

BJ JOHNSON

From No Shot to Olympic Basketball

BJ Johnson teaches sports professionals how to create a financial safety net through real estate while benefiting communities. BJ is a Villanova University alum with three Olympic gold medals in basketball as assistant director at USA Basketball and director of college scouting and player evaluation for the NBA's Brooklyn Nets.

My Early Love of Basketball

I grew up in North Carolina, the fifth of six children. I was two years old and my mom was pregnant when my father passed away. This put our family in a tailspin. Growing up without a father was a major challenge.

In Love with the Game

I wasn't very talented in basketball, but at around 13 years old, I just fell in love with the game. My goal was to earn a college scholarship and make it to the NBA. Everybody laughed at me. But, I believed it was possible. I didn't have access to all the resources that some of my friends had. I didn't have guys I looked up to that could teach me the game.

While others went to basketball camps and joined summer leagues, I taught myself by watching videos and reading books.

There were a lot of players more talented than I was. I was often picked on because of my awkwardness. Being told I had no future in basketball was embarrassing, however, I couldn't help but work hard because I loved playing so much.

There might be players more talented, but I knew nobody was ever going to work harder than I would.

I wanted to live a life of no regrets. If I was going to do something, I would go for it with all my heart.

Real Determination

In the 11th grade, my skills started catching up with my desires, but injuries kept me from getting a college scholarship offer. I went to Villanova University and was determined to make the team as a walk-on.

I worked out relentlessly, never going out on the weekends, closing the gym every Friday and Saturday night with my 77-year-old Jewish friend who worked as an attendant.

And, I was cut the first try out.

After getting over the disappointment and embarrassment, I kept working relentlessly until the following year's tryouts my sophomore year. They ended up canceling those tryouts, but I told myself that I would keep trying. If I got cut every year, then I would at least know it wasn't meant to be.

A Dream Come True

I chose to be a manager for the women's team and continue to work on my game with them. My junior year, after a women's practice, I was running stairs to prepare for the next men's tryouts when the men's team began practicing.

The coach called me downstairs. I expected to be kicked out, but instead, he invited me to be on the team!

This was huge! I played two years under Steve Lappas. Then, I played for Jay Wright, who gave me the scholarship I had always desired and the opportunity to play. It was a dream come true.

Limbo Becomes an Opportunity

After graduation, I was going to play in China. I got into law school but deferred so I could go overseas first. That opportunity fell through at the last minute. It seemed my basketball career may be over.

I was stuck in limbo with my opportunity to play and my opportunity to continue school closed. That's when my old youth pastor reached out to see if I wanted to come to Colorado Springs to help them with their ministry. I moved out to live with him and his family and started a job at Lockheed Martin doing software engineering.

A few years later, I was unsure of where I wanted my life to go next. Serendipitously, I found out that the USA basketball team was also based in Colorado Springs. I was ecstatic at the idea of pursuing my highest passion again. I reached out to Sean Ford, a fellow Villanova alum and national team director. When a position opened up in the team's management, Ford offered me an opportunity to apply.

USA Olympic Basketball Team

I was selected in 2005, the same year that Jerry Colangelo and Mike Krzyzewski took over. Life couldn't have been better.

In 2009, I was asked to help establish the inaugural Junior National Teams for the U16-U17 competitions. Our teams won every competition from 2009-2016 going 52-0, and we were selecting large numbers of players that would go on to be drafted into the NBA. At this time, I moved over to the men's national team and was the chaplain for the World Championships and Olympic Games 2010-2016.

I had tremendous success at USA Basketball, including three Olympics and countless gold medals. I'm very fortunate to have been a part of that group including Kobe Bryant, LeBron James, all those guys who I learned a lot from as role models behind the scenes. When you share a journey to success like we did, there's a special bond that connects you.

Brooklyn Nets

At the height of my success, I was looking for another challenge. I met Sean Marks, current general manager with the Brooklyn Nets. Even though this was my opportunity to finally be in the NBA, when he offered me my current position, I took a hard look because the team was in dire condition. In the end, I believed in him and his vision, and it was time to transition.

I had traveled quite a bit internationally, developing a global view of the game and relationships with younger players getting ready to enter the NBA who I knew would benefit the team. I was hired as coordinator of player evaluation in 2016 and quickly elevated to director the following year. I currently coordinate our amateur scouts and consultants for a team that has gone from the worst in the NBA to being on the verge of completing one of the fastest rebuilds in league history.

Building a Family

After extensive medical testing, it was determined that my wife Pauline was not able to have children. This was a devastating blow to her and our family.

After healing, we decided that adoption would be our path. Going through the adoption process and the training offered by our adoption agency prepared us to have a child and strengthened our marriage. Everyone's adoption story is different. After putting our profile up, we were selected fairly quickly by a prospective family in February 2016.

After the first several weeks, communication dropped between the agency and the birth mom. We thought she had changed her mind, and we were ready to be placed back into the pool.

However, a few months later, the birth mom decided to proceed with adoption, and the agency reached out to see if we were interested. We prayed about the decision and also decided to move forward. Our baby boy was born 11 days later on July 15, 2016.

I was in Houston preparing to head to Chile, and my wife was in North Carolina. We got on the first available flights, met in Kansas City and headed to Topeka, KS to meet our newborn. He was named on the hour drive to the hospital: Emory for what the birth mother desired and Marcellus to honor my wife's late brother. I was able to hold him for an hour before heading to meet the team in Chile while my wife stayed behind to care for him.

In Kansas, a mom has 12 hours to change her mind about an adoption. This is significant, as Emory's birth mom did want Emory back, but not until the next day.

The birth father was unresponsive and would not relinquish his rights. A little over two days after Emory's birth, he contested the adoption. Because the birth father chose to fight for custody, my wife had to remain in Topeka, KS for five weeks, alone, as a first-time mom while I was in Chile until a court order was issued. The birth father kept the case alive, but wouldn't show up for court appearances. The final court case was set for Dec 8, 2016, and he was a no show again.

We were granted custody that day. It was a tough journey to walk through, but every bit was worth it.

Now, we have started the process of finding our second child. There are so many children that are in a situation where they need homes. Most of them end up in the foster system, and some find permanent families through adoption. I now enjoy helping to provide other families with the resources to get through this process because our son has brought so much joy and had such a profound impact on our lives.

In the Game, There Are No Guarantees

Throughout my career, I have seen that scouts and general managers in this industry have very volatile positions. Even with great skills and experience, our jobs are not guaranteed, and you never know what's going to happen next season.

Like many investors, reading *Rich Dad Poor Dad* in 2004 had a profound impact on me. My wife got us going on our real estate journey. Just after we got married, we moved out of Colorado Springs in 2009 and kept her house to rent out. We saw that we could earn money and that there were major tax benefits. This could be our safety net beneath the unpredictable sports industry. Colorado was a great market for us, and now we are diving into the North Carolina market where we continue to grow.

As I've gained experience, I've developed a passion for helping guys like me. When this is your sole income and you can lose it in a heartbeat, new opportunities become critical.

I enjoy the successes my wife and I have had with small multifamily and single family deals. I enjoy taking something that was in bad shape and making it a good place to live. We desire to take this model into targeted areas of North Carolina and bring profit through community transformation.

Lessons

Throughout my life, perseverance, discipline, and determination have been my tools to achieve my great successes.

Growing up, I watched my mom persevere and figure things out every single day. Through her efforts, my siblings and I were able to get through college and we are all pretty successful professionally. The foundation of my life is based upon what she has done to show me what truth, perseverance, discipline, and determination are all about.

I've learned to view my setbacks and struggles as assets not liabilities. Every disappointment is a necessary stepping stone on the journey to success.



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