

## Profile

Mike Woodson



PHOTO BY ANDREW D. BERNSTEIN



PHOTO BY COLBY KIDD

# Holding Court

BY PATRICK JONES

**I**t has been a quarter of a century, but Atlanta Hawks head coach Mike Woodson clearly remembers his first round of golf. A senior at Indiana University in 1980, Woodson was cajoled onto the school's golf course by Hoosier basketball teammates Randy Wittman and Ted Kitchel.

"I told them before we teed off, 'Listen guys, if I hit a golf ball over in the woods, I'm not going to go look for it,'" Woodson recalls. "They said, 'Woody, obviously you don't know how much these golf balls cost.' I didn't care. I was never a

guy who hung out in the woods."

Now 25 years on, Woodson remains adamant about staying out of the woods – this time in a figurative sense. Entering his second season at the helm of the Hawks, Woodson is charged with the imposing task of leading a long-struggling franchise back to NBA respectability. The team has not reached the playoffs since 1999. What's more, almost a generation has passed since the Atlanta Hawks reached their zenith, when a team that included Dominique Wilkins, Tree Rollins,

Jon Koncak, Kevin Willis and Woodson's IU teammate Wittman was a single game away from reaching the conference finals before being denied by the Larry Bird-led Boston Celtics.

The Hawks' most recent season concluded with just 13 wins in 82 games. It was a losing run that is mostly unfamiliar to Woodson, who's accustomed to a lifetime of basketball success both as a player and a coach. Woodson was the Big Ten Conference's most valuable player in his senior season at Indiana while playing for Bobby Knight. He was a first-round pick by the New

year" as he implemented a new system with a lineup filled with unseasoned players. He also cites his players' attitudes as positive byproducts of last season.

"There were games when we could have thrown in the towel, but our guys never quit," he says. "We lost 25 games by five or less points, so that means that we were in a lot of games that we had chances to win.

"With me being a first-year head coach at this level and with a lot of inexperienced players, we just didn't get it done down the stretch,"

Woodson says. "Those are the things that I have to help my guys with to get over the hump. I have to get 12 players who believe in each other and who believe in what I am doing and what my staff is doing. That's how you grow as a team."

Acquiring and developing superstar talent is also a requisite to achieving success in the NBA. The Hawks added the University of North Carolina's Marvin Williams with the second overall pick in this year's NBA draft. They also picked up Arizona's Salim Stoudamire, who led the nation last season in three-

point shooting percentage.

Woodson was impressed with Williams' shooting range during pre-draft workouts and anticipates that he will eventually develop into a 6-foot-10 power forward – something the Hawks could "desperately use" in their system.

"I will push Marvin slowly, teach him how we want to play and, hopefully, he'll pick up things quickly and learn as he goes along," Woodson says. "But I won't put any added pressure on him to be rookie of the year and to lead us in scoring and rebounding. I would never do that to a young man coming into our league. He has to find his niche, and I have to help him do that."

In fact, the only discouraging words you'll hear from Woodson these days are on the state of his comatose golf game. "Coaching has almost killed it," he says.

Woodson became a serious student of golf while still playing with the Houston Rockets. He fell hard for the game, almost to the degree that

## THE WOODSON FILE

**Home course:** Willow Fork Country Club (Katy, Texas)

**Handicap:** As low as 11, but in the low 20s since he started coaching

**Low score:** 75 (Bear Creek Golf World in Houston)

**Dream foursome:** Tiger Woods, Phil Mickelson, Michael Jordan

**In the bag:** Titleist driver and fairway wood, Callaway irons, Snake Eyes wedges (52, 56 and 60), Callaway flatstick putter, Titleist Pro V1 golf balls



PHOTO BY COLBY KIDD

**Woodson on his coaching mentors:** "I have always spoken highly of Bobby Knight. He was instrumental in my basketball career on and off the floor. I think he's the greatest college coach that has ever coached the game. He and I are very, very close. But I have learned from a lot of guys. Cotton Fitzsimmons was the guy who got me started as a coach in the pros. I worked with Chris Ford, George Karl, Randy Wittman and, of course, Larry Brown, who I think has one of the greatest minds for the game of basketball. The guy is brilliant. He also has a way of getting his message across to his players, and that's why he's been very, very successful."

York Knicks in the 1981 NBA draft. Prior to landing his gig in Atlanta, Woodson was the top assistant coach under Larry Brown with the world champion Detroit Pistons.

As steel is forged by fire, the 47-year-old Woodson emerged from the setbacks of his rookie season as a head coach with stronger resolve. He exudes optimism as he examines the lessons learned and looks to the future.

For starters, he applauds the Atlanta Hawks fans, noting they were "tremendous to us last

it rivaled basketball – the game that has steered his life – for his full affections.

“Basketball has always been my joy and love, but I started playing golf back in 1987 or 1988, and I think it is the greatest game ever,” Woodson says. “In my second life, I would love to come back as a golfer. It’s a mental game. It’s a competitive game. It’s a beautiful game, and I love everything golf has to offer.”

Once as low as an 11 handicap, Woodson estimates that his index has doubled since he started stalking courtside with a play board at the ready. His rapid ascent to the heights of the NBA coaching ranks has mirrored the slow descent of his golf game.

“At one time I was playing pretty good golf that I felt comfortable with and was happy about my game, and it’s just not that way anymore,” Woodson says. “It’s frustrating, but it’s not frustrating. I’m realistic that you have to play this game regularly to be a good player, and I just don’t get to play that much anymore.”

Perhaps Woodson’s greatest accomplishment in golf is “Woody’s Club,” a youth program he created in Houston, where he made his home after retiring as a player. For five years, prior to entering coaching full time, Woodson organized summer camps revolving around golf. The program, which attracted as many as 250 kids for each of the five-week sessions, can accurately be described as a precursor to The First Tee program.

Woody’s Club provided T-shirts, hats, golf clubs and free meals. Speakers made presentations to the attendees, and a season-ending, nine-hole golf tournament was staged at Woodson’s home course.

“It took young kids and put them in a whole different atmosphere from what they had ever experienced,” Woodson says. “We didn’t just teach them how to play golf. We taught them how to dress, golf etiquette, how to speak and how to carry themselves. Some of the kids even went on to receive college golf scholarships.”

Mike Woodson never did like the woods. He gives it his all to steer others clear as well. ♦

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