

Bench Strength

With a pair of NBA championships and an Olympic gold medal, why is Brendan Suhr coaching at UCF?

Brendan Suhr opens his desk drawer and begins rummaging. “What is my job title?” he asks rhetorically. He finally finds a business card and reads, “Director of Program Development.” Suhr smiles.

At age 63, he’s beyond worrying about titles or courting the spotlight. Not that he’s ever been concerned with such things — ask his boss. “He coaches coaches,” says Donnie Jones, UCF’s head basketball coach. “He’s a servant-leader. What I mean by that is that Brendan Suhr has the power to lead from behind. And he’s been like that everywhere he’s [worked].”

In the basketball world, Suhr seemingly has worked everywhere. Yet even with his decorated and diverse background in the sport, he’d rather be at UCF than anywhere else.

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“People sometimes ask me, ‘Why are you doing this?’” he says. “I’m honored to do this. Sure, I could be on an NBA staff. ... I’m here because I want to be here.”

Suhr (pronounced “sir”) has been a key participant in some of the most prominent basketball moments of the past few decades. He was Chuck Daly’s assistant throughout the Hall of Famer’s coaching career, which includes back-to-back NBA championships with the Detroit Pistons in 1989 and 1990. Suhr also was the head scout who put together the USA’s gold-medal winning “Dream Team” for the 1992 Summer Olympics – a team that included Michael Jordan, Magic Johnson and Larry Bird – which has been called the greatest assemblage of talent in any sport in history. In addition to the Pistons, he’s coached for the Atlanta Hawks, New Jersey Nets, New York Knicks, Toronto Raptors and the Orlando Magic. He’s also been a head coach, general manager and owner in the Continental Basketball Association (CBA).

So how did Suhr’s path lead to UCF? Friendship.

Pick some prominent names in the coaching ranks – NCAA or NBA – and Suhr likely has a relationship with them. One of those coaches is the University of Florida’s Billy Donovan. When Suhr was an assistant coach with the Magic in the late ’90s, he’d occasionally visit Donovan.

“Brendan is one of the best coach-teachers I’ve ever been around,” says Donovan, who has won two national championships at UF. “He makes you think about how you want to [coach]. ... It’s an incredible gift, because if the decisions you make are not authentic ... it’s not going to come across well.”

One of Donovan’s assistants at the time was a young coach named Donnie Jones. “The first time I met him, I was in awe,” says Jones. “I knew who he was, and I was intimidated. He’d come up to talk ball with Billy, and I just wanted to sit and listen. But Brendan is so approachable. ... Here he was, this guy with such a great résumé, making me feel like I was important.”

Jones and Suhr became friends, and Jones often consulted Suhr for advice, especially after becoming Marshall University’s head coach in 2007. And three years later when UCF courted Jones to take over its program, he again turned to Suhr for input. “It was a tough decision to leave Marshall and come here,” Jones admits. “I remember talking to Brendan, and he had a great vision of what this job could be. He knew what a wonderful city Orlando is and the impact of it being an NBA city. He had a big vision for UCF. And let me tell you, it’s been everything he said it would be and more.”

After Suhr sold Jones on UCF, Jones had to sell Suhr on something — joining him. Suhr was overseeing two companies at the time, and though they dominated a good chunk of his energy, Jones' offer was impossible to refuse.

“It’s not too often in life that you get to work with your best friend. Every day we learn something new basketball-wise and life-wise. We’ve created a culture of getting better.”

In three of their first four seasons together, UCF won 20 or more games. Suhr mostly stays behind the scenes. “I try to help all the coaches on the staff,” he explains. “I help them in their development as coaches, in their personal development. I’m a sounding board, an adviser.”

Offseason, Suhr focuses on speaking and consulting as the founder and president of Off the Court, while also working with motivational speaker Kevin Eastman. He and Eastman created Coaching U LIVE, which offers development in leadership and all other aspects of the coaching profession.

“The best coaches can change lives,” says Suhr. “You’re not teaching basketball; you’re teaching leadership. That thought struck me about 10 years ago — it was an epiphany. With what I do, and especially with Coaching U, I have the ability to change thousands of people’s lives through coaching.”

Jones still can’t believe his good fortune.

“Here is a guy who could be sitting on any NBA bench in the country,” he says. “This is a guy who knows what it takes to win a championship at the highest level. Having him here, and having him as a mentor, is priceless. Brendan gets such a sense of self-satisfaction from helping other people, and he doesn’t care who gets the credit.”

Jones pauses at that last statement. “Actually, he does care,” he adds. “He gets great joy in seeing other people succeed while he remains in the background.”

Others have benefited from Suhr’s generosity as well. If not for Suhr, Los Angeles Clippers head coach Doc Rivers might never have gone into coaching. “I drafted Doc Rivers to the Atlanta Hawks in 1983,” Suhr remembers. “He was the 31st pick out of Marquette. We gave him a two-year contract; he ended up playing 13 years in the NBA.”

When Rivers’ playing career ended, he transitioned into broadcasting. Suhr, however, thought he was better suited elsewhere. “I told him that I thought he’d be a terrific coach,” he says.

Rivers wasn’t interested. Undeterred, Suhr invited Rivers to try working for a few days with his CBA team in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Rivers accepted and had a change of heart. Since then, he’s expressed on several occasions that “when I was playing, I didn’t think I’d find anything I’d enjoy more, but I found it.”

Few people know this backstory about Rivers, who now has an NBA championship under his coaching belt, and Suhr is fine with that. He’s quick to deflect any credit, saying instead, “We’re so lucky to have someone like Doc Rivers in coaching. I’m so proud of him.”

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And Rivers is just one in a long list of NBA legends he has influenced. Suhr coached in two NBA All-Star Games while also helping to develop league luminaries such as Isiah Thomas, Dennis Rodman, Bill Laimbeer, Dominique Wilkins, Penny Hardaway and Kenny Anderson. A defensive mastermind, he helped develop the infamous “Jordan Rules,” a strategy used to counter the offensive prowess of Michael Jordan.

His friendship with Hall of Famer Isiah Thomas is especially tight. Thomas once said this about Suhr's pro coaching credentials: "Brendan is definitely a guy who's been in the fire. He's coached in championship games, and he's been a part of organizations from startups to completion. So he understands how to roll up your sleeves and get dirty.

"I guess the most important thing is that he understands how to respond to being down. This is a league where you're going to be down, but you're going to have to have the resiliency to respond and come back. Brendan understands that and is capable of doing that. He's an extremely hard worker, and his X and O knowledge is beyond question."

It almost sounds like a job evaluation, but it falls short. How do you quantify an impact on a person's life? How do you put something like that into words — much less on a business card?



Suhr's All-Time Starting 5

Of all the superstars Suhr has coached, these five stand out.

1. **Isiah Thomas**, Detroit Pistons: “Inch for inch, pound for pound, Isiah is the best player I’ve ever seen. He was extremely competitive, had a genius basketball IQ, and he was a consummate leader. ... When you look at the other best players of his era — Magic Johnson, Larry Bird and Michael Jordan — he beat every one of them in a playoff series, and with a lesser team, many times.”
2. **Dominique Wilkins**, Atlanta Hawks: “[Dominique is] the human highlight film, the most exciting player I ever coached. He was the best dunker-finisher I ever had in the NBA. ... At his peak, Dominique and Jordan were on par. When they faced off against each other, it provided some of the most memorable plays I’ve ever seen. He and Michael propelled the use of the dunk in the NBA and made them ESPN ‘SportsCenter’ highlights.”
3. **Dennis Rodman**, Detroit Pistons: “He was the best rebounder — offensively and defensively — I’ve ever seen, as well as the best defender. And he came from nowhere, going from a second-round pick to a Hall of Famer. He was one of my favorite guys ever to coach — such a unique personality with a genius basketball intelligence. And the big thing about Dennis was that his will to win was unsurpassed.”
4. **Derrick Coleman**, New Jersey Nets: “Derrick was the prototypical power forward, 6-foot-9 and 250 pounds, with an outstanding inside and outside game. ... As a great power forward, Derrick was right there with Karl Malone and Charles Barkley.”
5. **Bill Laimbeer**, Detroit Pistons: “A really unique player — a 6-foot-10 physical center with a 3-point shot. His will to win, his intelligence and his competitiveness separated him from the rest of the pack. And he was one of the best teammates I ever had on a team. Everyone in the league hated Bill Laimbeer, but when you coached him he was one of your favorite players.”