

JOHN CALIPARI

with Dick Weiss

Foreword by Rick Pitino



REFUSE TO LOSE

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WITH DICK WEISS

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To my wife, Ellen, and my daughters, Erin and Megan. Ellen has been through a lot as a coach's wife. She has spent hours parenting our children, often by herself. She is a fabulous mother and wife. As for my two little sweethearts, Erin and Megan, they don't care about the score. They just think their dad is the best and that means so much to me.

—J.C.

To Joan, who kept me company, put up with my changing moods, hung in there with me during the dark hours, supplied help with the copy, and offered both moral support and insight while I wrote this book. Who else would put up with a basketball junkie like me?

—D.W.

FOREWORD

There are some people who think I owe my national championship to John Calipari.

As the coach of Kentucky, I felt if we had defeated UMass in the Great Eight last November, they would have been NCAA Tournament champions today. As it turned out, they gave us the motivation to succeed because they gave us something to shoot for all season.

I felt Kentucky and UMass were the two best teams in college basketball.

I never thought I'd be saying that. But I never thought UMass would be in the Final Four, either.

That achievement speaks volumes about the job John Calipari did since he arrived in Amherst eight years ago. I have not seen anything close to it in my life.

When I took my first head coaching job at Boston University, the program there was in bad shape. But UMass was much worse. Ten straight losing seasons. One secretary doing work for a couple of departments. No facilities. No weight room. No basketball camp. No support. No tradition in the Atlantic 10. No media coverage.

I was hoping John could eventually turn my alma mater into a competitive mid-major team in New England. I was hoping UMass could get to the NIT once every four years and maybe to the NCAA once every five years.

I was hoping.

But, to be honest with you, as good as John was, I didn't think even he could pull it off.

I should have known better.

I was on the selection committee to choose a new coach in 1988. When we finally went with John, it didn't take long for him to promote the program. He was on every TV station, every radio show, selling UMass basketball. He was part P. T. Barnum, part Merlin the Magician. And all John Calipari. He was doing everything humanly possible to give my school a team we could be proud of.

Most new coaches schedule weak teams to build confidence in their program. John did just the opposite. And he did it without any financial security: this was a job that had turned over every few years. If he had gotten fired, he might have been finished in this business. But he had superhuman confidence in his abilities.

Even when UMass had Julius Erving, the school never played in the NCAA tournament. Before John got there, UMass hadn't been invited since 1962, and even then, they couldn't get past the first round. In defense of our program, a school had to be No. 1 in New England to earn a bid because the NCAA field included only thirty-two teams. That usually meant getting past Providence College.

So we went to the NIT when I played.

In my mind, it was impossible to transform UMass into a national program. Best in New England? With an incredible amount of work, incredible recruiting, maybe. But we were never

going national, no matter how much I prayed and believed. If I went to church every day for two years, it wasn't going to happen.

Never say never.

UMass went to its first NCAA tournament under John in 1992. They've been going back ever since. And they've been ranked No. 1 the past two years.

I watched John grow up in this business. I was a counselor at Five-Star Camp when he was a camper. He was an average player, but you could see he really knew the game.

John played for Clarion State in college. What he lacked in physical ability, he made up for in the cerebral part of the game. When he became an assistant at Kansas and then at Pitt, I could see he was a ferocious recruiter. He had a brashness even then that has made him what he is today.

I was the Knicks' coach when the UMass job opened up and I spoke to John about interviewing for the position. He was young, only twenty-eight years old at the time. The search came down to two candidates—John and Larry Shyatt, an assistant at New Mexico and later at Providence—and I bowed out of being an active committee member.

When I left for a weekend road trip, the committee had agreed it was going to be John. I was in Milwaukee for a game with the Bucks when I received a phone call. The committee had now eliminated John from consideration because two or three Big East coaches had fired in and just killed his reputation and character after he had gotten into a recruiting squabble with Villanova over a 6'8" prospect from Atlantic City named Bobby Martin.

I persuaded them to call an emergency meeting on Monday. The discussion was heated.

“We’re not here to promote a Big East school,” I said. “We’re here to turn UMass around, and John Calipari’s the guy to do it. These people fear Calipari. They fear him in recruiting. This is the ideal guy.”

Then I asked if they had called the NCAA.

“Yes,” they told me.

“That’s all we need to know,” I said. “All we care about is what the NCAA thinks about his character. Jealousy is the worst evil we have in sports today. And a lot of people are jealous of this young guy.”

They all, I think, realized he was the right guy for the job. But the school wasn’t about to hire him without hitting me up for a donation.

They had offered John a \$63,000 package.

“But,” they said, “we don’t have \$63,000. Would you be willing to kick in \$5,000?”

So I did.

Before John arrived, I was really disappointed in the direction of the program. It looked like the administration had given up. They just did not care. It was almost like they said, “Well, what are you going to do? The Big East buried everybody.”

Some guys might have come in with an attitude of “Let’s take what’s left over. Let’s take our piece of the pie.”

But John said, “No. Let’s take their piece of the pie, too.”

I feel absolutely wonderful about what he accomplished with UMass.

He’s unique.

Thanks, John. And good luck with the Nets.

—Rick Pitino

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—J.C.

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—D.W.

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CHAPTER 1

NETS' PROFIT

I met Pat Riley of the Miami Heat for the first time at the 1995 Basketball Hall of Fame Dinner in Springfield, Massachusetts. I was surprised he even knew who I was.

Then he asked me, “When are you coming up?”

“Coming up to what? Practice?”

“No,” Riley said, “coming up to our league. With your personality and the way you are, you can coach in this league. You just have to want to do it.”

I finally decided I did—late Wednesday night, June 5, 1996.

I walked away from a job I loved at UMass to accept the position of head coach, executive vice president, and head of basketball operations with the New Jersey Nets.

Coaching in the NBA had always been in the back of my mind, but I hadn't felt comfortable that I had done enough in college to merit moving on. Well, the last two years, I thought I had proved to myself I could do it.

I judge myself by looking in the mirror, not by what somebody else says. At UMass, did we go as far as we could go? I don't think so. But the opportunity that came up might never come my way again.

In a lot of ways, I felt like I was caught in a time warp.

When I became head coach at UMass in 1988, I was told the job was a coach-killer. It was a graveyard for coaches. People said the administration was soft and didn't care, and the fans were apathetic. That sounds familiar. Isn't that what I'm getting into with the Nets?

At UMass, we were in the shadow of the Big East. Now we're in the shadow of the Knicks. But that doesn't mean we won't get it done.

It took us eight years to put UMass basketball on the map, to reach the top of the AP poll, and to advance to the Final Four. The Nets have been to the NBA playoffs twice in the last twenty years.

I like the odds.

What I like about the team is they're a good group of guys. They play hard and they rebound. Think about our teams at UMass. They all played hard. They played defense. And they all rebounded.

However, the Nets don't shoot very well.

Sounds like my UMass teams, too.

I stayed eight years in Amherst. That's a long time in this business. And every year, I was offered more money to leave and go to another job.

But this was a five-year deal that was just too good to turn down. For a kid from Moon Township, Pennsylvania, it was like hitting the jackpot. I'm not going to sit here and tell you money didn't play a part in this. My family is very important to me. Security is very important to me. I was poor growing up, so the money did play a part, even though I was pretty well taken care of at UMass.

Last fall, I had signed a ten-year contract with the school. It

contained a special clause that would have given me a job as a development officer in the chancellor's office until I was sixty at my last base salary if I ever decided I wanted to get out of coaching. Essentially, I had the same security as a tenured professor.

The Nets are much more of a risk. But they were willing to give me total control of an NBA franchise.

When I told that to UMass athletic director Bob Marcum, one of my closest friends, he just laughed. "Sure, John," Bob said, "but the goddamned captain of the *Titanic* thought he had total control, too."

I figured he'd say something like that. I'm sure a lot of people feel the same way. But, at age thirty-seven, this is what I want to do.

People have suggested I left because the UMass program was slipping. That's bull. UMass basketball should be a Top 20 team for the next five to ten years now that the university has promoted my former associate coach, James "Bruiser" Flint, to the position of head coach. I pushed hard for that with Bob and UMass chancellor David K. Scott because I felt it was the best way to maintain continuity.

UMass is on national television twenty-five times a year these days. It plays a national schedule. It recruits regional players who are good enough to take the program where it wants to go. UMass went to the NCAA tournament five years in a row when I was there. It won the Atlantic 10 tournament five straight times. UMass has started to put up banners—like North Carolina does. Every year that we were in the Top 20 in the AP poll we put up a banner. Hopefully, next year they'll add another one.

I've also heard speculation I left because of reports in *The Hartford Courant* on Tuesday, June 4, that Marcus Camby had

accepted cash and jewelry from two prospective agents while he was still playing college basketball.

Wrong again.

My attorney, Craig Fenech, had spoken to the Nets before that situation ever came up. I'd had initial talks with Michael Rowe, the team president, the previous Friday night in Providence, Rhode Island. In fact, Marcus's situation almost got me to say "I'm not leaving" until I looked into it more. Once I decided everything was going to be okay with Marcus, I moved on.

This was the second year in a row I had been contacted by NBA teams. I spoke to three different NBA teams in 1995, including the Boston Celtics. I think they had to talk to me because everybody wanted them to. M. L. Carr, who was the acting GM then, called me. I told him at the time, "I don't think I have an interest in the job, but I will talk to you."

Afterwards he said, "I don't think you have any interest in this job."

"You're probably right," I told him.

He probably wanted the job. That's okay.

Since that experience, I've learned that you don't deal on your own behalf in the NBA. At UMass, whenever there had been a shoe deal, or a speaking engagement, I used to do it all myself. An administrator, a college AD, or an apparel guy doesn't want to deal with an agent. He'd rather look me in the eye.

In the NBA, I can't do that.

At this point, I will not deal with anybody from the NBA on a personal level. I direct them to Craig.

This spring, the phone calls started again. In May, I was contacted by the Philadelphia 76ers, and we began to speak. When the Nets job opened and Rick Pitino turned down a deal that included equity in the team, I was really surprised I hadn't heard