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Winning

With Good Kids

A Virginia Basketball Retrospective

by Linda Hobgood (Col '75, Grad '76)

When I arrived on the Grounds of Mr. Jefferson's academical village 30 years ago, two readily apparent conditions seemed to dominate if not define the life of the University. The first was cultural. A year of coeducation had been successfully completed; as planned, the percentage of women arriving in the fall of 1971 exceeded the percentage of the previous entering class. The mixed feelings that so often accompany change were felt at the University. Even those who favored coeducation understood the nostalgia of others. Indeed, there would be no turning back. Shops on the Corner, hours at Memorial Gym, selected dormitory conversions all reflected the new demographics at Virginia, and if not every member of the faculty and student body at "the old U" was elated at the prospect of having women as four-year students and classmates, neither were they inhospitable. These were, after all, Virginia gentlemen; relations were, at worst, polite.

The second condition was easier to discern, for it was one of the heart. The inhabitants of Mr. Jefferson's University, his treasured Charlottesville and Albemarle County were a people crazy in love. They had, to a person it seemed, become enamored with basketball and the players who wore the Virginia uniform. Having advanced beyond all expectations in 1970-71 Atlantic Coast Conference play, this team had achieved the unprecedented: it had been ranked in the nation's top twenty. Life in central Virginia has not been the same since.

Portraits and game highlight photos of the "Amazin' Cavaliers," as they were being called, were featured everywhere that autumn, in the orientation materials and local newspapers, on the complimentary calendars distributed at the University Bookstore. The windows of Mincer's, Eljo's, The Virginian, and those of almost every shop on the Corner proudly displayed the new 1971-72 season posters. Every bank lobby and eating establishment at Barracks Road Shopping Center was likewise bedecked. Academic department bulletin boards, heretofore reserved for curricular notices, had tacked in a central spot the schedule of upcoming home games.

With all due apologies to the Scott Stadium enthusiasts, it was obvious to any newcomer back then that football was something folks enjoyed while waiting for basketball

season to begin. For a first-year student from the Buckeye state, this was at least different. At the same time, one could not inhabit the Grounds for very long without realizing that ACC basketball was unlike anything anywhere else. Of the schools in the conference, Virginia was now a major contender. To have an opportunity to see the games, it was necessary to spend the night in University Hall. One had to arrive in the mezzanine by eight o'clock in the evening prior to the box office opening the following morning to have any hope of finding a place for a sleeping bag or getting a ticket. No one slept those nights. Some studied, others played cards or board games. Still others talked basketball, reliving highlights of the previous season.

The head coach, Bill "Hoot" Gibson, was a local hero. His claim, "You can win with good kids," had become the season's motto; print and radio media outlets quoted the familiar phrase throughout the year. His game strategies, his recruiting methods, the crazy way he had of talking out of the side of his mouth (which the fans tried unsuccessfully to imitate), his legendary success with the team, not to mention his phenomenal efforts at public relations qualified him for stardom among the Virginia faithful as the Amazin' Cavs won game after game and made countless appearances at charity events, fund-raisers and local retail grand openings. The sleeping bag veterans informed us that Coach Gibson had his own theme song. As he emerged from the locker rooms and took his place at courtside, the Pep Band would play a rousing version of "Hogan's (renamed Hooter's) Heroes." I had seen Coach Gibson only once. Wearing a burgundy sport coat and driving a car of the same color, he had driven past as my friends and I paused on the sidewalk and stared.

Coach's exalted status was, however, recent. Only two years before, his job had been in serious jeopardy. One bleak season followed another and only Gibson's

most loyal friends thought he could survive much longer. Some claimed that the decision to fire Coach Gibson had been made before the 1969 ACC tournament, but nobody counted on the player revolt that occurred that spring. A couple of players were apparently even more disgruntled than the fans. Their quitting the team made a statement, but had an effect quite opposite to that which they likely imagined. Athletics department administrators, not wishing to be viewed as capitulating to a player mutiny, decided, against their better judgment, to retain Bill Gibson, but made it clear enough that the coming season would likely be his last.

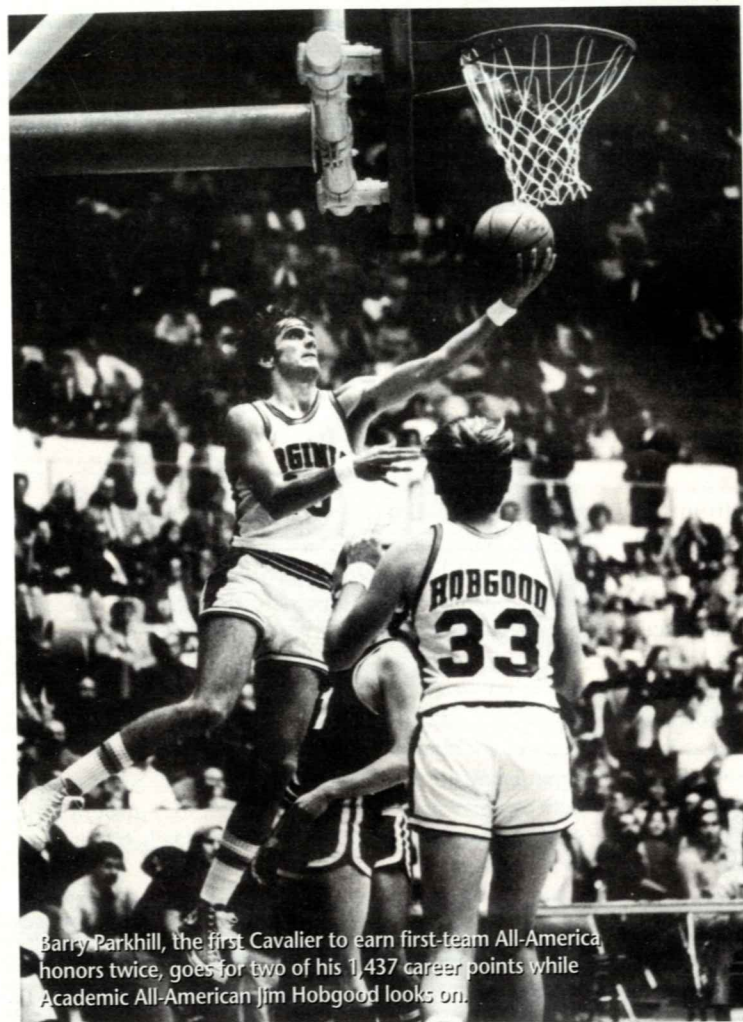


Coach Bill Gibson (front center) and the 1971-72 "Amazin' Cavaliers"

The freshman rule was still very much in place in college basketball in those days. Four first-year Virginia players, who looked forward to joining the varsity ranks in the coming 1969-70 season, watched as the disheartened and dejected coach who had recruited them sought, with an obviously heavy heart, high school players to join the Virginia squad. Scott McCandlish, Frank DeWitt, Chip Miller and Tim Rash took it upon them-



Jim Hobgood and Barry Parkhill



Barry Parkhill, the first Cavalier to earn first-team All-America honors twice, goes for two of his 1,437 career points while Academic All-American Jim Hobgood looks on.

John Aldrich

selves to assist in the process. Such was the atmosphere that greeted three young men who visited the University in the spring of 1969. They came from New York and Pennsylvania, that area of the country with which Gibson himself was most familiar. Larry Gerry was the younger brother of Bill Gerry, a second-year already playing on the team. Barry Parkhill, who came from State College and knew of Gibson's Pennsylvania ties, committed to Gibson early. Jim Hobgood, whose high school team had won the Pennsylvania high school state championship in 1968 (against a team led by one Craig Littlepage) visited Virginia, but was still undecided. Frank DeWitt helped change his mind: "I know if you come, I won't get to play as much. But I still really wish you'd come."

All three young men came from successful high school basketball programs; despite the obvious turmoil, they signed with Virginia. The following fall, Hobgood's parents drove to Charlottesville for a freshman game. Jim's mother admits she cried when, after seeing her son play to packed crowds in high school gyms across western Pennsylvania, she could hear the echo of her own voice in the empty U-Hall arena. But it was all about to change.

Having helped "Hoot" acquire players, the four rising second-years and their teammates went on to claim, over the next three years, some of the most unforget-

table victories in U.Va. history. Athletics director Gene Corrigan called the four games in January 1971 against Clemson, second-ranked South Carolina, Wake Forest and Georgia Tech the week that changed Virginia athletics. Seats that had been an ordeal to fill were in high demand. Local fans and patrons like Landon Birkhead and Mike Carmichael, whose laughter and whistles had also echoed in the hollow coliseum, by January could hardly be heard above the din of a deliriously enthusiastic crowd of cheering fans. I recall commenting to Mr. Birkhead that in researching material for a *Cavalier Daily* article I had learned that some local booster, desperate to fill seats in University Hall had actually bused Boy Scouts from Waynesboro over to Charlottesville for a game. Mr. Birkhead returned my chiding tone with a look that informed me precisely who that benefactor had been and how very far Virginia basketball had come in such a short time.

Mike and Edna Carmichael had been coming to games since their son Norm played on the team in the mid-60s. They had moved from New York to Charlottesville to be part of the local faithful. Mr. Carmichael's piercing whistle reverberated through U-Hall whenever he thought the referees had erred. I used to love watching Mrs. Carmichael feign a certain embarrassment, but she must have realized that his whistle consoled many a frustrated fan over the years.

By the time I arrived, empty seats for ACC basketball games in U-Hall were unimaginable. The fact that less than a decade before, Memorial Gym had been home to the Cavaliers was unthinkable. Chip Conner, who assisted Coach Gibson on the bench, had played his entire career in Mem Gym. Fans had gathered on the indoor track above the gym floor and watched the game, legs dangling, from this narrow perch. A native of Clover, Virginia, Coach Conner was himself a bridge between the Hoot and his players, and often their confidante. Another assistant, Mike Shuler, had come from a head coaching position at VMI. The year before Coach Shuler joined the staff, Virginia was apparently dealing the Keydets a lopsided defeat. During halftime Coach Gibson told his players for the first and only time to "ease up. Their coach is a nice guy." The following fall Shuler was part of the Cavalier coaching staff. A veritable clotheshorse and later NBA head coach, he was among the finest "x and o" strategists the Virginia players had ever seen.

By the opening game, the local frenzy had spread to the 1971 entering class, and conference play had not even begun. Scott McCandlish commented later that he knew things had changed when, after soundly defeating Washington and Lee in the opening game of the season, local sports reporters had found fault with the team's performance. Expectations were at an all-time high on everyone's part. It was a delight that never became routine to see some of my most somber professors in the classroom become wildly unabashed fans in the arena that year.

Back in my dormitory on Alderman Road, we kept a record of wins and losses on the complimentary bookstore calendar posted in the suite. Downstairs there lived a first-year man who so closely resembled one of the players that his roommates nicknamed him "Hobgood."

The success of sophomore Barry Parkhill was such a phenomenon that a song had been written about him. Titled "Mr. B.P.," it was carried in local stores and on every jukebox in every pizza restaurant in town. We practically knew it by heart. Several of the first-year students had friends who knew someone on the team or took classes with one of the players. Word had it that these guys weren't just good players, they were genuine students as well. From collegial conversations, *Cavalier Daily* sports articles and nightly local news commentary, consensus was that these players were congenial, dedicated and as unaffected by the sudden fame as any group of young men could possibly be. They really seemed to be, as Coach Gibson asserted, a group of "good kids" with whom you could win. An invitation to the NIT—Virginia's first in 30 years—was the culmination of the 1971-72 season and evidence to support Gibson's claim.

Meanwhile, I was having a hard time explaining to my parents the U-Hall ticket situation. They couldn't understand why anyone would have to forego the opportunity for a perfectly good night's sleep in one's own dorm just to try to get tickets for a college basketball contest. Their discontent suggested the need to locate a workable alternative. A notice was posted for cheerleading tryouts that spring. I happened to notice.

It turned out to be a fine option, with a near-perfect view of the game. It was fun to watch Maryland's Tom McMillen express his frustration with the referees right before my very eyes or to witness David Thompson of N.C. State appear to take flight whenever he shot the ball. Monty Towe's broken nose was not a pretty sight, but still worth the vantage. University Hall was close to my dorm, so it was a short walk to cheer for each game and head home to study afterward. The seniors on the squad traveled to away games; the rest of us waited our turn to be seniors. I don't recall which of them went to the 1973 Carolina game where Virginia won in Chapel Hill for the first time since 1917, but all of Charlottesville seemed to have been there in spirit. News of the victory set off a celebration from Rugby Road to Vinegar Hill.

"Excuse me, but is this the *real* Jim Hobgood?"

The caller had identified himself as such, and thinking perhaps it was that first-year student we had so nicknamed, I just naturally asked, to eliminate any confusion. Besides, the player Jim Hobgood had graduated. But the pause that followed was so interminable and so awful, that I realized I was indeed talking to the "real" Jim Hobgood. He finally responded, and his voice had a quizzical tone:

"I think so."

If there had been a way to disappear into thin air I would have done it right then and there in the hallway of Mary Munford on that raw day in January of 1974. Fortunately, he was more conversant, and apparently willing to overlook what must have sounded like a ridiculous question. He asked if I'd like to go to dinner.

I managed to make an already awkward introduction even worse. For some reason, having seen me at a recent game against George Washington University, Jim had decided to ask me out. Not wishing to appear igno-

rant of the game or the current squad, I found time between his call and our scheduled dinner to review statistics and records from articles in the local papers tucked away in the reference room at Alderman Library. My favorite, a story about Hobgood written by a young sports reporter named Bill Millsaps, was headlined: "Wrong-Armer Knows Self, Game." He described the left-handed #33 as a pure shooter, witty and self-effacing, with a wry sense of humor. The article alluded to a rare camaraderie among the players, so natural to them that it was easy for others to take for granted. My research completed, I was more than ready for any high-minded basketball conversation that might ensue over supper. As it turned out, we talked of other things. He somehow knew of my interest in politics and love of history. He was studying for his master's degree in gov-



Empty seats were a distant memory as raucous fans packed University Hall to support the 1971-72 team.

ernment and working as a graduate assistant coach along with Scott McCandlish. By the time our coffee arrived, I realized he hadn't even mentioned his playing career. In my eagerness to demonstrate my newly acquired basketball savoir-faire, I opened my mouth to say something but the only thing I could remember was the one game when he had been 0-3 from the floor.

"Too bad about Princeton," I blurted out, to my utter and complete horror. The "wrong-armer" cast me a strange glance, then graciously rejoined: "Yeah, the worst part about it was that my brother brought my niece to the game. The only time she ever saw me play was the night I failed to score."

Sure that he would drop me off at my dorm forthwith, I was surprised when he suggested a movie. Standing in the lobby of a downtown theatre that no longer exists, we were approached by a boy of about ten. The youth gazed up at my escort with pen and paper extended, and Jim inquired as to his name. I didn't realize that this was the natural course of events in the daily lives of the Virginia players and actually wondered briefly whether Jim had paid this young man to impress me. Either way, it worked. I was impressed.

The Amazin' Cavaliers, with whom I became acquainted, were as fine a group of young men off the court as on. They studied hard, most of them, and they kept each other humble. Each player had a nickname, a

routine, a habit that everyone else made fun of. The newer players took the brunt of the practical jokes. Dan Bonner, called "Pins" because of his kneepads, received on a regular basis a tin filled with homemade cookies from his mother. The players would eat all but one cookie, so while poor Pins rarely got to enjoy the lovingly wrapped baked goods, the players became especially fond of Dan's mother. Brian Tully was kindhearted. On a weekend jaunt to the SPCA, he fell in love with and purchased a furry puppy that grew to be the ugliest dog anyone had ever seen.

Life for the players had a surreal quality. Bill Millsaps once wrote his byline in the living room of the players' apartments. Celebrations following games hosted hun-

care of the cooking (something they do to this day), Joe Gieck, Frank McCue, Babe Deputy and a handful of others administered to the health and medical needs of the team. It was a smaller entourage in those days, but loyal to the core.

When Barry Parkhill was drafted by the pros, his parents, who had relocated to Charlottesville, invited us for a farewell meal. They had a cat, a Persian, as I recall. Jim is allergic to cats. Mrs. Parkhill patted Jim's shoulder repeatedly that evening as his eyes filled with tears, reassuring him that Barry would be back to visit, that this good-bye was not forever. It warmed her heart, she said, to see how devoted the players were to each other. Mention of their pet would have been insensitive

at that point. To this day I wonder, though, if the cat didn't actually ease what was a difficult farewell to say the least.

The players did come back to visit. Many returned to see Coach Gibson and his family, to enjoy the warm hospitality of his home, where U.Va. memorabilia covered the walls of his basement. It therefore came as a bit of a surprise when he announced plans to leave Virginia to become head coach at the University of South Florida. Rumor assigned responsibility to increasingly competitive recruiting as Virginia, alone among the ACC schools, refused to relax its academic entrance standards. Gibson had taken his copy of the Garfinkel Report,

which evaluated basketball prospects, to the Admissions Office and was told that two, maybe three, of the top hundred players in the country could qualify for acceptance to the University.

Coach Gibson did not depart alone. He took with him as assistants Chip Conner and Scott McCandlish, one of the finest "good kids." The Hoot realized that Scott had been the heart and soul of the team in some of its darkest hours. He, along with the others from the classes of 1971-73, had carried the Hoot when it mattered most. Just two years after his departure from Virginia, these young men carried him again, this time as pallbearers at his funeral. Bill Gibson's death was untimely. But for his players, his timing in life could not have been better. They were his good kids to the end.

The years that followed were happy ones for Virginia basketball. A pattern had been set that became a legacy.

Davidson's Terry Holland became head coach; success became routine. When, in 1979, Ralph Sampson signed with the Cavaliers, it seemed a pinnacle had been reached. Virginia went on to postseason play in the NCAA Tournament, even to the Final Four. The wrangler and I were married in 1976. That year Wally Walker led the team to its first ACC championship and an automatic berth in the NCAA Tournament. In the spring of 1980, when we brought our six-week-old son, Dan, to U-Hall for the first time, Mr. Birkhead scooped him from my arms and carried him to the highest row in the coliseum, so that the noise of cheering fans would not hurt his tiny eardrums. One of Dan's proudest childhood possessions was the giant button that read, "I saw Ralph Sampson's last game."

In 1984, Jim ran for Congress to succeed the retiring J. Kenneth Robinson, on whose congressional staff he had served for nine years. The campaign was short-lived, but long enough for every teammate to call offering to assist. Jim Sumpter, who had roomed with the players, fashioned a bumper sticker, turning the "o's" in Jim's name into—what else—basketballs. Barry Parkhill did the thing he does best, other than playing basketball, helping to raise money for the campaign. For the players involved it was a labor of love. The nominating convention was held in University Hall; Jim's supporters caucused in the old basketball locker room. There was cheering and frenzy, and while there wasn't a victory, Hobgood's courtside call for unanimous support of the winner sounded perfectly consistent with the spirit of the good kids.

In 1996 he found himself back on the court, but this time with a mike and headset, assisting Mac McDonald's play-by-play with color commentary. Mac had decided to try yet another former player as his radio sidekick. In Jim he found someone whose recollections go back—way back nowadays. It's fun to watch the ever-increasing numbers of fans who bring their radios to the game. For Jim there are few happier moments than when former players appear in U-Hall and stop to say hello. Our son and daughter have had a chance to meet the players about whom they've heard so much, the good kids who keep on coming to Virginia. Hours spent with the broadcast team, and Cavaliers past and present, are without equal.

It seemed important the summer after my mother-in-law sustained heart bypass surgery to drive her from our home in Richmond back to see the University of Virginia. We approached U-Hall, parked and walked inside. She saw the glass case where her son's credentials as an academic All-American had been displayed. We found an unlocked door to the arena, and opening it, I urged her to take a peek at the dimly lit basketball court. She stood in the open doorway for a long while. Finally, I leaned toward her and whispered: "Can you hear the screaming and shouting?"

She looked at me with tears in her eyes but her face aglow. "If I'm very quiet, I can hear it all again."

That's the way it is with me, too. University Hall is like no other basketball arena. I've seen Cole Field House, the Smith Center, Cameron Indoor Stadium, even the old Carmichael Auditorium, but U-Hall is unique. Talk of building a new place finds me, like the foot-

dragers in the matter of coeducation, resistant to change. The older I get, in fact, the more the gym in the closing scene of *Hoosiers* looks like a perfect place to play. None of this helps the recent challenge Terry Holland has assumed, but he is up to the task of building a new home for the Cavalier basketball teams. If the 30-year tradition is to continue, this may be the most important next step. Terry has several key advantages.

Virginia has in Pete Gillen a gem. What other coach quotes spontaneously Victor Hugo, James Joyce and William Shakespeare all in the same speech to alumni and boosters? His Irish red hair and boundless excitement from the sidelines have earned him comparisons to a leprechaun, but no leprechaun ever possessed Pete's New York accent. No leprechaun ever faced the catastrophe that greeted Coach Gillen in Fairbanks, Alaska, when his players and trainer succumbed to food poisoning and somehow managed to win a game. He alone brought them out of their demoralized state and, cheering wildly all the while, coached them to each hard-won victory that season. At last year's Jimmy V tournament in the Meadowlands, the contest between Virginia and Tennessee was a prelude to what was supposed to be the big game. By evening's end, *the* game had been the opening one and Pete's Irish luck belonged to the Cavaliers.

As the team returns from away games and the bus passes Barracks Road and turns into the parking lot of U-Hall, Pete, who is usually very quiet on the ride, stands to give his players a final word. Win or lose, the message is the same. It reflects the character of Pete Gillen: "Remember why you're here. You're here to study and to work hard and to get good grades. And you're representing the finest public university in the nation. Be careful. Get home safe. Get some rest. Practice tomorrow is at ..."

Then there are the fans. In one of those phone calls I won't soon forget, my husband called from Charlottesville last spring, just prior to airtime. He was trying to tell me what was going on outside University Hall, and I thought the connection on his cell phone was fading. But the hesitation was Jim's; he was overcome with emotion at the sight of a virtual city of tents outside the arena. Students were waiting in the cold rain for tickets that wouldn't be distributed for days. They were camped out like Cameron crazies at some other school, shivering but undaunted. "You don't understand," my husband was saying. "This is how it used to be. It hasn't been like this since ... And Pete has been bringing them food. Donuts, pizza and everything. The players have been stopping by to thank everyone for coming out in the cold. You can't imagine how much this reminds me of ..."

Of what? Of how it used to be and is once more? Of dedicated coaches and fans who happen to love basketball? Or is it the players themselves, the men and now the women at Virginia who take to the floor each season to prove that Bill Gibson was right—you can indeed win with good kids. **V**



The last game of the 1972-73 season was an emotional one for graduating fourth-year players (from left) Barry Parkhill, Larry Gerry and Jim Hobgood.

dreds. Fans approached in public places, but the players were always cordial. They never turned away an autograph seeker, and seemed well aware that fame is a fleeting thing. Once, when my parents were in town for a game, we saw Andrew Boninti afterward in a local restaurant. My father told Andrew what a fine player he was and Andrew, noticing my cheerleading uniform, said nice things about me, though he didn't know me at all. Andrew left the restaurant and my dad remarked that he was certainly a nice young man. I remember thinking he was even nicer than my parents realized.

Such kindness was matched by the unfailing support of fans throughout the community. Jimmy and Rachel Graves, who have for years hosted the Virginia basketball camps, accompanied the team to the ACC tournaments and fed all the Cavalier faithful. They created a Graves Mountain Lodge on wheels, and as they took