

FROM THE HEART

A passion for hoops takes Mike Bowser, MD '70, from cardiologist to coach.

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Michael Bowser, MD '70, first met Bobby Knight in the early 1990s, when Knight was the head coach of the Indiana University men's basketball team and Dr. Bowser was a Syracuse cardiologist who had this wacky, pie-in-the-sky idea of becoming a basketball coach.

Bowser attended a clinic run by Knight at Indiana, and he asked Knight for advice on how to get into coaching. About a month later, Knight sent Bowser a letter telling him about some good coaching clinics in New York. Knight,

who's now at Texas Tech, also invited Bowser to spend a week at Indiana watching him coach, but Bowser politely declined. Something about his schedule being filled with surgeries.

A few years later, Bowser went to another of Knight's clinics at Indiana. While getting his picture taken with Knight, Bowser thanked Knight for writing the letter.

"I remember," Knight said, "You're a cardiologist?"

"Right," Bowser said.

"And you want to be a basketball coach?"

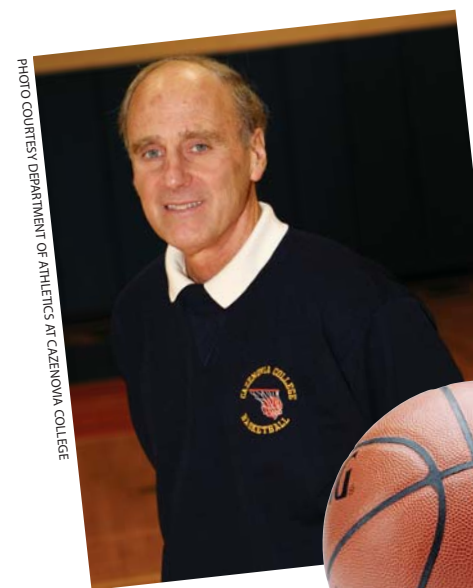


PHOTO COURTESY DEPARTMENT OF ATHLETICS AT CAZENOVIA COLLEGE

MICHAEL BOWSER, MD '70, attended a basketball clinic run by then-Indiana coach Bobby Knight and asked Knight for advice on how to break into coaching.



"Right."

"And I said I'd help you?"

"Right."

"What the (heck) was I thinking?" Knight said, laughing.

More to the point, what was Bowser thinking? He was over 50, he had a successful practice, and he and his wife had put two sons through college and were raising a teenage daughter. But Bowser always promised himself that when he turned 55, he would stop doing surgeries. And that would give him time to pursue his other passion.

So Bowser, who turned 55 in the fall of 1999, took courses to become a certified coach, and that year he helped coach the seventh- and eighth-graders at Liverpool High School. The next year, he moved to Fabius-Pompey High School as the junior varsity coach and assistant varsity coach. And the year after that, he coached at both Fabius-Pompey and Division III Cazenovia College under head-coach Todd Widrick. He worked as an assistant under Widrick for three years, and when Widrick left after last season to take the head-coaching job at Cazenovia High School, Bowser became the head coach.

Last fall, Bowser received another offer from Knight to observe a week of practice at Texas Tech. Once again Bowser had to pass, only this time it was because he would be busy coaching his own team.

"At first, I thought it was just talk and it would pass," said Melanie Bowser, Bowser's wife of nearly 37 years. "But there was a part of me that knew he would do it, because usually he succeeds at whatever he sets out to do."

Basketball in his blood

Born in Buffalo, Michael Bowser has lived in the Syracuse area since he was 13. He graduated from Christian Brothers Academy and College of the Holy Cross and received his medical training at the University of Maryland and SUNY

Upstate Medical University, where he earned a degree in internal medicine and cardiology.

For most of his career, Bowser was an invasive cardiologist, meaning he conducted office visits and performed catheterizations and surgeries. Bowser inserted catheters into patients, and the catheters took pictures of the heart muscle, coronary arteries and valves. If arteries were blocked, Bowser determined if the patient needed medicine, open heart surgery (a heart surgeon would do that), or another surgical procedure that Bowser performed using balloons or stents (tiny metal springs) that widened narrowed arteries.

In the fall of 1985, one of Bowser's patients was David Widrick, Todd Widrick's father. Bowser inserted a balloon into David Widrick to open a blocked artery.

David Widrick soon learned what everyone at the hospital and Bowser's office already knew: Bowser was a basketball nut.

Bowser's co-workers always knew when he had played a rough game at the YMCA because he'd limp into the office with stitches over his eye. They figured Bowser was the basketball expert, so they started asking him questions about why Syracuse University coach Jim Boeheim did this or that.

Bowser wanted to know more about it, too, so he started watching games more closely, attending clinics and collecting tapes from lectures given by the best college coaches. And when he hit 55 and reduced his practice to office visits, Bowser decided to follow the adage that's on a picture hanging in his office: "You miss 100 percent of the shots you don't take."

"I always wanted to be the best cardiologist I could be," Bowser said, "and I want to be the best basketball coach I can be."

Just call him "Doc."

In 2001, before Bowser's second year at Fabius-Pompey, David Widrick went back into the hospital with chest pains. He was treated by one of Bowser's partners, Ronald Caputo, MD, and Widrick asked Dr. Caputo, "What happened to Dr. Bowser?"

Caputo jokingly said Bowser was out trying to become a basketball coach. It just so happened that Todd Widrick, then in his second year at Cazenovia, was looking for an assistant coach, and David Widrick told his son that Bowser was looking for a coaching job.



CAZENOVIA COACH Michael Bowser, MD '70, instructs his team during practice.

GLORIA WRIGHT/THE POST-STANDARD



CAZENOVIA PLAYERS gather around their coach, Michael Bowser, MD '70, at the conclusion of a game last season.

Todd Widrick arranged an interview, and his first question was the same one Bowser had heard many times: Why would a doctor want to chase kids around a gym?

“It all came out when we were talking that we shared a passion for the game,” Widrick said. “He just loves the game, he loves studying the game, he loves drawing diagrams. I knew he’d be an asset to me.”

Still, Bowser had to prove himself to Widrick and the players. While the players called Widrick “Coach,” they called Bowser “Doc.” When a player got hurt, he often went to Bowser instead of the trainer.

“I’m a heart doctor,” Bowser would say. “All I know about legs is that you’ve got two of ‘em.”

Eventually, the players started taking Bowser seriously, especially when he read books and watched videotapes and dissected defenses and came up with new wrinkles for the Cazenovia defense. But to some of the Wildcats’ upperclassmen, Bowser is still affectionately known as “Doc.”

“That’s why he ran us so hard in practice,” said former captain Chris Comino, smiling. “He knows if anything happens, he’ll take care of us.”

Still plenty to learn

Based in large part on a recommendation from Todd Widrick, new Cazenovia athletic director Matt Newman hired Bowser, 60, as Widrick’s replacement. So far, it has been everything Bowser had hoped for—except for the wins and losses. In 2005-06, the Wildcats won eight games and lost 18.

“We need to be better and I need to be better,” Bowser said. “I wasn’t a great cardiologist overnight, and I won’t be a great basketball coach overnight.”

But there are encouraging signs. The Wildcats are improving, Bowser said, and they never give up.

“A lot of (opposing) coaches after the games have said, ‘Your guys played hard, coach, right to the end,’ and that’s what I want from them,” Bowser said. “Sometimes we can play better, but we always play hard.”

While Bowser and the Cazenovia players are growing and learning together, Bowser is also trying to teach them life lessons. Last year, for example, the Wildcats “adopted” an Army unit from Fort Drum and invited the soldiers to a game before they left for Iraq. The idea, Bowser said, was to support the troops and make his players aware there’s more to life than basketball and school work.

“To me, it’s watching young guys grow up and watching them blossom into responsible adults,” Michael Bowser said. “I hope that 10 years from now, they’ll call me up and let me know what they’re doing.”

And what about Bowser in 10 years? What if the next time, Bobby Knight extended a permanent invitation?

“If a Division I head coach ever came to me and said, ‘You know, I love your love and desire for the game, you can come here,’” Bowser said, “I’d be in heaven.” ■

Year-by-Year Records as Head Coach

YEAR	OVERALL	CONFERENCE
04-05	6-16	4-8
05-06	8-18	7-9
06-07	1-2	0-0
TOTALS	OVERALL	CONFERENCE
	15-34	11-17