

PEZZIMENTI: Lanier, St. Bonaventure Renewing Relationship

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During his days at St. Bonaventure, Bob Lanier would often make the short trip to Salamanca and, more specifically, to the Seneca Nation of Indians. He helped with basketball clinics there and taught youngsters the basic skills of the game.

Just like his days on the court as a Brown Indian, he made a deep impression.

At the conclusion of Lanier's career, the Senecas presented him a huge head dress - feathers upon feathers, 15 feet in all.

They also adorned him with a new name: Hiunata, meaning He who leaves big tracks.

The perfect handle indeed, both literally and figuratively. Everywhere he's stepped foot with those size 22s, Lanier has left an indelible mark.

From leading Bona to the 1970 Final Four, to a Hall of Fame professional career, to countless hours of community service, to serving as a figure head for the NBA's intense charity work, Lanier's tracks have been seen far and wide.

Just take a gander at the newly-installed basketball floor at the Reilly Center. Painted in brown on the hardwood is Lanier's signature. And, of course, his jersey number hangs high above in the rafters.

When you think St. Bonaventure, you simply think Bob Lanier. It's been that way for nearly 40 years.

Yet, Lanier's personal presence is, perhaps, being felt more profoundly now at the school than at any time since the '70s.

He will be on campus in early October when the new state-of-the-art floor will officially be dedicated and named "Bob Lanier Court".

More importantly, Lanier has let it be known to Bona president Sister Margaret Carney and athletic director Steve Watson that the school has his complete backing. He wants to be involved on a deeper level, like never before.

How does the Big Cat want to help?

"Any way I can," he said during a recent phone conversation. "If I can help them with fundraising, if I can help them with trying to do stuff to recruit ... whatever they need me to do. Like I told Steve and Sister Margaret, I'm here for them."

For various reasons, that hasn't always been Lanier's stance. In a sense, he's been on the sidelines for most of the last two decades.

Now it seems as if Lanier is back on the court again, all seven feet of him willing to man the paint for the Bonaventure cause.

Just recently, a scholarship, to be given out each year, was created in Lanier's name. Watson has been left with the impression that Lanier wants to do much more.

"He really cares about this place," the AD said.

Reaching out

Watson first met Lanier during a trip to Lanier's home state of Arizona in March. The two have become fast friends.

They talk over the phone several times a week. When Lanier visited campus for a team reunion in July, the two went to breakfast and played a round of golf.

Watson describes Lanier as humble, laid back and friendly.

"He walks in a room and he lights the room up," Watson said. "It's not because he's the tallest guy there. It's because he has a great personality. He's very approachable and somebody that I've grown to like quite a bit."

At the NBA Hall of Fame in Springfield, Mass. visitors can compare the size of their feet to Lanier's. As all too many have discovered, it's difficult to fill Lanier's giant shoes.

Refilling those shoes has been at the forefront for Sister Carney, named president in 2004, and Watson, who was hired over the winter. They want to make Lanier a big part of the next generation and beyond.

"As I reach out to alums everywhere, Bob is someone I especially want to be able to keep in touch with because so many people identify him with our history," Sister Carney said. "But I want him identified with our future as well."

Watson echoed those sentiments.

"Just having him involved and linking that name to St. Bonaventure means the world to this place," Watson said. "The fact that he's motivated to help us move forward, not just as a basketball program and athletic program, but as a university, that means quite a bit."

On-and-off relationship

There's been a wide perception in these parts that Lanier's link with the university hasn't been very strong, much less evident at all over the years.

Lanier denied that the past relationship was contentious, but admitted certain aspects of it could've been improved.

"I just have had a busy life. I haven't had a rocky relationship with the school," he said. "There have been times, for whatever reason, when they haven't reached out to me. And with my life the way it is, I probably haven't reached out to them."

Lanier lost a lot of contact he had with the school when former teammate Jim Satalin's reign as Bona coach ended in 1982, and when former coach Larry Weise was removed from his AD post in the early '90s.

"Those are people that you know extremely well and are always talking to," Lanier said. "When those people were gone and there was no one calling you on a regular basis or saying stuff to you, you just go on with your life."

Sister Carney made it a point early to bring Lanier back into the Bona family.

They first met when Lanier visited campus in the summer of 2003 - when Sister Carney was vice president - for the unveiling of a children's book series Lanier co-authored. Bona was in the initial recovery stages from a player eligibility scandal that rocked the school and men's basketball program.

"He made it very clear," Sister Carney recalled, "that he wanted to support us in our efforts to restore the good name of our basketball program."

Lanier, meanwhile, has developed a deep admiration and respect for Carney and Watson. The relationship is as strong as ever.

Of Carney, he said, "With her little bitty self, her persona just fills a room up. She is quite a leader for St. Bonaventure University. She's the kind of person that St. Bonaventure needs to just fire us up again."

With Watson, Lanier is most impressed by the AD's willingness to reach out to Bona's basketball past.

"He went out of his way to come down here to talk to me and other people like Sam Stith," Lanier said of Watson's trip to Arizona in March, which coincided with the AD's search for a new hoops coach. "And then when he went up to a reunion with Sam and Tom (Stith) and Larry Weise, I thought 'Wow. This is a pretty special guy.'"

Lending a hand

Much of Lanier's adult life has revolved around community service. As Special Assistant to NBA commissioner David Stern, Lanier has been highly involved with league programs like Read to Achieve, Stay in School and NBA Cares. He still serves as Stern's right-hand man.

Charity and community service was something that Lanier learned about at an early age. He remembers many times as a youngster when he'd sit on his mother's lap as she read biblical stories about serving others. Mom always stressed giving back and making a difference.

"It's just the Christian spirit, I think, that my mother had," Lanier said. "She passed that on to me and my sister. The NBA has given me a grander scale to initiate those kinds of things. I've been blessed to have David Stern kind of hand pick me to be involved with the programs we do."

Lanier also founded the Bob Lanier Center in his native Buffalo, which provides an after school program that allows children a safe environment to escape to.

"That's his life. That's his passion. That's what he does," Watson said of Lanier's community work.

Sister Carney said that Lanier has been very responsive in providing Bona advice, too.

"He's been very available to myself and our athletic leadership," she said. "And with all alums, we ask them to contribute their time, treasure or talent. Bob is no exception."

It helps that Lanier's visions are in line with Sister Carney's and Watson's.

"I think a lot of positive things are now starting to happen for St. Bonaventure, especially with this new leadership that we have here," Lanier said. "They're obviously doing a wonderful job of galvanizing both former and current constituencies so that we can make positive things happen for the university."

Lanier legacy continues

When Watson came to Lanier with the idea of the court naming, Lanier hesitated.

The idea was Sam Molinaro's, the alum who donated much of the money toward the new floor. Lanier had to speak with Molinaro before anything.

"When I talked to (Molinaro) I was lifted," Lanier said. "He said that his family had gotten together and wanted do something special for the school. They collectively said they wanted to do it in Bob Lanier's honor, because who better, they said epitomized the Franciscan spirit in the way he's played and lived."

But Lanier also made this point to Molinaro: "I'm accepting this on behalf of all of us that shed blood, sweat and tears in the Bonaventure tradition."

And that tradition is still deeply rooted in Lanier. His days at Bona will never leave him.

"I am a spirit of St. Bonaventure University," he said. "It was four of the best years of my life that I'll never forget, in an environment where people really truly cared about who I was, and not just a number or not just somebody who came in and played basketball.

"Even to this day, when I meet alumni of St. Bonaventure, they all reach out to me and say, 'Hey, how you doing?' It makes you feel like you were special."

Sharing one last memory, Lanier recalled a return trip to Olean following an NCAA tournament victory in 1968, his sophomore year. As the team bus journeyed closer and closer to town, more supporters lined Route 16, waving and cheering.

The team exited the bus at the intersection of Union and State streets, where exhilarated fans had packed in, and team captain Billy Butler addressed the crowd, "at a time I probably wouldn't have known what to say," Lanier said.

"He got off the bus," Lanier said of Butler, "and he said, 'How sweet it is.'

"That rings in my ear to this day. It was just the right thing for him to say. And it was the thing that all of us were feeling."

You kind of get the idea that that feeling has been captured in Bona Nation once again.

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