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Still Walking Tall

Titan great Jack Sikma '77 talks about life as an NBA coach and reveals why he chose Illinois Wesleyan.



As an assistant coach for the Houston Rockets, Sikma (above) teaches players mental as well as physical aspects of the game. (Bill Baptist /Courtesy of theHouston Rockets)

Story by Joel Brigham '04

While attending a Bulls game at Chicago's United Center last December, I found myself in the locker room of the opposing Houston Rockets, patiently waiting for a legend.

As a sportswriter covering the National Basketball Association, I routinely interview the game's biggest stars, but none had roused the unique sense of excitement I felt in the presence of Jack Sikma. Now an assistant coach for the Rockets, Sikma is best known as the All-Star center who led the Seattle SuperSonics to an NBA title in 1979.

Sikma and I both grew up in the same part of Illinois, but something more personal drew me to seek out this particular interview; we also share a college alma mater: Illinois Wesleyan University.

Since learning as a student that Sikma was a fellow graduate, I had wondered why a 6-foot-11 top prospect, with offers from some of the most reputed college basketball programs in the nation, would choose instead to attend a small, liberal arts university in Central Illinois.

At the United Center, after drawing up plays on a dry-erase board, chatting strategy with players and facilitating a pre-game shootaround, Sikma graciously agreed to take the time to answer that question, as well as many others.

Not surprisingly, the first Wesleyan name he mentioned was Athletic Director Dennie Bridges, who retired as the Titan men's basketball coach in 2001 after 36 seasons. Sikma was a senior playing basketball for St. Anne High School in Kankakee County, Ill., when he first met the man he still refers to simply as "Coach."

"My Illinois Wesleyan success starts with Coach, who was a very important person in my life" — and remains so, Sikma said. In fact, he and Bridges still get together for the occasional round of golf and remain close friends.

In his 2002 book, *A Dunk Only Counts Two Points*, Bridges recalls his first impressions of Sikma as he watched him play for St. Anne in December 1972. "Jack was as tall as I'd heard he was, and actually looked maybe taller than 6-foot-9 because he definitely was as skinny as I'd heard. He looked a little like the Dutch Boy on the wrapper of the paint can with a mop of floppy blond hair. ... The next morning when I got to my office, I told

Coach [Jack] Horenberger about seeing Jack play. I told him that if I could recruit Jack that ‘he would be the greatest player in Illinois Wesleyan history.’”

While Bridges was the first college coach to seriously recruit Sikma, he wouldn’t be the last. In March 1973, Sikma scored 100 points in the four-game state Class A tournament series in Champaign that saw St. Anne take a 30-1 record into the semifinal round. After that, several big-time programs recruited Sikma, including the University of Illinois. But, in the end, he was persuaded by Bridges’s arguments that at Wesleyan he would be a “real college student,” and that he would be able to play as a starting center his freshman year. (“In 36 years, Jack was the only player that I promised a starting job,” Bridges wrote.)

Sikma also factored into his decision the fact that IWU’s schedule at that time included several Division I schools. “In recruiting me, Coach said that the issue of me being seen and recognized was not going to be a problem, and I agreed with him there,” Sikma said. “Back then you could schedule majors a lot more easily, so we played a lot of the major schools in the area. We usually took a trip over Christmas break and played a couple majors then as well. That was really important.”

The kicker for Sikma, however, was that he wasn’t going to ride the bench behind other prospects at a bigger school. At Illinois Wesleyan, there would be no doubt as to who would lead the team.

“I was a late bloomer,” Sikma said, “and I wanted to play right away. I knew I was going to get a chance to get on the floor and play, and the competition in that league was pretty good. There were some good players there, so early in my career the fact that I got to play was a big plus.

“As time went on and I became more recognized, things opened up for me even though I played ball [at a smaller school].”

Sikma was indeed noticed. In each of his last three seasons as a Titan, the team won conference championships and advanced to the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics tournament in Kansas City. To this day he is still Illinois Wesleyan’s all-time leading scorer (2,272 career points) and rebounder (1,405 rebounds). His play at IWU was so effective that in 1977 the Seattle SuperSonics selected Sikma with the eighth overall pick in the NBA Draft.

His accolades in the NBA are extensive. A seven-time NBA All-Star, Sikma helped lead the Sonics to their first and only championship in 1979, which was only his second year in the pros. To this day he holds Seattle’s team records for total rebounds (7,729) and free throws made (3,044).

One of the most prolific free-throw shooting centers in the history of the game, Sikma is one of very few at that position ever to have led the league in free-throw shooting percentage; he did it in 1988 by shooting 92.2 percent from the charity stripe.

After all that, it's no wonder that his jersey has been retired both by IWU and the Seattle SuperSonics.

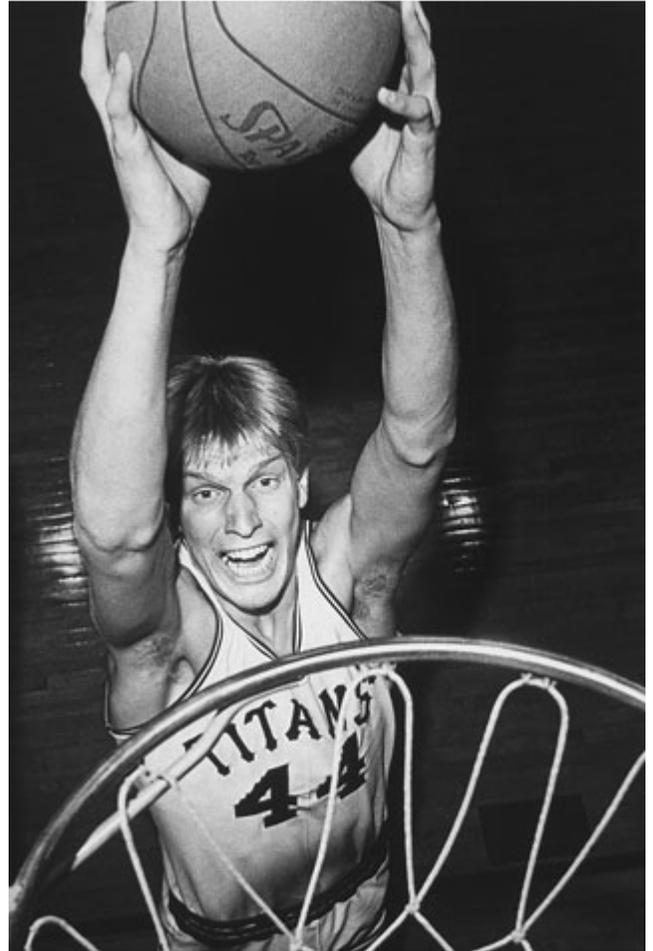
Sikma credits Bridges for preparing him for the demands of playing in the NBA. "Just having the opportunity to get to know him and play for him — that set me up really well for my career because I was very fundamentally sound when I got to the league. Coaches notice that, and that got me playing time on the court. With that, if you're able to execute and do well, then you'll be able to play."

Beyond basketball, Sikma rates his Illinois Wesleyan experience positively, both academically (he majored in business administration and was an Academic All-American) and socially.

"Wesleyan was just a great environment to learn," he said. "Socially it was a really fun campus, and I made a lot of really good friends. I still hold many of those and stay in touch with as many of them as I can. It was the right spot for me, and I'm really glad that I ended up there." Some of those friends came from playing basketball, some from classes, and some from the Sigma Chi fraternity, of which Sikma was a member.

No matter if he's living in Seattle or Houston, Sikma still thinks of Illinois as home. "I've got a lot of family in the area south of [Chicago], and I really don't get to see them much in the last few years," Sikma admitted. "But life gets busy. ... It was a great place to grow up, and basketball was such a big deal in town. I just have so many fond memories of taking the court with my buddies and taking on anybody."

After being traded to Milwaukee in 1986, Sikma retired from the NBA as a player in 1991 and returned to the Seattle area, where he used his business-administration skills to run a golf-course management company and devoted much of his time with his wife, Shawn, raising their three boys (son Luke is currently a guard for the University of Portland Pilots).



Above, a well-known publicity photo from his days as a Titan. (Marc Featherly)



Above, the “Super Seven Plus One” from the 1976-77 Titans basketball team. Though recruited by bigger schools, Sikma (first row, left), was persuaded by Coach Bridges (second row, left) to come to Illinois Wesleyan and be a “real college student.”

opportunity to coach these outstanding athletes and amazing people is fun, and I’m excited about coming to work every day.

“The NBA and the competition is so tough, and though there are times when you get the bug and wish you could still be out there, this is the next best thing to it. The ballgame, the 48 minutes out there, to be all in with your team is unique, and I enjoy doing whatever it takes and helping wherever I can to put us in a position to win.”

It’s not all about basketball, however. Like Coach Bridges with a young Jack Sikma, it’s about developing burgeoning young minds — turning athletes into mature, intelligent people.

“I hope not only to do the physical work and help them through the physical aspect of the game, but to also talk with them about concepts and why, so that they start looking at a bigger picture, the mental side, and why you do it this way. Many of my conversations are discussions back and forth, ‘What do you think? What do you see?’

“I really enjoy evaluating a player and his skills. ... I like the puzzle and working through the puzzle. That’s what coaching is.”

When our interview was over, I shook Sikma’s large hand and thanked him for his time, which he insisted he was more than happy to offer. He then hurried back out to the court to work more with players preparing for the game as Bulls fans filtered into their seats.

The Rockets would go on to win by 18 points that night, and while most people were there to watch Tracy McGrady or Yao Ming, I watched the game that night with a close eye on Sikma. Illinois Wesleyan University has had its fair share of legends, but when it comes to the game of basketball, none are bigger than him.

This story’s author, Joel Brigham ’04, is a writer and editor for HOOPSWORLD.com and HOOPSWORLD Magazine.

Sikma always considered going back to the NBA and when his sons had grown into their teens he decided the time was right, rejoining the Sonics as special assignments coach prior to the 2003-04 season. This past summer, he was added to the Houston Rockets’ staff specifically to help bring along international superstar Yao Ming.

Currently the tallest NBA player at 7-foot-6, Yao played professional basketball in China before being selected by Houston as the first overall pick of the 2002 NBA draft. Sikma has worked with Yao on tweaking fundamental skills such as footwork, balance and passing, while also teaching him a move known around the NBA as “The Jack Sikma,” an inside pivot into a jump shot that was perfected by Sikma under Bridges’ guidance at Illinois Wesleyan.

Sikma understands that coaching is all about passing along what you know. “I really enjoy working with the players,” he admitted with the grin of a proud father. “Position-wise, I spend a lot more time with the [big players], but having the