

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

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 & 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.”

# 'You survive Franklin Street, you can survive anything': VCU players, coaches remember soon-to-be-demolished gym

In 1967, after a stint at Cleveland State, former Armstrong standout Don Ross transferred out and returned home to Richmond.

He was in contact with Richmond Professional Institute and its coach, Benny Dees. Dees asked Ross to stop by the school's basketball facility, Franklin Street Gym, to meet and chat.

“And the first time I walked in there it was like, ‘Wow, Armstrong High School gym, where I went to high school, was larger than this,’” Ross said.

Still, Ross chose RPI. And that cramped, hot, underwhelming gym became the lab where the DNA of VCU basketball was formulated.

RPI merged with the Medical College of Virginia a year after Ross arrived, in 1968, to form VCU. The first season of VCU men's basketball tipped off that November. The team continued to play its home games in Franklin Street Gym's modest basketball sanctuary. Even a Times-Dispatch story from the Rams' first season called the space “outmoded.”

But from there the program grew. A larger, 1,500-seat gym was added on and opened for the 1970-71 season. VCU continued to play games there, in the expanded gym, through the 1979 season, then kept using it as a practice facility after that. It remained the women's basketball team's home floor until the Siegel Center opened in 1999.

Generations of Rams touched the floor at Franklin Street Gym. The spartan setting helped forge an identity of toughness.

It's only been about five years since they moved out, in favor of the \$25 million Basketball Development Center on West Marshall Street. But now Franklin Street Gym has reached the end of the road.

The on-campus facility is set to be demolished in a process that's scheduled to begin in earnest next week, and that'll likely take several weeks. It'll be replaced by a building that'll be used for science, technology, engineering and math education, a \$121 million project.

But, for those who came to know it well, the memories of Franklin Street Gym remain.

“The legacy of VCU basketball really started in Franklin Street Gym,” former player David Hobbs (1969-71) said. “And the guys that are enjoying all the perks and bells and whistles of today, they've got the people that started in that building to thank.”

What the facility may have lacked in size and amenities, it perhaps made up for in character. Ross remembers people filling the old gym, to the extent they could.

He said that the teams he was on, which included RPI in 1967-68 and VCU in 1968-69, won games in Franklin Street Gym that they probably shouldn't have, because of the noise.

Those teams also knew every nook and cranny in the gym. There were a couple of dead spots on the floor where the ball wouldn't bounce like it should.

"That's where we would try to drive our opponents, to those places, and then double team them," Ross said with a chuckle.

Hobbs had a similar impression of Franklin Street Gym as Ross did, upon seeing it for the first time after transferring from Ferrum. His high school gym at E.C. Glass in Lynchburg was also much bigger than his new college digs.

But Dees, Hobbs said, sold everyone on what VCU was going to be. Construction was in progress on the new, 1,500-seat gym. It took much faith and a lot of salesmanship from Dees to pull it off, Hobbs said.

"He sold everybody on they were starting something new and ... you got to start somewhere," Hobbs said. "And it was going to be something later on, which it obviously proved out to be."

When the new gym opened in 1970, while still not something to write home about, Hobbs said, it was quite a bit bigger than the confined space where VCU played at first. That first season in the new gym, the Rams hosted Minnesota and won 63-56 in overtime.

It was part of an 11-0 home record that year. There was a rumor that Minnesota thought it was traveling to play UVA, not VCU.

"They were playing in bigger arenas and all that kind of stuff," Hobbs said. "And they came in there, and I remember the stories going around about them thinking they were going to a bigger place, and so forth and so on. But we ended up beating them in there."

By the 1971-72 season, the Rams began playing some of their games at the Coliseum. They continued to play games at Franklin Street Gym through 1978-79, before the Coliseum became their full-time home.

VCU went 74-3 in Franklin Street Gym from 1968 to 1979.

"It was a fun place to play," Hobbs said.

The men's team still practiced at Franklin Street Gym after moving to the Coliseum. Phil Stinnie (1984-88) remembers it being hotter inside the facility (which had no air conditioning) in the spring and summer than it was outside.

“But it was our home, and we loved it, and we worked hard,” he said. “That’s how we got better.”

Stinnie watched older players work hard in Franklin Street Gym his freshman year, and he followed their lead. He had a key to the gym and would train there in the wee hours in the night.

“Because that’s all we knew, you know what I mean? We weren’t the five-star recruits,” Stinnie said. “We were the three-stars that wanted to prove that we could play with the five-stars, and that’s what we did.”

There was a period, after the Siegel Center was completed in 1999, that the Rams practiced there instead of Franklin Street Gym.

But when Anthony Grant arrived in 2006, he asked if his team could use Franklin Street Gym to practice, too. Richard Sander, VCU’s athletic director at the time, laughed.

“Like, ‘You really want this with the ceiling tiles falling off?’ And who knows if there’s asbestos in there or not. And it’s hot as the dickens and everything,” Grant said. “So we made a makeshift locker room of a hallway. We put some air freshener in the bathrooms over there. And we made it home. And our guys really embraced it.”

Richmond native Bradford Burgess (2008-12), who grew up playing in Franklin Street Gym with various AAU teams, said practicing there built character for VCU teams.

One of those teams he played on, of course, made the Final Four in 2011.

“You survive Franklin Street, you can survive anything,” Burgess said. “And that’s kind of the mentality that those teams played with, especially my teams, and ... my brother’s [Jordan Burgess] teams.”

Ed McLaughlin, current VCU vice president and director of athletics, first saw Franklin Street Gym while on his interview for the job in July 2012. His first impression was that he couldn’t fathom how hot it was inside.

His second thought was how desperately the school needed something else.

A practice facility project was approved in 2011, and that grew into what became the Basketball Development Center, which houses the men’s and women’s teams, with separate courts on either side. The programs moved in October 2015.

But the mark Franklin Street Gym left on them, and perhaps the athletics department as a whole, remains. Tim Lampe, VCU’s senior associate athletic director for facilities, feels all of the Rams’ sports teams play with a chip on their shoulder and an edge, and that Franklin Street Gym is a symbol of that.

Even the baseball team had batting cage space in Franklin Street Gym, before its \$1.9 million Baseball Performance Center opened late last year.

Though the building itself will soon be gone, Franklin Street Gym's impact on VCU is perhaps inerasable.

"It was beat up, it was kicked around. But it was ours," McLaughlin said. "We are not the program we are today without having Franklin Street as our history."

# 'It was like a dream in retrospect': ABA's Squires experienced eventful six-year run in Virginia

In September 1969, three weeks before training camp began, Oakland Oaks center Jim Eakins received a phone call from general manager Bruce Hale.

The team, Hale told Eakins, had been sold to Washington, D.C., lawyer Earl Foreman. Foreman, Hale said, was moving the American Basketball Association franchise across the country to the nation's capital. Eakins, a self-described western boy from Sacramento, Calif., had just a couple of weeks to relocate.

Despite an initial trade request, Eakins made the trip and arrived in D.C. a day or so before the start of training camp. Thus began his club's East Coast life.

The team competed as the Washington Caps in 1969-70 before moving again to Virginia. The newly named Virginia Squires, based out of Norfolk, played their first game almost 50 years ago.

The Squires lasted just six years, but were a notable blip on the Virginia sports radar. They remain the only modern-day major league franchise to play in the state. They featured future Hall of Famers Julius Erving, George Gervin and Charlie Scott. They drew quality crowds in Norfolk.

Financial issues led to the Squires' demise before the ABA merged with the NBA in the summer of 1976. But fond recollections remain.

"We felt like we had something special here," said Kirk Levy, a Squires fan and former ball boy from Portsmouth. "And we saw it firsthand. It was a style of basketball that was different than the NBA.

"It's what the NBA has become. Not just 3-pointers and dunks, but flamboyance and entertainment. And we had something special here that I still cherish to this day."

In the offseason of 1970, after a year living in the D.C. area, Eakins received another call informing him that the franchise was headed to Virginia. At that point, Eakins viewed the move as an inconvenience.

But the 1969-70 season was tough for him and the Capitols. A year after winning the ABA title as the Oaks, chemistry was off with the team in Washington. It finished 44-40.

Eakins was unhappy in Washington and thought of retiring. But coach Al Bianchi told Eakins changes were being made and asked him to stick it out.

Scott and Neil Johnson were then among the newcomers for the first edition of the Squires. Both went on to be All-Stars during the 1970-71 season, along with George Carter, and the Squires went 55-29 and won the Eastern Division to start their time in Virginia on a positive note.

Levy, who was a ball boy that first season, was enamored.

“I’m not sure I was as diligent in my duties as a ball boy as I was stargazing,” said Levy, now an attorney in Virginia Beach. “Charlie Scott had been my favorite player, coming out of UNC, and he was the star of the team. But I remembered several of the players, from college or following the ABA.”

The Squires were a regional franchise, which meant that they played home games in Hampton, Richmond and Roanoke besides Norfolk.

Attendance was strong at Scope Arena, their Norfolk venue.

The Roanoke games were dropped after the team’s second year in Virginia.

For two seasons early in the Squires’ existence, fans watched the most well-known former Squire: Erving, also known as Dr. J.

Erving signed with the Squires out of Massachusetts before the 1971-72 season. He wasn’t widely known at the time, but made a big early impression.

Eakins remembers an exhibition game against the Kentucky Colonels before Erving’s rookie season. He grabbed a rebound and passed it up to Erving.

Erving drove to the basket, where 7-foot-2 future Hall of Famer Artis Gilmore was defending.

“Doc went in and he extended the ball out in his right hand up to make a layup. And Artis was above and just ready to smother it,” Eakins said. “And Doc pulled it out and around and changed it to his left hand, a Michael Jordan-esque thing, and changed it to his left hand and looped it over Artis and into the basket.

“And I said, ‘This kid can play.’ I knew right then that Doc was going to be a star, and that he could play.”

Erving was an All-Star as a rookie and averaged 27.3 points and a team-high 15.7 rebounds. But Scott left the team late in the season and landed in the NBA with the Suns. The Squires went 45-39 and fell to the New York Nets in the Eastern Division finals. It was their last time finishing better than .500.

Another future star, Gervin, arrived during the 1972-73 season. The Squires finished 42-42. But despite the presence of Erving and Gervin, the team continued on a downward trajectory.

For financial reasons, Erving was traded to the Nets in 1973 — a major piece of a trend of castaways that persisted.

Eakins said the players were aware that the team had financial problems. It was to the point that, with 12 guys on the roster, players knew they had to be one of the first 10 to get their check on payday and run it to the bank or else it was going to bounce.

“It hurt,” Eakins said. “It hurt when you saw your superstars being traded off.”

Gervin was shipped away, too, during the 1973-74 season, to the San Antonio Spurs.

It had an effect on the fans, a base Eakins considered among the best of anywhere he played in his 10-year ABA/NBA career.

“The fans were coming to see Dr. J and Charlie Scott and George Gervin and these guys, and these guys are being traded off, and the fans started losing their loyalty,” Eakins said. “And so our fan base started to go down and go down, which created even more financial problems.”

The money woes didn't help the on-court product either. The Squires finished 28-56 in 1973-74, at that point the franchise's worst record since its first year in Oakland in 1967-68. The changes kept coming.

Foreman sold the Squires in 1974 to a group of local investors.

Even Eakins, who had been with the franchise for the long haul, was traded to the Utah Stars that offseason, though he had a 23-game stint back with the team during the 1975-76 campaign after the Stars went under.

He played 518 games with the franchise dating to its days in Oakland, the most of anyone.

Fans like Levy lost interest. He described the final couple of years of the franchise's existence as “chaos.”

“The last two years, that was more of a revolving door with the players and they were trying to save the team,” he said.

Jack Ankerson became the Squires' general manager in 1974 after time as the Spurs' GM. He said the team in 1974-75 was not very good. It finished 15-69.

Still, Ankerson had optimism heading into the 1975-76 season. The Squires drafted N.C. State's David Thompson in the offseason beforehand, knowing they likely didn't have the money to sign him. But Ankerson made a deal with the Denver Nuggets to send the rights to Thompson and George Irvine in exchange for Mack Calvin (a five-time All-Star), Mike Green (1975 All-Star) and Jan van Breda Kolff.

With those newcomers, plus a healthy Willie Wise, who averaged 20.9 points and 6.4 rebounds over 16 games in 1974-75, Ankerson thought Virginia would be very competitive.

But Calvin and Green suffered injuries in exhibition games, and Wise was banged up, too.

“All of my wonderful optimism and great plans, and there we were,” Ankerson said. “We were saddled and hampered by all these injuries.”

Financial problems continued to compound. Players were paid late, and hotel bills sometimes were a challenge.

“That was certainly a tough time, because you think that you’re in pro basketball. ... You’re going into hotels and possibly not being able to check in until Jack Ankerson works his magic and comes up with a check to send to the hotel,” said Dave Twardzik, a former ODU standout who played for the Squires from 1972-76. “So you certainly would never expect that in a pro setting.”

Bianchi, the franchise’s seventh-year coach, was fired early in the season, too, after the Squires began 1-6. The team cycled through three more patchwork coaches before finishing the year with recently retired player Zelmo Beaty at the helm.

The Squires’ season ended with a loss to Erving, Eakins and the Nets on April 7, 1976 in Norfolk. The franchise, unable to make financial obligations, folded about a month later.

“When they left in ‘76, we never said goodbye,” Levy said. “We never had a chance to thank them, to do anything.”

A formal team reunion was held in May 2014 in Virginia Beach with Levy the lead organizer. In anticipation of the event, Levy created a Facebook page called, “Virginia Squires Last Stand.”

He continues to post Squires content on the page regularly, and it now has 2,514 followers.

To Levy, the Squires were something he and others experienced that may not ever come around again.

The team itself was short-lived. But the legacy lives on.

“It was like a dream in retrospect,” Levy said.