

Life on the rebound for former Hoosier

Dreams of being head coach at collegiate, NBA levels deferred after facing charge of theft

By TOM COYNE
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LAPORTE
Delray Brooks remembers what success looks like. Being honored as the top high school player. An invitation to the 1984 U.S. Olympic tryouts, just one of two high school players given the chance. Final Four appearances as a player and a coach, including a national championship.

It's a long way from those days to La Lumiere, an elite Catholic preparatory school that's better known for producing Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts than for its basketball program.

But it's there — a 45-minute drive from his home in Matteson, Ill., south of Chicago — that Brooks hopes to find his way back to the top.

"We'd like to have a graduate who is a chief justice on the Supreme Court and an NBA All-Star who also graduated from La Lumiere," said Brooks, who is in his first season as head coach at the school about 25 miles west of South Bend.

"I think what we want to do is build a strong program that will allow us to recruit at that level and prepare our kids for college both athletically and academically."

For Brooks, the journey from last season's losing record to powerhouse isn't nearly as long as the road to rebuild a reputa-



La Lumiere basketball coach Delray Brooks, center, stands with his team during the national anthem prior to a game with Howe Military School on Jan. 19 in Howe. Brooks was a former Indiana University player.

tion battered by 1999 accusations that he stole \$25,000 from Texas-Pan American while he was the school's head coach.

"He made a serious mistake, and he has to dig himself out of that hole," said Earl Cunningham, Brooks' coach at Michigan City Rogers High and a longtime friend.

Brooks pleaded no contest in 2000 to a felony charge of theft by a public servant, admitting that there was enough evidence to convict him without admitting guilt. A Texas judge sentenced him to five years' probation and ordered him to pay back the

\$25,000 to the school, plus \$10,000 in expenses to cover Pan Am's investigation in the matter and a \$750 fine.

Brooks still contends he is innocent.

"I didn't do it, but there was an entry of \$25,000 into my account. Back then I let it slip, I wasn't paying attention, and money came out of the account, and there was no way to prove that I didn't do it," he said.

At first, Texas Pan-American seemed a good opportunity for Brooks, who had been USA Today's Player of the Year in 1984 and in 1987 helped lead

Providence College to the Final Four after transferring from Indiana, where he had struggled under Bob Knight.

Rick Pitino, his coach at Providence, later hired him as an assistant at Kentucky in 1994, where the Wildcats won a national championship in 1996 and went to the Final Four in 1997 during Brooks' four years as an assistant.

When Pitino became the Boston Celtics' coach in 1997, Brooks moved to Texas-Pan American.

"I was just fixated on becoming a head coach," Brooks said.

"The most important thing that struck me about Delray (Brooks) was his integrity. There's no question in my mind he's a person of integrity and strong character."

Michael Kennedy

headmaster of La Lumiere Catholic School near LaPorte

"You want to run your program, and you feel like you're ready."

The Brooks went 8-46 in two seasons under Brooks before the theft allegation surfaced.

After his firing, Brooks found it impossible to find a job as a basketball coach. He was rejected for jobs as an assistant despite his experience at Kentucky.

He sold hardware and insurance, worked in real estate and for a private investment firm and coached high school basketball for a year in Boca Raton, Fla. He heard about the La Lumiere job last summer and decided to apply.

Michael Kennedy, headmaster of the 131-student school, said he didn't hesitate to hire Brooks.

"The most important thing that struck me about Delray was his integrity," Kennedy said.

"There's no question in my mind he's a person of integrity and strong character."

The program is 13-8 so far this season going into Friday's game, a big jump from 5-14 last year. But Kennedy says there's more to the 40-year-old coach than the victories.

"I think Delray Brooks understands that his job as an educator is to help kids understand it's not all about what the score depicts at the end of the game," he said. "It's how you got there."

Cunningham believes that strong character will allow Brooks to rebound.

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