. "I told her, 'I've got a surprise. We're going back to D.C.'"

What was the surprise in that? Both are Rockville, Md., natives and still have ties to the area. Tish Brey figured it would be just another fun weekend spent with family and friends—but there was a catch.

"I didn't let anyone know we were coming," Coach Brey says. "I just wanted to sneak in."

The Breys were headed back to Washington, but not to share stories and laughs and hugs with relatives. They were headed back to where it all started for them in the early 1980s. They were headed back to Foggy Bottom.

THE ROAD HOME

Graduating from DeMatha Catholic High School in Hyattsville, Md., Coach Brey never thought to attend George Washington, a school where his mother, Betty, served as swim coach and his father, Paul, a former high school athletic

director, earned his master's degree. George Washington didn't recruit him when he was a prep point guard, and the itch to play college ball needed to be scratched. Mr. Brey's only offer near home was a tepid one from American University, so he packed up for Natchitoches, La., and Northwestern (Louisiana) State University. He enjoyed three solid seasons with the Demons. Prior to his senior year, Coach Tynes Hildebrand, the man whom he migrated so far from home to play for, was fired. Suddenly, Coach Brey wasn't sure that Natchitoches was such a natural fit.

Mr. Brey had an "in" back inside the beltway—his old prep mentor, legendary DeMatha boys basketball coach Morgan Wootten. Mr. Brey spent summers working at Coach Wootten's camp and coaching DeMatha's summer-league squad. Mr. Brey wondered what Wootten would think of his relinquishing his scholarship at Northwestern State and transferring to George Washington. With his mother a faculty member, tuition would not be an issue. Mr. Brey could live at home and commute. Playing basketball no longer needed to be a part of the equation for someone who wanted to be a coach after college.

"Let's get you started now," Coach Wootten told him.

Mr. Brey enrolled at George Washington in August 1980. One day he was playing pick up with the men's team when Colonials Coach Bob Tallent noticed the scrappy, energetic guy holding his own. Coach Tallent pulled Mr. Brey aside and wondered if he was in graduate school. Mr. Brey explained his situation.

Coach Tallent had a thought. Would Mr. Brey be interested in playing one final season after sitting out under NCAA transfer regulations? He could use an older guard—better yet, a local one—who could play.

"Now," Mr. Brey says, "you've got the fever."

His temperature cooled when George Washington replaced Coach Tallent with former Indiana assistant Gerry Gimblestob following the 1980-81 season. Mr. Brey again was left to wonder where he fit, and he worried that he had just wasted a year getting his hopes up for one last run. No new coach wanted a fifth-year guard, especially one who was not on scholarship. But like Coach Tallent, Coach Gimblestob preferred older players who knew the game. Mr. Brey eventually solidified a starting spot. He averaged 5.0 points and 4.8 rebounds a game during the 1981-82 season. He served as team captain and earned most valuable player honors.

"We went 13-14, but the experience I had, I felt like we went 25-2," Mr. Brey says. "It was a heck of an experience. It was a fun time, man."

One day on campus, Mr. Brey grabbed a sandwich and a soft drink at the GW Deli, across the street from the Charles E. Smith Center. As was his pre-practice routine, Mr. Brey found a spot in the arena bleachers to eat his meal. On the old Tartan floor below, the volleyball team was practicing. He noticed one player, a junior named Tish Schlapo. The two didn't know one another, but Mr. Brey was taken. He had to meet her, talk to her, get to know her.

The volleyball player and the point guard first met among the tape, tables, and tonics of the training room. They struck up

casual conversation and learned that each lived in Rockville, Md. On weekends, they would hop in Mr. Brey's 1977 white Toyota Celica, throw some Bruce Springsteen on the tape deck, and head for home. Sunday nights, Mr. Brey would chauffeur Ms. Schlapo back to campus.

"I could make that drive in my sleep," Coach Brey says. "We ended up dating those two years and hanging. It couldn't have gone any better."

If he wasn't perched somewhere in the Smith Center stands with a sandwich in hand and an eye out for a certain volleyball player, Mr. Brey could be found in the swim coach's office. Most of the quality time mother and son spent during Mr. Brey's three years in Louisiana occurred over the phone. At George Washington, they saw one another regularly and even took a class together: Psychology of Winning.

In spring 1982, Mike and Tish received their undergraduate degrees. Following graduation, Mr. Brey, a physical education major, returned to DeMatha to teach and coach for five seasons. He moved on to Duke University in 1987 and spent eight seasons as an assistant coach to Mike Krzyzewski. He helped the Blue Devils win a pair of national championships in 1991 and 1992. He became a head coach in 1995 at the University of Delaware, where he spent five seasons. Following his fourth year in Newark, Mr. Brey was a finalist in 1999 for the vacant head coaching position at Notre Dame, a job that went to Matt Doherty.

At first disappointed, Mr. Brey was happy to return to Newark, and he kept open the door to one day getting back to George Washington.

"At times, I thought I would go back there and coach," he says. "The timing never really worked out."

Just over a year later, Notre Dame again opened. This time, he would not finish second.

A SECOND CHANCE

Coach Brey remembers well the summer day in 2000 when the direction of his life changed. It was July 7, a Friday. He snatched the morning paper and settled into his favorite spot on the front porch of the family vacation home in Rehoboth Beach, Del. A news item caught his eye.

Roy Williams had declined the chance to chase the coaching vacancy at the University of North Carolina. Mr. Brey planned to spend that day along the boardwalk or at the beach with his wife and two children: son Kyle, now 23, and daughter Callie, now 19. Instead, his mind raced. His pulse quickened. A Carolina graduate, Mr. Doherty had injected some much-needed juice into a lifeless Notre Dame program during the 1999-2000 season. If Mr. Williams wouldn't coach the Tar Heels, Mr. Brey was certain Mr. Doherty would walk there for the opportunity.

He called for Tish.

"You're going to think I'm crazy," Coach Brey began, "but we may have to get ready for South Bend again."

Mr. Brey left the next day for Indianapolis and the Nike All-American camp. As was part of the annual routine, he met Mr. Krzyzewski for lunch. As Mr. Brey approached the table, a seated Mr. Krzyzewski was humming the Notre Dame fight song.

"You know you're gone?" Mr. Krzyzewski started.

"Please..." Mr. Brey began.

"You just need to be ready," Mr. Krzyzewski responded.

"I'm ready," Mr. Brey said.

Six days later, on July 14, 2000, Mr. Brey was introduced as the 14th coach in Notre Dame's history. The courtship lasted less than 48 hours. He stepped off the plane that warm Friday afternoon in northern Indiana and stepped right into a sticky situation. The Irish were inheriting their third coach in as many seasons. The guy who promised that he would take them to great places—Coach Doherty—had left without saying goodbye. Confusion and a big dose of distrust were all that remained. Coach Brey also was a hot, young coach at the time. What would stop him from following Mr. Doherty out the door for someplace else the following spring?

"We were the most dysfunctional program in the country," Coach Brey says.

Coach Brey gathered what players remained on campus for summer school, pulled a chair into the middle of the locker room, and spoke from the heart. They didn't know him. He didn't know them. But he seemed genuine. The players liked what they heard.

"It just felt like a connection with him as soon as I met him," says former Irish guard Matt Carroll, then a sophomore and now an NBA player with the Dallas Mavericks.

As the 1990s ended, Notre Dame was stuck in neutral. Eleven seasons had passed without a trip to the NCAA tournament, a must-have for any program. The Irish had taken far too many lumps as a Big East punching bag.

Tish (Schlapo) Brey, BA '82, (second from left) shown here preparing to spike the ball, was a standout volleyball player for the Colonials.



PHOTO COURTESY OF TISH BREY



BARBARA ALLISON/SOUTH BEND TRIBUNE



(Left) Mike Brey speaks with members of the media in October prior to Notre Dame's basketball media day. (Above right) Mike Brey gets his team fired up during a December game against Providence.



JIM RIEBERS/SOUTH BEND TRIBUNE

Mike Brey congratulates player Luke Harangody during a matchup against DePaul in December.

Coach Brey helped change all that. Prior to his arrival, Notre Dame had won 35 Big East games. Under Coach Brey, the Irish have won over 90, including a school record of 14 in 2007-08. Notre Dame was the Big East West Division regular-season champion during Coach Brey's first season in 2000-01. That culminated in a trip to the NCAA tournament for the first time since 1989. Four additional NCAA visits have followed, including the program's first Sweet 16 appearance (in 2003) in 16 years.

In late December 2009, Coach Brey became only the third coach to win at least 200 games at Notre Dame. In early January 2010, he won his 300th career game. In a profession of constant pressure, in an oversaturated league of 16 teams, only two coaches—Connecticut's Jim Calhoun and Jim Boeheim of Syracuse—have worked in the Big East longer than the 50-year-old Brey.

"Mike's as good a coach as any of those guys," says Villanova coach Jay Wright.

In leading Notre Dame to 24-8 and 25-8 finishes during the 2006-07 and 2007-08 seasons, Mr. Brey was named Big East Coach of the Year, an honor voted on by his conference peers.

"Mike Brey is one of the good guys in this business," says Loyola Marymount University coach Max Good.

When Coach Brey and his family arrived in northern Indiana, few had heard of Coaches vs. Cancer, an organization spearheaded by college basketball coaches to help raise money for cancer research and awareness programs. Coach Brey, whose father is a cancer survivor, and his wife started a Coaches vs. Cancer chapter in South Bend. It has since raised nearly \$2 million. There are golf outings and black tie dances, raffles and various fundraisers that draw large crowds and donations each spring and summer.

Coming off a 24-8 season in 2006-07, in which Notre Dame returned to the NCAA tournament after a three-year hiatus, Coach Brey traded in some of his spring free time



JIM RUBERSOUTH/ST. BEND TRIBUNE

for a seven-day trip to visit U.S. troops in Kuwait as part of Operation Hardwood IV, a tour by several college basketball coaches sponsored by the United Service Organization and Armed Forces.

Coach Brey traveled halfway around the world and spent a week battling temperatures that routinely soared over 100 degrees without a hint of shade to spend time with troops. He coached a group of soldiers in a basketball tournament on an Army base. He felt the real fears of war. He tried to block it all out to bring some joy to a group that faces situations far more serious than zone defenses and missed shots. It was beyond stressful, yet it is a trip that Mr. Brey says he would make again tomorrow.

“You could just feel the tension,” Mr. Brey says. “You see their faces and they know they’re going in [to Iraq]. They don’t give a damn about college basketball.

“Powerful stuff.”

Coach Brey continues to keep Notre Dame competitive in arguably the nation’s most cutthroat conference. The pressure to win enough to get back to the NCAA tournament builds with each season. No longer is “getting there” good enough. Fans want more and demand more. It’s enough to drive coaches crazy and push athletic directors to make changes while chasing ghosts of coaches who might do it better.

Notre Dame operates under a different set of guidelines than any of its Big East colleagues. Missing class is rarely an option. If Notre Dame plays Georgetown at the Verizon Center on a Wednesday night, every player is in class Thursday morning. If the Irish are in New York for the Big East Tournament during finals, an academic adviser administers tests in a hotel conference room.

Not only do the Irish have to be athletes on the basketball court, but they also have to be students in the classroom. It’s an aspect that Coach Brey, always the educator, embraces. His team players routinely earn at least a 3.0 grade-point average. Every player that he has recruited and has stayed for four years has graduated.

“To me, a great coach is a guy who gets the most out of his players and develops them as good human beings,” Mr. Wootten says. “That’s what Mike does. Notre Dame is very fortunate to have Mike.”

BACK TO FOGGY BOTTOM

As Tish Brey learned more about her husband’s plans to celebrate their 25th wedding anniversary last August 18 with a trip home to Washington, she scouted potential hotels.

She discovered George Washington University Inn, which was not there when they were students.

“We’ve got to stay there,” Mike Brey said.

The Breys arrived that weekend and stepped back in time. They checked into the George Washington Inn. They had dinner downtown and attended a play at the Kennedy Center. But what they were really there for was to remember those moments nearly 30 years ago when they were college kids.

They spent one day taking countless photos on campus. They strolled down H Street and toured the Marvin Center. They soaked in the new and improved Smith Center. They marveled at all the new construction and expansion that has occurred since graduation.

They stood at the spot that once was Scholl’s Cafeteria, where a couple bucks would buy you the city’s best breakfast. They laughed and pointed and remembered where the 21st Amendment bar once stood, where the Breys and their college buddies shared beers and boasts.

It was a great time to be together. It was their time to share together.

Coach Brey was only on campus a short time, but he carries a lifetime of friendships and memories from George Washington. He remains in regular contact with Mr. Gimblestob and Mr. Tallent. He can’t run into Colonials coach Karl Hobbs along the recruiting trail without asking about the people and places back in Foggy Bottom.

“I’m proud I was able to get there for two years and get my degree,” Coach Brey says. “It’s a special spot in my heart.” **GW**

Thomas R. Noie is a sports reporter for the South Bend Tribune. GW Magazine thanks the Tribune, Notre Dame Sports Information, and the Breys for the photographs in this article.



PHOTO COURTESY OF TISH BREY

Mike and Tish Brey are well known in the Notre Dame community for their fundraising accomplishments with the Coaches vs. Cancer organization, a collaboration between the American Cancer Society and the National Association of Basketball Coaches. The couple started the Coaches vs. Cancer chapter in South Bend, Ind., and the chapter has since raised nearly \$2 million.