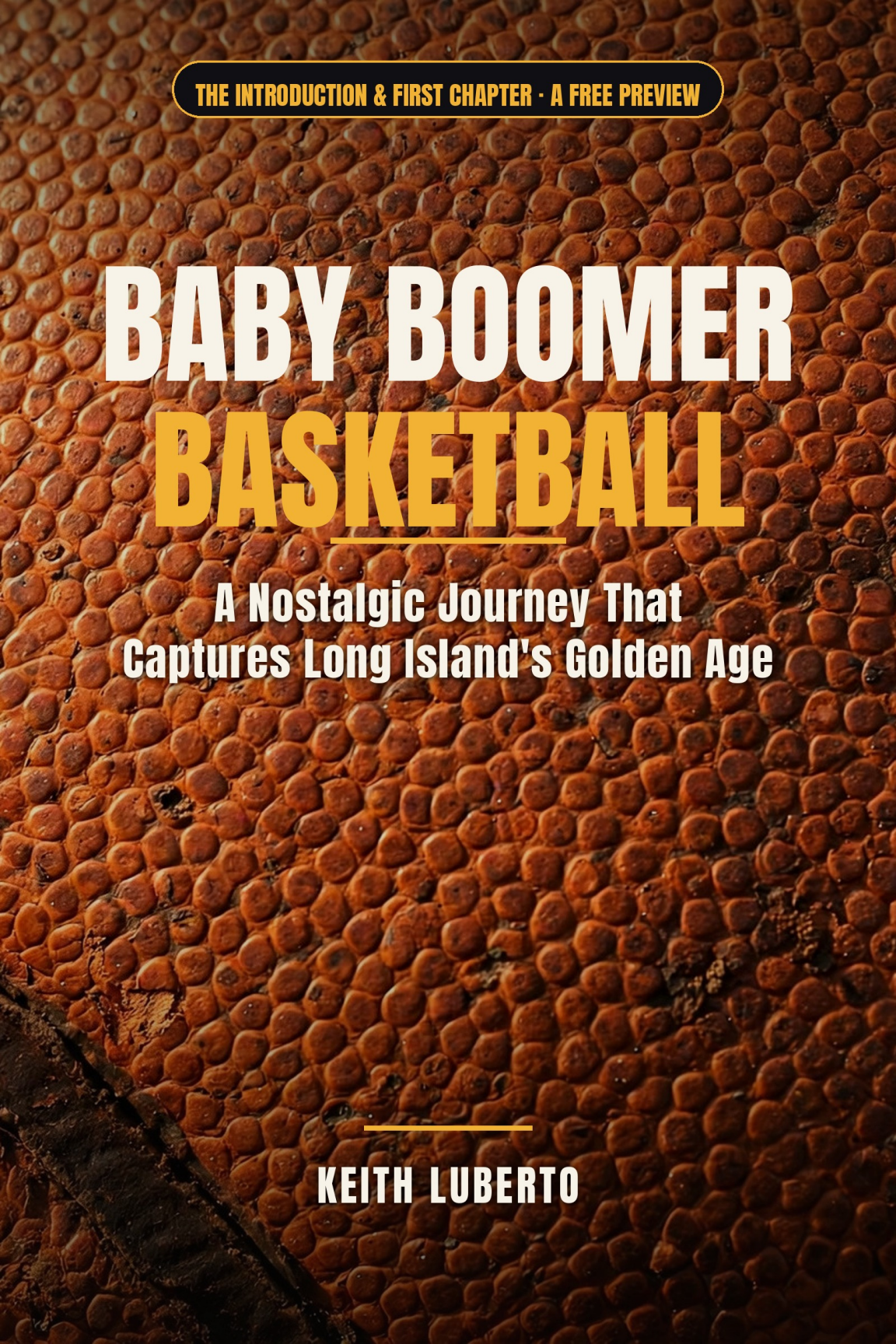

THE INTRODUCTION & FIRST CHAPTER · A FREE PREVIEW
BABY BOOMER
BASKETBALL
A Nostalgic Journey That
Captures Long Island's Golden Age
KEITH LUBERTO

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COACH KEITH LUBERTO

FREE PREVIEW EDITION — KEITHLUBERTO.COM

INTRODUCTION

When Hall of Fame basketball coach Rick Pitino shares an observation, people listen, especially if it pertains to Long Island basketball. The man is an Island legend. As a one time undersized guard from Nassau County, he scratched and clawed his way to a Division I scholarship at the end of the 1960s. He lived in Bayville and played for a Catholic high school in Oyster Bay. Both of these small waterfront communities elicited images of summer beach playgrounds for the affluent city crowds, but in reality served as an Island incubator which formed dominant basketball players. The Catholic school Pitino played for was St. Dominics, where they generated a production line of star players that colleges swooned over. The talents formed on Long Island opened the door wide for the players to attend numerous nationally ranked colleges on full scholarships. According to Pitino, "those days are long gone."

Reflecting on the Long Island basketball scene in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, Pitino said, "Back then there were about a million and a half people on Long Island and there were about 30 Division I players (each year). Today, there are about three million people on Long Island and you're lucky to find five Division I players." Pitino's record includes coaching at St. Johns and he has won national championships at both Kentucky and Louisville. He also worked his coaching magic at Providence, and stretched his talents in the NBA as the head coach for the New York Knicks and the Boston Celtics. He has an impressive resume and his basketball wisdom is considered as nuggets of gold. Although well-traveled, he has kept himself plugged into the Long Island basketball scene.

Pitino attributes the steep drop off of Long Island talent to affluence. “The rich happened to move out to Long Island and there goes basketball”, bemoaned the legend. Pitino’s theory is sound, but there may be more here than meets the eye. Another more relevant question should be asked and answered: How did a rural stretch of open space in the late 1950s, best known for potato farms and sleepy beach hamlets, become the nation's nucleus for outstanding basketball players during a twenty-year window?

I graduated from a Long Island high school in 1977. As a youngster I was enthralled by tales of local schoolboy sports heroes. During my varsity years I played with and against future NBA and college players in games, camps, and at all-star events. I was in the middle of the picture painted by Pitino, but was clueless as to the special era that was being unveiled at the time. Having witnessed the explosion of talent, Pitino’s words resonate with me today.

Baby Boomer Basketball investigates this phenomenon via in-depth interviews with the type of players Pitino referenced. And like Pitino, their love of basketball continued as they became successful basketball coaches. The personal tales are divulged in engaging short

biographies. This was the Golden Age of Long Island basketball. It was a simpler time, an innocent time, for high school basketball. Parents respected the position of the coach. Club basketball was in its infancy. The sneaker and apparel wars hadn’t invaded the game yet. And the players were driven by an internal fire to become masters of their craft.

Malcolm Gladwell discovered an interesting phenomenon in his research for his monumental book, Outliers. The Canadian youth hockey leagues used a January 1st birthday cutoff for registration purposes. Players born early in the year had a developmental advantage. The slightly older, larger kids, often were selected for the elite teams. They then re-

ceived better coaching, and accumulated more practice and game time. A disproportionate number of the best youth hockey players were born in January. Through the research done for Baby Boomer Basketball, patterns in the lives of Long Island players who became coaches emerged, and unique factors were revealed which may have also led to the upsurge of basketball stars on the Island.

Extraneous factors are also explored in Baby Boomer Basketball through the natural sequence of story telling. Long Island held a uniquely privileged status of growth in the 1960s. The growth was an extension of the immigration movement to America in the late 1800s and early 1900s, as the children of immigrants escaped the city, seeking greener pastures. How did the immigration trend impact the new Long Island suburbanites? The Long Island suburbs in the 1960s faced the same social vulnerabilities that were impacting the rest of the nation. How did that play out in individual lives? Through extensive interviews, roots are shared of each family's migration to America, and then to Long Island. The transition had a profound effect on their lives, and on their decision to pursue a life in sports.

Long Island in the early 1960s represented a period of immense optimism and economic prosperity. The potato fields were paved over, making room for the rapid development of housing tracts and shopping centers. The expansion of the Long Island Expressway created an artery that connected the boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens with Long Island's Nassau and Suffolk Counties. The population of the Island boomed in the 60s, growing by 600,000, with many relocating from city life. The appeal of home ownership and wide open spaces was just too good to pass up.

My personal story mirrored the life of countless young boys growing up on Long Island in the 1960s. Our family fled the cramped confines of

Queens in 1962 and settled comfortably into the lush landscape of the Long Island suburbs. Our town was Hauppauge, the geographic center of the Island. My parents traded the concrete row house for a manicured lawn surrounded by bushes and trees that separated the houses. I was only three years old when we made the move so I couldn't comprehend the contrast, but later in life when we visited my grandparents in the old neighborhood, the stark difference was startling.

Growing up in Hauppauge in the 1960s was like living in a Norman Rockwell painting. I have fond memories, especially of the summers. Carloads of families would meet at the beach, and we would frolic in the sand and water. In the background we were serenaded with the latest

AM hits blasting from transistor radios. When not at the beach, we kids would take off on our bikes for hours, going on adventures. We would lose ourselves for the day playing army and racing our Sting Ray bikes. Our only restriction was to be home by dinner. This was my life on Long Island as a kid, and it felt like paradise.

I lived next to a family of five boys, and that family molded me. Two of the boys were older, and I gravitated towards them. They were obsessed with all things sports, and soon sports dominated my existence. It wasn't until the 8th grade that I transitioned into playing just one sport. I surprised myself and others when I was chosen to play on the CYO (Catholic Youth Organization) basketball traveling team. From that pivotal point forward I was all in, and basketball became my life.

It was a special treat for me to make the journey into Ozone Park to visit my grandparents. My grandparents lived in Queens, a borough of New York City, and although just an hour drive away, it was a different world. There was a sense of entering a forbidden land, the concrete jungle. Most of the time we saw my grandparents at family feasts on the holidays at my aunt's house in Hicksville, which was located between

Queens and our home in Hauppauge. My father's parents were both born in Italy and traveled by boat through Ellis Island into New York City. When we went to visit my grandparents, dinner was always lasagna, meatballs, sausage, and my grandmother's special "gravy" that we soaked up with Italian bread. My grandmother's authentic Italian cooking added to my delight for the exciting adventure into the "city".

Ozone Park was the neighborhood in Queens that both my parents grew up in. The streets were lined with row houses, and my grandparents lived on the second floor of a two family row house. There were barely any trees on the blocks of Ozone Park, and certainly no lawns of grass. It was a predominantly Italian neighborhood, but that was changing fast the days we visited. One sojourn when I was in 9th grade and I was hooked on the game of basketball, I noticed a high level of basketball play in a local park. My grandmother was adamant that I couldn't go because the "coloreds" had overtaken the park. Even growing up in lily white Hauppauge, I knew the term "colored" was out of date, and probably derogatory. My grandmother spent almost all of her years in the seclusion of the Italian-American neighborhood, so I gave her the benefit of the doubt. I still wanted to experience the competition, but my requests were shot down.

The patron saint of the Ozone Park neighborhood was John Gotti, the American mafioso and boss of the Gambino crime family. When Gotti wasn't conducting dubious affairs, he was doing good deeds for the folks in Ozone Park. Every 4th of July he engineered a massive fireworks display, right on the streets. This was illegal, but the local police just stood and watched, enjoying the show with the local residents. Gotti established his social club in Ozone Park, where all of his wheeling and dealing was mapped out.

Driving into Ozone Park gave me a glimpse into the environment my parents grew up and lived in before migrating to the suburbs of Long Island. During these drives I reveled in the tales my father spun about his basketball playing days. As we drove he pointed out the schools

and parks he spent hours playing the game he loved. I would crane my neck attempting to get a glimpse of the baskets where my father mastered his two-hand set shot and sweeping hook. My father was good enough to receive a tryout for the St. John's University varsity, and played one semi-pro game. Imagining my father playing ball in the old neighborhood motivated me in a profound way to up my game.

Both my parents were born in 1928, the first year of the "Silent Generation" (born between 1928 and 1945). This generation was tagged with the moniker because they were perceived as conformist and less rebellious than other generations. They followed the Greatest Generation and preceded the Baby Boomers, and saw tremendous social and economic growth. My parents' formative years were strongly shaped by the Great Depression and World War II. Historically, the Silent Generation was characterized as having a strong work ethic, for being resilient, and respectful of authority. Unwittingly, the Silent Generation modeled ideal character traits for their Baby Boomer children if they chose to participate in athletics. Coaches would eagerly embrace the coachable Baby Boomer players

When the immigrants escaped Europe and regions beyond in the late 1800's and early 1900's for the promised land and the hope of a better life, they could never have imagined that their children, grandkids, and great grandkids might become obsessed with putting a round rubber ball into a raised cylinder. America was the New World and this new culture introduced a flock of fresh activities, especially sports for kids.

Basketball has long been considered the City Game, and there have been books written that chronicle this brand name. Very little space or equipment is needed to play basketball, just a ball, which is ideal for the tight quarters of the city. The city public parks all had baskets, and some industrious kids would even fashion a wire hanger to a pole to form a hoop. NY City and its boroughs had no shortage of church gyms, and the priests and brothers would gather the boys up off the street to play. Some priests and brothers even made excellent coaches, teaching the players the basics of the game. A culture of New York street ball was developed in the 40's and 50's that fed into a winners mentality. If your team wins in a pickup game, you stay on the court. If your team lost you could wait hours until you would get a chance to play again. Give your all, or pay the price. This park mentality would be an essential aspect in the development of Long Island players.

Young men that grew up in the City who were part of the Silent Generation began to marry, and seek a better way of life to raise a family. Long Island was appealing with spacious new homes and land to spare. The Long Island Railroad made it convenient for Islanders to work in the City with stops in every Long Island town, and a direct line into the city. Silent Generation fathers brought the City Game out to Long Island. A convergence of factors formed that created high school basketball supremacy on Long Island in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. Fathers seeking to connect with their sons in the Camelot of the suburbs began teaching them basketball and sharing their love and passion for the game.

Baby Boomer children learned that obstacles and challenges were to be overcome, and complaining was unacceptable. Long Island basketball coaches during this period were also cut from the same cloth as the Silent Generation parents, demanding their players give their very best. The Baby Boomers didn't give it a second thought, no matter how much the

coach yelled. Long Island Baby Boomer boys were on the receiving end of a litany list of factors that resulted in exceptional success in high school gymnasiums. The effect was astounding, beginning in the late 1950's.

It was the 1960's that ushered in an unparalleled period for Long Island high school basketball that would last into the 1980s. This was the Golden Age of basketball on the Island. Each year, scores of high school players were recruited to play Division I basketball, and a legion of others would go on to play at the Division II and Division III level. Some reached the pinnacle of the sport by reaching the NBA. Players from the Golden Age that represented their Long Island high schools on NBA rosters include Julius Erving, Randy Smith, Foots Walker, Mitch Kupchak, Jeff Ruland, Toby Knight, Wally Szczerbiak, Frank Brickowski, and Marc Iavaroni, among others.

Long Island became a hotbed for college recruiters and some of the biggest names in college coaching circles made the trek to Long Island to pitch their school and program to Long Island hoopsters. High school basketball players from the Island would go on to play at basketball bluebloods Kentucky, North Carolina, North Carolina State, Virginia, Duke, Notre Dame, St. Johns, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Florida, to name a few. Considering Long Island is just 20 miles wide, and the distance from the Queens/Nassau County border to the sparsely populated east end of Long Island is 100 miles, it is almost inconceivable that there would be so many outstanding high school basketball players in such a small swath of real estate. This phenomenon could have comfortably resided in Malcolm Gladwell's Outliers book that examined exceptional success stories and the distinct factors that contributed. The reckoning was revealed when Long Island high school and all-star teams began beating their city counterparts in the late 1960s. One glorious illustration was the work of Gus Alfieri.

Nestled deep in the heavily wooded neighborhood of San Remo, a small hamlet on the north shore of Long Island's Suffolk County, once stood the St. Anthony's all-boys high school. If you didn't know exactly where to look, you'd never find the place. At the end of the road leading to the campus was the Nissequogue River, which emptied into the Long Island Sound, adding to the rural vibe. "Going down to the river" was code for the school boys to meet up to smoke cigarettes, drink beer, or even get high. The Franciscan brothers that founded the school arrived from Brooklyn in the late 1920s, foreshadowing the relocation efforts to the suburbs that many of their future students' parents would employ. Sports would be an important component to the St. Anthony's student education, but the brothers could not have imagined that their 1974 basketball team would be the best team in the state. Neither could the basketball aficionados that heavily favored the style of basketball played in the streets of Manhattan and its boroughs.

Throughout the summer days starting in 1969 into the 70s and 80s, the St. Anthony's campus was crawling with basketball campers. One of the first and best Long Island basketball

camps was the brainchild of the school's coach, Gus Alfieri. Hundreds of campers from throughout the Island would travel to San Remo, sporting the camp's iconic gold shirts and red shorts. The Fransician brothers provided transportation, making many stops in yellow school buses. The campers were hungry to elevate their games, this wasn't a traditional summer daycare camp. Although it wasn't directly imparted in so many words, the campers received a basketball education on how to play the game like the boys in the City.

The coaches that worked the camp shared a similar upbringing, growing up and playing ball in the City, and moving out to the suburbs. They savored opportunities to share their basketball journeys, and the campers

would be mesmerized by the tales. The stories were powerful, and they inspired and influenced young minds. In the minds of the young suburban campers, playing ball in the City was as far from reality as flying to the moon.

Alfieri grew up in Brooklyn in the 1930s and was an All-City standout at St. Francis Prep in Queens. Legendary St. John's coach Joe Lapchick was impressed enough to offer Alfieri a scholarship, and he started on NIT championship teams, back when many considered the NIT THE national championship. When Alfieri coached his players and taught the campers, his wisdom was invariably laced with City game anecdotes. This teaching technique played out across the two counties on the Island.

Long Island high school basketball coaches in the 60s and 70s generally grew up in the City. Their style was no-nonsense, and they did not suffer fools. Guided by a strong work ethic and a "never say die" attitude, their temperament infused the young, eager basketball players under their tutelage. The Baby Boomer players were sponges, and they soaked it all in. The passing of the torch from coaches to the players was a secret sauce, and just one ingredient that elevated Long Island high school basketball to national prominence in a two decade window starting in the mid-60s. The awe inspiring achievements of the St. Anthony's basketball program was not singular. Schools from Nassau County to the east end of Long Island would perpetually produce full-scholarship basketball players and generate top ranked teams.

A surprising number of players from that era also became elite basketball coaches in their own right, coaching in the Olympics, the NBA, all levels of college, and at high school programs. They learned the lessons of their fathers and coaches and became master coaches. Long Island can proudly claim as their own: Larry Brown (the only coach in basketball history to win an NBA and NCAA title); Billy Donovan (two time

NCAA champion and NBA coach); Rick Pitino (two NCAA titles and three separate teams to the Final Four); Bob McKillop (longtime Davidson coach and Steph Curry's college coach); Matt Doherty (Notre Dame and North Carolina); and Ken Atkinson (current NBA coach).

This book is a far reaching narrative of Long Island high school basketball players from the Golden Age who became coaches. The significance of the game in their lives is

unmistakable. Basketball became so ingrained into the fiber of their being, they became coaches when their playing days were over.

The individual stories are unique, but remarkably similar. The path their families took to Long Island was sometimes identical. They rose to the top as basketball players and coaches, and it was their own fathers and coaches who provided the road map to success. The interviewees' high school playing days spanned the early 1960s to the end of the 1980s, a time period covering significant cultural changes. Immigration tales that detailed their journeys from Europe, and sometimes from migrant worker Southern states, to Long Island are insightful. The Outliers factors that contributed to the rise of Long Island high school basketball are exposed in the course of the investigative narrative, providing a fun ride along the nostalgia highway.

CHAPTER 1

Jeff Ruland: Harrowing Childhood

Jeff Ruland exploded into my basketball world when I played in a summer league for rising 10th graders. Ruland was taller than the rest of the league and remarkably still demonstrated guard skills. He dominated the game when our two teams clashed, and I foolishly voiced my frustration. In the middle of play on the court, I called him a “big doofus”. I felt empowered and protected by the referees on the floor.

The very next day we had another game. Before the game I was in the restroom, at the urinal. Ruland walked in and instantly recognized me. He fixed a stone hard glare in my direction and said, “I should knock your block off”. Thankfully he didn't, and I swiftly exited the restroom. I was visibly shaken, but I still had my “block” firmly secured on my shoulders.

LONG ISLAND BIGS

The Long Island landscape is not known for having towering timber, but there was an electric era when tall trees towered over the Island high school hardwood courts. The basketball community in the suburbs of Nassau and Suffolk County had front row seats, and spectators marveled at the growing number of high school blue chip bigs in the 1960s and 70s. In 1968 two private school behemoths elevated their teams to elite status and were recruited by legendary college basketball programs from the Atlantic Coast Conference. Tom Riker from St. Dominic's chose South Carolina, became a college All-American, and was drafted by the NY Knicks. That same year Bill Chamberlain from Long Island Lutheran also made the journey down south and starred at North Carolina. After graduating college, Chamberlain played in the ABA and NBA for a number of years. In the early 70s Mitch Kupchak was instrumental in Brentwood winning two County Championships. He followed Chamberlain to North Carolina, and later earned an Olympics gold medal, won an NBA championship, and became an NBA executive. Port

Jefferson in Suffolk County went deep in the County playoffs in 1973 with Toby Knight prowling the paint. Knight shined for Notre Dame and the NY Knicks. One year after Knight graduated high school, Marc Iavoroni capped off a remarkable run for Plainview JFK High School. Virginia prevailed in the recruiting battle for Iavorini, and he would have a prosperous professional playing career, eventually becoming a NBA coach.

In a staggering two-year timespan, 1975-1977, there was an abundance of highly ranked high school big men on Long Island. Wayne McKoy was predicted to be the next Lew Alcindor and received his first

recruiting letter while still in 8th grade. That ambitious projection never materialized, but he was an All-American at Long Island Lutheran and was All-Big East at St. Johns. Rivaling McKoy's college recruitment was Farmingdale's Jim Graziano. He chose to play at South Carolina, and took his talents overseas to play professionally. Frank Brickowski played high school ball for small Locust Valley High School, followed by a solid career at Penn State and a 16-year professional career. Down the road from Locust Valley, Ken Labonowski was a force for Oyster Bay High School, then played for Marshall University and spent five years playing professionally in Israel. The Hamptons are known for being a vacation hotspot for jetsetters, but the level of basketball play in the area is impressive. Howard Wood led East Hampton to a State Championship before starring at Tennessee. He followed his one year stint in the NBA with an extended playing career overseas. Chris Brust was on two Long Island Championship teams and followed the big man basketball pipeline to North Carolina. Brentwood continued their development of bigs with Bob Van Noy, who played at Florida. Malverne star Lionel Harvey was a massive recruit and settled on Cincinnati. Kevin Vesey played high school ball at Bay Shore, and was one of many Long Island all-stars who played for Jim Valvano at Iona. The long list of big men that played on Long Island between 1975 and 1977 was mindboggling, and all were heavily recruited. The best of the bunch in this generational group was Sachem's Jeff Ruland.

HARROWING CHILDHOOD

Jeff Ruland was a basketball scrapper. He clawed his way through intensely challenging circumstances growing up, and that fueled his ascent. Ruland's tumultuous upbringing manifested itself into Ruland playing

with a chip on his shoulder, and he was driven to reign supreme. Woe to the person who got in the way of Ruland and his goals. Through it all, there was one woman who loved and cared for Ruland, his mother Anita. It was Anita that modeled a tough as nails persona that Ruland adopted.

Anita came to America in 1926 as an orphan. She was raised in a Jewish orphanage in Germany, and was rescued by the Otto's, Henry and Frida. After World War I, Germany was in dire disarray, and if Germans could escape, they did. The Ottos had the wherewithal to seek a better life in America, and they took seven-year old Anita with them, entering America through Ellis Island. In America they adopted Anita, and Anita became an Otto. Anita Otto grew up in Brooklyn, and at 19-years old she married a successful older man. This was Anita's chance to get out from under living with the Otto's. Anita's husband died of an aneurysm not long into the

marriage. The widow Anita inherited funds to finance living expenses, and for growth in the future.

Anita's second husband was Lugo, who became abusive to Anita's son and daughter. The abuse was hidden but when Anita found out, she immediately escaped Lugo. Kenneth Ruland, a former gifted baseball player working in the construction field, married Anita and a mixed family became united. When Jeff Ruland was born, the children in the family numbered nine.

Anita and Kenneth moved to Bay Shore, in Suffolk County, the town Jeff was born in. In an unconventional career move, Anita bought a neighborhood bar called "The Townhouse". Most mothers on Long Island at the time were stay at home moms, but not Anita. Sadly, Kenneth Ruland was an alcoholic and having a bar in the family didn't do Kenneth any favors. Kenneth died of a stroke, and his last words to young Jeff

were, “I see a pink elephant”. Within a year of Kenneth’s death, Anita married his best friend, Ernie.

When Ruland was in third grade, living in Bayshore, he was beaten mercilessly by a man in his 20s that was recently released from jail. The man accused Ruland of using the “N” word, which Ruland said was ludicrous. All of his friends were black. This was a tough neighborhood, and even tougher for Ruland. Ruland would run home after school each day along the railroad tracks because of the rocks scattered along the railroad ties. The rocks were weapons for his protection if he was attacked. Ruland had a strong arm from playing baseball and the rocks warded off attacks. He was white in a predominantly black neighborhood, and his skin color alone was enough to anger some.

Anita reached her breaking point with life in Bayshore. When Jeff was in 5th grade the family relocated to Farmingville, 25 miles east. Farmingville at the time consisted of a gas station, a small strip center housing six stores, and the neighborhood tavern. Anita bought the tavern and renamed it “Ernie’s Tavern” after her fourth husband. Ernie’s Tavern was the definitive blue collar waterhole, and some faithful customers even dropped by in the morning for shots and a beer on the way to work.

Ruland lived in an apartment above the bar for two years during junior high and had to endure the juke box playing into the early morning hours. Anita spiced things up at the bar with female impersonators and marijuana parties. Yet another example of Anita living outside the box.

Ernie, Ruland’s stepfather, tormented Ruland. He once forced Ruland to dig a massive, deep hole, only to tell Ruland to fill it in. Things got so bad, Ruland once held a knife to Ernie’s throat. Ruland said the stepfather once spent eight months in jail, and he said that was his “happiest time in all of junior high”. Ruland’s painful past was far removed from the wholesome family sitcoms dominating TV in the 60s.

CLIMBING THE LADDER

Ruland played all sports growing up, and was initially just slightly taller than his classmates. Baseball and football were his favorites. He felt obligated to give basketball a try, being the tallest in his class. At first Ruland was horrible at the sport. Ruland joked in 8th grade his basketball sneakers were red, white, and blue, and he wore colorful wrist bands and head band, making him "look like a spastic clown". Everything changed in 9th grade.

Growing pains are real. Entering high school Ruland began to roll out of bed screaming. He grew over seven inches in three months. He would go to school and realize his pants were six inches too short. The added height had its benefits on the basketball court and Ruland began to shine. Ruland's 9th grade coach, Coach Sabatelle, lit a fire in Ruland and he fell in love with the game.

On weekends he would play 10-12 hours a day at the Tecumseh Grade School courts near his home. He rode his bike great distances to play in pick up games. When he could drive he would go anywhere on the Island to face stiff competition. Ruland was obsessed with improving, and he attacked the game with a vengeance. He constantly wore down the bottom rubber of his Converse sneakers and resorted to putting cardboard inside his sneakers. His family didn't have the funds to purchase new sneakers every two weeks.

Ruland experienced exponential growth during his varsity years in high school. A crucial contributor to Ruland's rise was Sachem High School's head coach, Tim Clouser. Clouser had an easy-going demeanor, which was contrary to high school coaching styles at the time. His coaching personality was an equalizer in connecting with players. Clouser's

penchant for teaching the basketball fundamentals was frequently recognized by his coaching peers. His teams and players proudly wore the label "well-coached".

When players rise like shooting stars, sometimes jealousy rears its ugly head. When Ruland was a rising junior, his team went to Rollie Massimino's summer team camp in the Pocono's, in a rural setting. Prior to attending the camp, Ruland played for the Riverside Church summer team, the premier team in the region. Ruland received free shirts, shorts, and sneakers, and he was eager to wear them at the camp. The apparel were a badge of honor for the all-star. This did not sit right with a few of Ruland's rising senior teammates.

The campers stayed in cabins as a team, and the cabins were surrounded by trees. Ruland was resting in his bunk when a small boulder was hurled through the window, striking Ruland in the head. Blood covered his face, but he didn't need stitches. He might have had a concussion, but in those days concussions were rarely diagnosed.

Years later Ruland's suspicions were confirmed by one of the culprits. Ruland bumped into the former teammate at Studio 54 in NY City. Ruland stated the former teammate admitted he and two other seniors were responsible. This horrendous act was not the best way to build team chemistry. The following year, Ruland's senior season, the team was not as talented but much more successful. They recognized Ruland was the centerpiece, literally, for the team.

Ruland lost his father when he was nine, and Clouser provided Ruland parental support. Ruland reflected, "He was a good coach and a better person. I have much to be thankful for that guy". Ruland and Clouser shared a bond that lasted nearly a half century. Ruland was able to provide Clouser with memories only a select few coaches ever experienced. In Ruland's senior year he led Sachem to the County Finals. Prior

to the final, in a game for the ages, 6' 10" Ruland scored 40 points in the County semi-finals against undefeated East Hampton and all-everything Howard Wood. 6' 8" Wood would star for Tennessee and get drafted by the Utah Jazz. Even after severely injuring his ankle, Ruland heroically carried his team to victory. In the finals against league nemesis North Babylon, Sachem lost by seven. The high profile game was played in the Nassau Coliseum, home of Julius Erving and the New York Nets. Ruland would never use the ankle as an excuse, but his play was hampered. He still excelled, and was able to score 27 points and pull down 19 rebounds.

The Five Star Basketball Camp was by invitation only and was essential in the growth of the best Long Island high school basketball hoopsters. The overnight camp attracted elite players and coaches on the East Coast. Ruland fondly recalls driving to the camp in Ralph Willard's Gremlin when Willard was still coaching high school. On the ride, Ruland picked Willard's basketball brain for nuggets to boost his game. Willard would eventually coach for the Knicks, Kentucky, and was head coach at Western Kentucky and Holy Cross. At Five Star it was Hall of Famer Rick Pitino that taught Ruland the jab step, and Ruland feverously devoted hours mastering it. The morning basketball stations focused on individual moves, and Ruland would work on his moves by the basket during down time. As educational as the camp was for Ruland, it was his top notch play against the finest that showed Ruland he was much more than a good player. He was a great player.

When the time arrived for Ruland to choose a college, there was no shortage of suitors. Ruland averaged 29.5 points a game his senior season. He did so well in national all-star games, some placed him as the number one recruit in the country. One notable all-star game was the Capital Classic: U.S. All-Stars vs Washington DC All-Stars. The game was the

precursor to the prestigious McDonald's All-American game. Ruland represented the U.S. all-stars, along with nine future NBA players, including Magic Johnson. The Long Island rising megastar was the second highest scorer for his winning team. A long list of college coaches took turns pitching their program to Ruland. In what would become one of a series of surprises initiated by Ruland, he signed to play at tiny Iona College and became a Gael.

SURPRISE CHOICE

Iona, a private Catholic College just 25 miles outside of New York City, was not on anybody's basketball radar at the time. The basketball team was coached by the flamboyant Jim Valvano, an exorbitant coach with lofty ambitions. Valvano grew up and played high school basketball on Long Island, and was one of the first to recognize the garden of plenty representing Long Island high school basketball in the 1970s. Valvano assumed the Iona Gaels head coach position in 1975, and quickly turned the program around by recruiting the best

players on the Island. He had a personal touch, and sold the vision of national status all within close proximity to home. Valvano portrayed the team as a family, and that appealed to recruits. The year before Ruland arrived, the starting backcourt at Iona was Glenn Vickers and Kevin Hamiltion. The two were former All-Long Island players that were teammates of Ruland's on all-star teams, and they were Ruland's friends. The two would be instrumental in Ruland's decision.

Ruland gave college basketball bluebloods Indiana and Kentucky long, hard looks, but decided Iona was the place to be. Ruland said at the time, "I weighed the coaches, the people, the distance from home and the situation. I have played with most of the players at Iona." Pivotable in

Ruland's decision was his mother would have the ability to watch him play in person. The drive from Long Island to Westchester County was doable for Anita. Ruland agonized over the decision, and there were those that voiced he made a colossal career killing mistake going to Iona. But he proved them all wrong.

Valvano stockpiled a legendary Long Island all-star team on the Iona roster, and Ruland was his crowning achievement. Ruland played three years at Iona and produced admirably. In each year he averaged over 20 points per game and 12 rebounds, and was named to several All-American teams. The highlight of his and Iona's partnership was in his third season when Iona beat eventual national champion Louisville by 17 points in Madison Square Garden. The boisterous home crowd rocked the Garden with thunderous cheers and ovations that shook the stands.

Throughout his career, Ruland has been underestimated and overlooked. Before the Louisville game the television announcer said Ruland looked out of shape and wouldn't be able to keep up with the athletic Louisville players. Ruland scored 30 points and grabbed 21 rebounds. The announcer was woefully wrong. After the game Iona was ranked #19 in the nation. This was an insult to Ruland and his teammates after whipping the highly ranked Louisville squad, showing Iona got no respect.

That third season Iona finished with a school record 29-5 record and advanced to the second round of March Madness. This was one round further than the previous year, but Ruland began to feel disillusioned. Valvano sold the vision of competing for a national championship. Iona finished in the Top 20 that season, but that is a far cry from competing for the paramount prize. Iona would be losing the starting backcourt the following season, which exacerbated Ruland's unease.

Valvano was distracted by Ruland's third year. When Ruland first attended Iona, he would share supper with Valvano and his family almost daily. Before eating, Ruland would shoot hoops outside with Valvano's 7-year old daughter. This was the family atmosphere Valvano promised. It all began to change by year three, as Valvano began to get pulled in different directions. The ultimate act of betrayal in Ruland's eyes was when Valvano decided to leave Iona for North Carolina State. Valvano had assured Ruland that he would be there for him his entire four-year career. For a man who lost his father at a young age, this betrayal was too

much for him to bear. Ruland had begun conversations with an agent during the season, and when the NCAA was notified, they declared Ruland ineligible. The plan all along was to go pro, but not under these circumstances. Ruland was forced to declare for the NBA draft.

BECOMING A PRO

Ruland would be a professional basketball player for 13 years. Rarely did it all go smoothly. The NBA draft process was a profound disappointment for Ruland. He knew where he stood amongst his peers, but he slid into the second round, significantly past where he deserved to be chosen. There were unfounded rumors swirling about Ruland because of his relationship with an agent while still in college. Crazy accusations about misused monies, game fixing, and a FBI probe, scared NBA teams off from choosing Ruland. He was never officially accused, but it was enough that even his agent dropped him before the draft.

The Golden State Warriors drafted Ruland, and quickly shipped him off to the Washington Bullets. The Bullets front court was stacked, and the trade made no sense to Ruland. When a professional basketball team from Barcelona, Spain, made overtures, Ruland was all ears. Ruland's im-

petus all season playing in Spain was to improve, then enter the NBA and prove everybody wrong. Spain was Ruland's homebase for exploring Europe, and that part of his stay was enjoyable. Otherwise, he was miserable living in Europe.

Ruland returned to the States and joined the Bullets in 1981. The previous year's crowded frontcourt thinned. His five-year stint with the Bullets resulted in Ruland being named to the All-Rookie team, and two NBA All-Star teams. He became a force to be reckoned with, and a player before his time. His size required him to play by the basket during his team's offensive possessions. But he had the ability to pull down defensive rebounds and go coast to coast, electrifying the crowd. Most satisfying was his friendship with Rick Mahorn, and the two earned the nickname "Beef Brothers". They were big and strong and not shy about using their physicality.

In 1986 Ruland was traded to the Philadelphia 76ers for Hall of Famer Mose Malone. This was Ruland's legitimate chance to get a championship ring. At Washington, he could be counted on to score 20 points per game, and pull down 10 rebounds, and that was what the 76ers expected. Ruland was also recognized as an elite passer, and players loved playing with him. The 76ers still had a star studded cast from their championship days, and Ruland couldn't wait to join his new team.

The joy of playing with fellow Long Islander and basketball icon Julius "Dr. J" Erving was tragically cut short when Ruland was severely injured in just the fifth game of the season. Ruland would retire, attempt two comebacks, and eventually succumb to his knee and foot injuries.

After multiple comeback attempts where he endured the constant pain and despair of rehabilitation, Ruland's body was done. For over 25 years Ruland was molded by men that

devoted their lives to the game of basketball. The next step in Ruland's life and career was a natural one, and he answered the call to coach.

HE CAN'T PLAY BUT HE CAN COACH

Ruland still had ties and a good relationship with the front office in the 76ers organization. He began his coaching career as an assistant coach for the team, under Fred Carter. After one year, Ruland had the opportunity to blow up the adage, "You can never go home again". Ruland, the conquering hero, returned to Iona as an assistant coach to Tim Welsh. The apprenticeship as an assistant coach lasted three seasons, and Ruland was promoted to head coach in 1998.

For nine seasons he would be head coach at his alma mater . The Gaels would have three 20-win seasons, win three conference championships, and earn three NCAA March Madness appearances. His last season was abysmal. The school's administration fired Ruland's assistant coaches, and Ruland couldn't recruit. After the season, Ruland received a call from the Iona President when the President was on a cruise. The President bought out Ruland's remaining two years, and his Iona career once again came to an abrupt end.

Ruland rebounded quickly and took over the coaching reins of the NBA D-League Albuquerque Thunderbirds, replacing former Laker great Michael Cooper. The aspirations of all D-Leaguer's, players and coaches, is the ascend to the NBA, and after one season with the Thunderbirds Ruland was once again on the move. For the second time he was recruited to be an assistant coach for the Philadelphia 76ers. Before his second season with the club, the 76ers hired a new head coach. Head coaches bring on their own assistants, and Ruland was without a coaching gig. This would change quickly with an unlikely offer.

Ruland's best years as a professional were playing for the Washington Bullets/Capitals. He returned to the region to resurrect the University of the District Columbia Firebirds, a Division II program. Hired in September, right before the start of the season, the team had a predictably poor season, finishing 1-20. The Firebirds only had five players, and in one game was forced to play with four after one fouled out. Ruland went to work and the team won 11 games the following year, followed by a healthy 22-6 record in year three. When the team faltered in year four, Ruland was relieved of his coaching duties. In 2015, Ruland was hired as an advance scout for the Washington Wizards.

From the outside looking in, Ruland was a star basketball player that utilized his gifts to succeed on the court and then as a coach, receiving adulation. The reality is his life has been a bumpy road; from a painful childhood, to broken relationships, career ending injuries, firings, and marital hardships. Ruland's wife, Maureen, was an alcoholic that was finally able to get sober. Sadly, she died shortly after kicking alcohol, of leukemia. Eventually Ruland entered a 23-year relationship with a woman, but alcohol was the contributing factor that destroyed their togetherness.

LIFE CAN BE A TOUGH ROW TO HOE

Baby Boomers grew up in a time of childhood freedom and great abandon. Psychology asserts that children of the 1960s and 1970s did not become emotionally strong thanks to better parenting, but because they grew up with enough daily neglect to solve problems on their own, and develop resilience. Ruland once said, "I grew up with a lot of freedom, but I never took advantage of it. Giving me freedom was my mother's

way of teaching me responsibility." And that freedom helped Ruland overcome the hardships of life. The man is resilient.

Ruland has three daughters and two grandkids. His daughter, Brittany, summed up what makes Ruland special when she posted on LinkedIn: "My Dad is the hardest worker I know. He is the reason work ethic is not just something I talk about, but something I live by every single day. Watching him show up with passion, discipline, and heart is what shaped me and helped get me to where I am today in my career. I am endlessly grateful to learn from his example and lucky to call him my Dad."

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Keith grew up on Long Island in the 1960s and 70s and fell in love with basketball early, becoming a standout player — before a hard stretch pulled him away from the game for years. Faith and family brought him back, this time as a coach. That comeback set the course for everything he's built since.

As a high school athletic director, his programs won multiple state championships, and he coached a boys basketball team to a state runner-up finish. He then became the founding athletic director at Providence School in Santa Barbara, building an athletics program from scratch — and leading the girls basketball team to a CIF championship within a few years of the school's first season.