**Unbelievable joy: After 14 years in prison, hoops star Pee Wee Barber is taking advantage of a new beginning**

**BY WAYNE EPPS**

His goal is to establish his own basketball gym where he can help mentor kids, on and off the court.

HARRISONBURG - On an outdoor basketball court, paved amid Harrisonburg's rolling hills, a smooth and swished fadeaway jump shot elicits smiles and chuckles from a small group of onlookers.

It's a reaction that says, he's still got it.

The shot maker was Norwood "Pee Wee" Barber Jr., who more than 30 years ago garnered all manner of reactions when he patrolled the court for Harrisonburg High School. Those who saw it with their own eyes still rave about his athleticism.

On this day, though, Barber is playing the role of coach. The shot came during his weekly basketball skills and drills clinic, against a player more than four decades his junior - a teaching moment.

Barber can be found on that court, at a Harrisonburg Boys &amp; Girls Club, every Saturday and Sunday, training the current generation of Valley hoopers. It's the latest chapter in Barber's story, one that took a variety of twists and turns since his time as a star at Harrisonburg High School.

The 5-foot-11 former guard, who has been called an early Allen Iverson, "could do it all" athletically, a former teammate said. Not only was he a force on the hardwood, but on the football field and baseball diamond, too.

Barber, after graduating from HHS in 1983, shined at what was then Ferrum Junior College, then at Florida State University.

But after being selected in the fourth round of the 1987 NBA draft, injuries derailed Barber's professional career. His path turned in the years that followed, and drug charges ultimately led to a mandatory life prison sentence in 2005.

However, after his sentence was commuted by former President Barack Obama in 2016, and after the First Step Act went into effect in 2018, Barber was granted his release in August 2019.

Now, with a new beginning in hand, he's teaching the game through which he electrified so many.

"The joy that I have right now, it's unbelievable," said Barber, now 56.

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Growing up, Barber's childhood consisted of sports, sports and more sports. All year round - basketball, football and baseball.

Barber - whose full name is Norwood Barber Jr. and who shared the "Pee Wee" nickname with his father - lived in a house near the same Boys and Girls Club site where he trains players today, and took advantage, frequenting the gym there.

Barber and others would play football and baseball at the spot, too. But basketball was his favorite, without a doubt. It was the sport he could play year round.

Barber's brother Mario, who is 16 months younger, remembers Barber being 12 and 13 years old, playing against adults in those childhood basketball games.

"Just natural instinct and ability, man," said Mario, 54. "And a gift that he could just pick up on stuff so quickly."

The athletic gift was God-given, said their mother, Carolyn.

"I can't say he got it from either side [of the family.]," she said. "God gave it to him. That's who gave him his gift."

Barber, away from basketball, was an all-state football player. He played quarterback and defensive back. In baseball, Barber batted .336 for his career. He pitched, and played shortstop and centerfield.

Recruiting letters came for basketball and football, but basketball was Barber's pick.

"Any sport that he wanted to do, he was great," said Tim Meyers, who coached Barber in JV basketball, taught him in government and was an assistant for coach Roger Bergey's varsity team. "In fact, he was a super ping pong player in the gym classes. You know when you have just one of those guys. He's that dude."

The closest comparison former teammate Tom Purcell can think of is Allen Iverson.

"Arguably the greatest player who came out of our area was Ralph Sampson. Because he's 7-foot-4, all world. Played at UVA," Purcell said "But, my opinion, Pee Wee was a much better basketball player overall than Ralph. Pee Wee wasn't 7-foot-4. But, as far as skill set, nobody could match Pee Wee."

In recruiting, though, a lot of schools backed off because of his grades, Barber said. He wasn't sure where he was going to play.

But, at an all-star game after Barber's senior season, former Ferrum coach Grant Hudson spotted him.

"And said, 'Come on down,'" Barber said.

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The work just continued at Ferrum, located about 2½ hours south of Harrisonburg. Barber never stopped.

He was in the gym even on off days, either shooting or lifting.

During a trip to the JUCO national tournament in 1985, Barber met Joe Williams, who was then the coach at FSU. Barber wound up taking just one recruiting visit out of Ferrum, to Tallahassee, to see FSU.

"I said, 'Shoot, man, I'm going here.' [Williams] told me, 'Pee Wee, if you sign, you're going to start,'" Barber said. "And held true to his word. And that was it."

Barber paced Florida State in scoring and assists, by sizable margins, both of his seasons in Tallahassee.

He was named to the Metro Conference's all-tournament team his junior season, and was a first-team all-conference pick as a senior.

However, after the season, Barber was playing in a pickup game back in Harrisonburg when he came down on an opponent's foot. Barber hurt his own right foot, breaking it.

He remembers watching the NBA draft that June with a cast on the foot. The Portland Trail Blazers picked him in the fourth round, 86th overall. Barber had expected he might be selected by late in the second round.

The foot was still bothering him by the time he got to Portland's training camp.

"I could barely run up and down the court," Barber said.

Barber was cut out of camp, and went to play for the Topeka Sizzlers of the Continental Basketball Association.

The following summer, though, in 1988, the injury bug bit again.

Barber was horsing around back in Harrisonburg, on a hill near the outdoor courts at the Boys and Girls Club, when he suffered a broken right leg. It effectively ended his professional basketball career.

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Barber didn't play basketball again until about two years later. He tried to go play overseas, but the prospect fell through.

What was next was what Barber described as "the foolishness."

According to the Daily News-Record in Harrisonburg, Barber was convicted of two counts of distributing crack cocaine in 1990, and was convicted of possession of crack cocaine with intent to distribute in 1993.

Barber served prison sentences of seven years and more than six years. Then, according to the news report, he pleaded guilty to a crack cocaine distribution charge after a 2004 arrest. It was Barber's final strike, and he was sentenced to life in prison.

"I just chose to do that," Barber said of the criminal activity. "No pressure, no nothing. I just chose to do it."

When Barber first re-entered prison in 2004, he was 40 years old. He served time in West Virginia, South Carolina and in Petersburg.

"When you go to prison like that, you take people with you," Mario said. "Their hearts."

In 2016, though, Barber's sentence was commuted, one of 1,715 by Obama during his two-term presidency. That action set Barber's release year to 2022.

Then the First Step Act, passed with a bipartisan majority in Congress and signed into law by President Trump near the end of 2018, opened a path to an even earlier release. Part of the law addressed sentencing disparities between crack and powder cocaine.

The day came on Aug. 9, 2019. He didn't know that he was being released that day until about 2 p.m., though his family was told earlier in the day. As he exited, in Petersburg, he was told the exact amount of time he served: 14 years, eight months and two days.

"As I'm coming out the gate, my daughter [Tyesha Turner] and her daughter [Kennedy] is coming to pick me up. And she's crying," Barber said. "I'll never forget that. Never forget that."

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As Barber reflects, the type of hoops training he's doing now is what he said he should've been doing a long time ago. But, now, he's finally getting the chance again.

It started earlier this year, with one girl: Sarah Haliburton, a sophomore at Spotswood High School in Penn Laird. Barber and Haliburton's father, Robert, are friends.

Barber began working with Haliburton on ball handling, shots and more. She's built up greater assurance in her outside shots.

"It just builds my confidence," Haliburton said of her work with Barber. "He always tells me stuff that I'm able to remember during the game."

From the start with Haliburton, over the summer, Barber's training grew to a group and into "Pee Wee's Skills and Drills Clinic." Barber works with players from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays at the Boys and Girls Club spot.

There have been five or six regulars, but on an early October Saturday, Barber facilitated his largest group to date: 15, from elementary age to high school. His 16-year-old son, Messiah, was among them.

Barber worked the players through a wide variety of drills, emphasizing fundamentals - from layups on either hand to dribble control to free throws (with a punishment of running after three misses) to one-on-one post moves. The players also split for a live scrimmage.

And the coaching didn't stop. All throughout, Barber took time to pause, correct and share words of wisdom.

"Just technique. And how to play the game, really, how to be smart," said Vinny Sipe, a senior at Waynesboro High School.

But it's more than basketball.

"Just become a better person. Don't be like me. That's all," Barber said, when asked what he wants to get across to the kids he trains. "And a lot of them know my story anyhow."

A small group that included Mario and Carolyn looked on. Also Barber's wife, Tracy. The two have been together since 1983, when they met at a social gathering in Staunton.

They were married on Sept. 12.

Tracy said anyone who knew them knew they would get married someday. So they finally did, at their home in Waynesboro.

"I just love that man. ... My shining armor, my dream came true," Tracy said. "I love him yesterday, today and always."

Barber still plays hoops himself as well - at least twice a week - around his full-time job at VIRTEX, an electronics manufacturing service company. Tracy also works there and the two eat lunch together at 12:30 p.m. each day.

"I can't get enough of him," she said. "We're always together."

Barber's goal as he continues to train players is to establish his own basketball gym, a haven for kids to grow in. It's something he's already exploring.

He's also planning a line of clothing to be named S.O.C. - Signs of Creation.

In his new beginning, he's just getting started.

"I got a long story, man," Barber said. "But it ain't even over."