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David Stern's Slam Dunk Career

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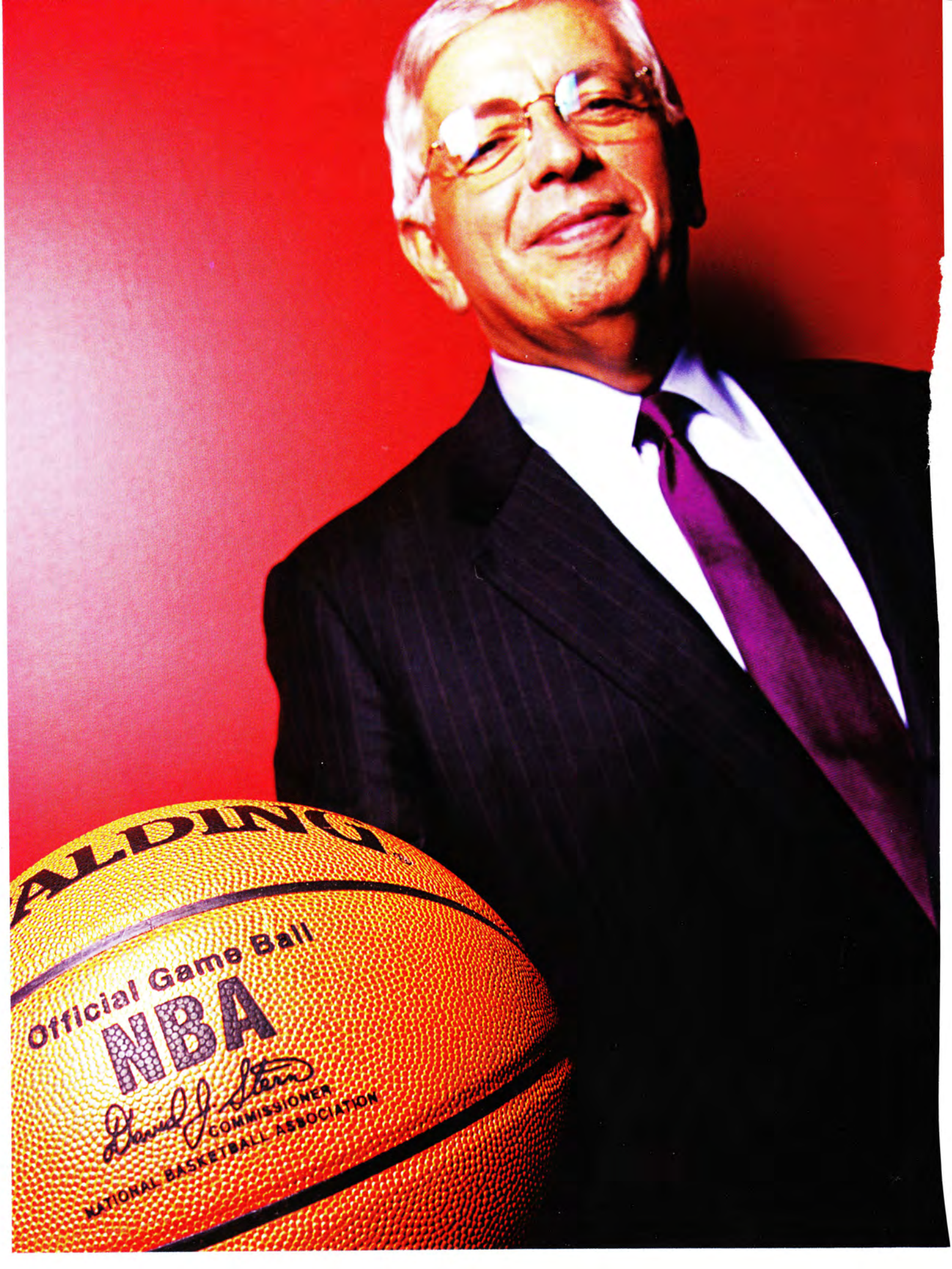
ALDING
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David J. Stern
COMMISSIONER
NATIONAL BASKETBALL ASSOCIATION

STERN ADVICE

David Stern would have you think that his rise to NBA commissioner was an accident. **Guess again**

by Bill Glovin

David Joel Stern (RC'63) has a smile on his famous face as he strides through the Rutgers Student Center. Invited to give a talk on leadership, Stern, the commissioner of the NBA for the past 21 years, is returning to his alma mater as one of the most recognized and accomplished alumni in the university's long history. But Stern's smile also smacks of success, and confidence. It says, "Go ahead, folks, give it your best shot, try and find an issue that I haven't been challenged on or a question I haven't been asked."

After being introduced by former Rutgers President Francis L. Lawrence, who invited Stern to speak to a forum he runs for Rutgers' Center for Organizational Development and Leadership, the 63-year-old commissioner pulls remarks from his pocket, but he won't even glance at them. The public face of the NBA, he has years of experience in front of an audience; speaking to a group of 500 people—a huge crowd for a midday event at Rutgers—is a slam dunk.

"Let me talk to you about the accident," Stern begins, tracing his path from Rutgers to Columbia Law School to a big New York City law firm. The young attorney, a partner by the age of 32, was the firm's go-to guy for 12 years on its NBA account. For Stern, who grew up watching the Knicks in their glory years from the cheap seats at Madison Square Garden, handling matters such as the admission of American Basketball Association teams into the NBA in 1976 was thrilling.

Two years later, Stern wrestled with an offer from then NBA Commissioner Larry O'Brien to become the league's first in-house counsel. At the time, the league was floundering: illegal drug use by players was rampant, franchises were valued at less than $20 million each, and CBS was airing playoff games on tape delay because of low TV ratings. Trusted friends warned Stern that the NBA might be the wrong path. "Partnership in a prestigious law firm had been a cherished lifetime goal, but I didn't want to be looking back in 50 years, saying, 'What if?' So there is a lesson

Photography by Peter Murphy

Fire Away

At a spirited Q & A session, Stern shows he's game

The failure of the U.S. men's basketball team to win the gold medal in the 2004 Summer Olympics was a tremendous disappointment. What are you doing to make sure we win in 2008?

First, I hereby guarantee, on the Banks of the Raritan, that the U.S. men's and women's teams will both win the gold medal in 2008. We're going to do a better job of preparing our players.

Should there be an age minimum to play in the NBA?

Yes. I get more parents coming up to me saying, 'My kid is in the sixth grade, he has no intention in going beyond high school—he's going to the NBA.' Those parents should say to their kids, 'Look, maybe you are going to the NBA, but you better plan for that one year after high school, before you get there.' And that's okay. Maybe that player will go into our development league or to Europe—or maybe he'll go to college. And you know what? Maybe he'll like it and stay because he'll recognize that he isn't as good as he thought he was and that he's ready to get his education.

The violent incident that involved [Indiana Pacers forward] Ron Artest and others has turned some people off to the NBA. What can you do to offset this?

You make a fair point. We have a certain malaise, but some of it is convenient. Don't let code words like "thug" and "punk" fool you. Parts of America are uncomfortable with black athletes with cornrows, tattoos, and gold chains. But I see it as an enormous opportunity. We are going to use basketball's considerable power to demonstrate it's someone's game—not what they look like—that matters. Exhibit A is Allen Iverson. People love him now because they see what he does on the court, which is to give great effort. Bill Bradley said to me, 'I didn't really have any feeling for Iverson and didn't like his attitude. But how can you not love that guy based on what he does to his body every night out on the court.' At the same time, we need to communicate to our players that something said by two or three of them gets applied to 450 other players.

How would one go about getting your job?

My job used to be for lawyers, but it's not necessary anymore. Future sports commissioners will come up through the ranks. Whatever you decide to do, whether it's sports, sales, marketing, accounting, legal—whatever—work as hard as you can at it.

there," he says of his decision to accept O'Brien's offer. "Our lives all have defining moments; that was one of mine."

The NBA's board of governors unanimously chose Stern to succeed O'Brien as commissioner in 1984. He immediately began to solidify his reputation as a gifted labor negotiator when he and his staff forged a collective bargaining agreement with the players' union. The pact introduced a team salary cap for players, a then-radical concept for pro sports.

Like an athlete who finds that it's sometimes better to be lucky than good, Stern points to fortuitous circumstances in his early tenure as commissioner as the reason the NBA is today a $3 billion-a-year business. On the heels of an on-the-court rivalry between Magic Johnson and Larry Bird came Michael Jordan, who was blossoming into an international phenomenon and fueling new interest in Stern's NBA. The three stars helped TV and merchandising revenue and corporate sponsorships reach unprecedented levels. Meanwhile, ratings and attendance reached all-time highs and players were making more money than they ever dreamed of.

Stern may understate his role, but others do not. Labeled everything from dictator and micromanager to master salesman, marketing genius, and the most successful commissioner in the history of sports, he has come down hard against on-the-court violence and even tweaked the rules of the game. He has gotten the drug problem under control and kept the union and the players united. He has closed and built new markets and increased the value of franchises. Gary Bettman, who worked for Stern before becoming the commissioner of the National Hockey League, once said that Stern "is the only negotiator who walks away from the table with both sides liking him." Others who have seen him negotiate say he always looks into the eyes of the players seated at the table, not those of union officials.

Stern says that if there is any one thing that he has done to help his league evolve, it has been his ability to understand change. He pulls a cell phone out of his pocket and holds it up. Someday a device this size, he says, will contain "all knowledge, the Bible, and every book ever written. Google will be a quaint recollection. Whatever you do is changing before you even get to do it. And if that sounds confusing or gives you a headache, it should, because that's life."

Further evidence that life can indeed take a dramatic turn comes before Stern's talk when the distinguished commissioner—a man who has negotiated $100-million deals and schmoozed with the world's wealthiest and most powerful people—breaks into a huge grin at the memory of being a first-year student in New Brunswick wearing "this ridiculous-looking beanie to the Rutgers–Princeton football game and having a Princeton student swipe it."

After growing up in the Chelsea section of Manhattan, he and his family moved to Teaneck in his early teens, where he graduated from high school in 1959. The fact that he tested out of a year of school in New York City meant that Stern was only 16 years old when he moved into Room 211 at the Wessels dormitory in the College Avenue quad. "I was a pretty unsophisticated kid, majoring in history, taking a lot of poli-sci courses, and staying up all night to study calculus and still getting a D," says Stern, failing to mention that he was also a Henry Rutgers Scholar.

As someone who had grown up around lean pastrami and fresh rye bread at his father's deli near Madison Square Garden, he recalls spending a fair amount of time exploring local eateries to escape the dining hall fare. His memories of his time on the Banks include speedball in the College Avenue gym, debating in class whether one has a soul, and Sigma Alpha Mu fraternity, where he was an officer and pledge master. "At the time, I think tuition was $250 per semester, and I always felt indebted to the state for providing me with the opportunity to go to college," he says.

Although he serves on the Rutgers University Foundation Board of Overseers and helps raise money for the annual fund and minority scholarships, he doesn't get back to campus often. Stern, who lives with his wife, Dianne, in Scarsdale, New York, and has two grown sons, has spoken at commencement and received an honorary degree in 2004. "David's been great to Rutgers; he's been there whenever we've asked," says Dick Lloyd, former vice president of alumni relations. The evening before his talk, Stern quietly came to Cook College to speak to a group of 20 minority students about careers and business—a gesture that reaffirms Lloyd's description.

Back in the student center, Stern tells the audience that the only time he consciously thought about leadership was at the start of the 1991 season, when Magic Johnson was diagnosed as HIV positive and the world wondered how the NBA would handle it. He and his staff consulted with an infectious disease expert and decided to allow Johnson to play in the All-Star Game later that season. Johnson ended up winning the game for his team and Stern hugged him on TV before millions of viewers.

As a result, Johnson, today a successful investor in minority communities, became the public face of AIDS and created a new perception: that people who are HIV positive are capable of leading normal lives. Says Stern, "It was one of my most challenging periods—and probably the best thing we've ever done."

Stern also is proud of the WNBA, a pro summer league for women founded by the NBA in 1997. He says that it's important that young women participate in sports and while the WNBA is still young and evolving, he is committed to its survival. "Look at your Lady Knights," Stern says enthusiastically, referring to the Scarlet Knights women's basketball team's successful run in the NCAA tournament in 2005. He refers to the 2004 NCAA Championship game featuring UConn star Diana Taurasi, pointing out that, at the time, it was the highest-rated basketball program—

Stern in his 1963 *Scarlet Letter* yearbook photo.

> "I was a pretty unsophisticated kid, staying up all night to study calculus and still getting a D."

men's or women's—in the history of ESPN. "That's simply not acknowledged by most male journalists," he says.

The NBA recently launched its own cable TV station and a developmental league, but it is globalization that will be the commissioner's legacy. Last season 81 players from 35 countries and territories outside the United States accounted for 16 percent of the league's rosters, compared with only 6 percent a decade ago. "Sports is the canary in the mind of globalization; it tells us everything," he tells the audience. Stern predicts that by the end of the next decade, "there will be multiple NBA teams in Europe," either as regular expansion franchises or in a separate league.

Before Stern signs off, he takes questions from students on the failure of the 2004 U.S. Olympic hoops team, underpaid WNBA players, and spoiled teenage millionaires. No topic fazes him. A student holds up a "Free Artest" sign, referring to the controversial, season-long suspension that Stern imposed on Indiana Pacers forward Ron Artest for going into the stands to fight with fans. "I'll get to that in a minute," he says, a trace of bemusement in his voice. When he responds, it's with a tone that implies he's addressed the issue countless times before: "I met with Ron and found him to be a thoroughly decent young man. We reconsidered the suspension, determined that Ron still has some work to do, and will return this coming season."

At a postevent luncheon for students in the forum class and their guests, Stern signs autographs, poses for photos, and graciously accepts Rutgers athletic garb. He's in no hurry to get back to his Manhattan office. For now, he's in the moment—and his smile says that it's good to be back at Rutgers. ❑

Bill Glovin is senior editor of RUTGERS MAGAZINE.