

Growing up Grizzlies: How I fell in love with the NBA

ca.sports.yahoo.com/blogs/eh-game/growing-up-grizzlies--how-i-fell-in-love-with-the-nba-200436216.html

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2/12/2016

My life changed on March 18, 1999. Well, really, my life changed whenever my dad thought it was a good idea to take his overly energetic five-year-old watch the Vancouver Grizzlies host the Minnesota Timberwolves for his birthday. But the transformation itself took place on that first night at the arena then called General Motors Place.

We drove from our home in North Vancouver over the bridge and into the city, heading toward my greatest adventure yet.

The noise. The lights. The energy. Even from our seats behind the basket way up in the upper deck, I was transfixed by the action on the court. The combination of power and grace. The speed and quickness. I'd never experienced anything like it.

Two things happened that night: The Grizzlies won – I'd realize later how rare that was – and I fell in love with basketball. There was no turning back.

Recognizing their son was smitten, my parents decided to invest in Grizzlies season tickets. A few days before the start of the 1999-2000 season we drove to the arena to pick them up at the team's head ticket office. When we entered the elevator to head back to our car, there were five Grizzlies players inside the elevator on their way down to the court for some shooting practice. I was so awed to be in their presence, and overwhelmingly shy, that when I shook their hands I couldn't utter a single syllable.



It didn't matter to me how bad the team was, and they were a special brand of bad. The win I witnessed over Kevin Garnett and the Timberwolves was one of just eight the Grizzlies had in 50 games that season, and they went 50-119 over the two years that followed. I was in the arena for a few of those wins and many of the losses. If I wasn't there, odds are I watched the game on TV or listened to it on the radio.

On top of all that losing, the franchise was utterly mismanaged and the failing Canadian dollar wasn't helping, either. Thanks to these factors I didn't quite comprehend, the Grizzlies weren't long for Vancouver. My eight-year-old heart broke the day they officially moved to Memphis in 2001. But my love for basketball was forever.

My fandom followed my favourite Grizzlies player, Mike Bibby, to those wildly entertaining Sacramento Kings, and I was, of course, fulfilling my civic duty by passionately backing local legend Steve Nash during his days with the Dallas Mavericks through his MVP seasons with the Phoenix Suns.

How much of an impact did Nash have on the game in Canada? Here's my favourite personal anecdote from growing up in British Columbia: When I began playing in the Steve Nash Youth Basketball program when I was nine years old in 2002 there were six teams in my age group. The next two years there were eight teams. Nash won his first NBA MVP in 2005. The next year, there were 16 teams.

Nash isn't alone, though. From the Raptors' most recent surge into the national consciousness to the Canadian

talent flooding the NBA and NCAA and the increasing quality of play in CIS, the game's growth in our country has been astounding. Every person that's a part of this country's basketball revolution, from writer, to fan, to NBA star has their story.

"I went to Glen Shields Public School [in Thornhill, Ont.]. For me it was always playing behind the school with my friends," Andrew Wiggins told Yahoo Canada Sports at the BioSteel All-Star Kickoff Party. "It was fun, and everyone was competitive."

A month ago I sat down with Jay Triano, the head coach of the Canadian men's national team and a Grizzlies employee for the six years they were in Vancouver, before a Trail Blazers in Portland. At the end of the interview I told Triano my story about growing up with the Grizzlies. He smiled and told me if not for the Grizzlies, he'd probably still be coaching at Simon Fraser University.

I'll never forget how I felt watching the Grizzlies for the first time. And every time I watch (or play) basketball, I fall in love over and over again. Covering the NBA All-Star game in Toronto is a dream come true.

Now about getting a team back in Vancouver...

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