

## Gym rat found his 'soul major'

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Published: Wednesday, September 24, 2008 at 1:00 a.m.

Last Modified: Tuesday, September 23, 2008 at 7:10 p.m.

Zach Hilferding broke every basketball scoring and rebounding record at Bradenton Christian high school. "Zach was the pioneer; he put Bradenton Christian on the map for basketball," said Jannon Pierce, BCH director of admissions.



CORRESPONDENT PHOTOS / JENNIFER SHEA Zach Hilferding, center, Sarasota Family YMCA director of sports, with Klajdi Mulla, left, 16, and Johnny Attanasov, 14. Klajdi, 16, plays on the YMCA basketball travel team. He also coaches the younger players. Hilferding, "emphasizes respect and responsibility," Klajdi says. "He's a great role model." Johnny plays ball, but he is also in training to become a middle school basketball referee. "I would love to ref professionally. I learn so much from Mr. Murray and from Zach," he says.



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Zach Hilferding, above, "put Bradenton Christian on the map for basketball," said Jannon Pierce, director of admissions. Hilferding's overriding passion for youths and sports led the former basketball star to his current position at the YMCA.

Between athletic and academic scholarships, Manatee Community College paid him to attend.

Hilferding's success as a small forward at Bradenton Christian allowed him, in his junior year, to lead his team to the best record in the school's history, 27-3.

He was All Conference, All State; he averaged 16 points and 16 rebounds per game.

Hilferding was so well acclimated to victory, after graduation from MCC he set his sights on the University of Florida Gators and Coach Billy Donovan.

Hilferding admits a cocksure approach, "I was known as a leaper, blocking shots." he said. "The MCC team I played on had the two best years that they had ever had."

Hilferding turned down scholarships to three Division II schools to walk on at Florida. He was elated when he made the travel team.

A few days later, Hilferding was bumped from the travel team because a player with equal talent had a grade point average that exceeded Hilferding's solid 3.0.

He was devastated, so disappointed, he said, "I didn't want to play basketball anymore."

His dream, his assumption that he would continue to play basketball throughout his academic career, was in ashes.

He floundered, changing his major three times.

Hilferding credits his faith in God, nourished, he said, at BCH, and the self-confidence that his mother, Vicky Clendenen, imbued in him, with surviving his disappointments at UF. "At the time, boy, I really felt like a failure," Hilferding said.

He eventually rebounded and won Intramural Championships, beating Coach Billy Donovan, one-on-one and Gator players in a game of three-on-three.

After dropping business administration and psychology classes, Hilferding settled on physical education, just trying to graduate.

During his teaching internship at a Gainesville middle school, Hilferding felt the tug of his true calling, what he refers to as his "soul major."

"I realized that the kids didn't respect their coach; they would not listen." Hilferding intuited that a "huge void" existed in youth sports.

After three years at UF, Hilferding left without a degree, but with a new passion.

He returned to Bradenton.

"It was a tough time, financially," Hilferding said, but he insists that God had a plan for him.

Hilferding felt that coming home without a degree, without a basketball-related job, was humiliating, but, he smiled, "If I had not taken a job at Anna Maria Oyster Bar, waiting tables to make ends meet, I would never have met Jillian." Hilferding dated Jillian Thomas for four years; they wed Oct. 20, 2007. "Sometimes," he said, grinning philosophically, "God works in strange ways."

Hilferding took a series of jobs, bartending at the Ritz-Carlton, and personal trainer and manager of the Bradenton Gold's Gym, jobs that supported him financially but did not feed his soul.

Hilferding was still in college playing shape when he was offered a part-time position with the Bradenton YMCA, refereeing basketball games.

"I found out that I was really good with the kids and the parents," Hilferding said, laughing. "Back when I was playing, I always told the refs that I could do their job. I was right."

More than a few years past, and on a whim, Hilferding walked into the ESJ YMCA in Sarasota to chat with YMCA Director Greg Smith about a Sports Director position.

Smith said, "We hired him on the spot."

Hilferding consciously chose the kids over money August of 2005.

Within three months, Hilferding expanded the sports programs; offering soccer and football leagues instead of the routine camps.

He initiated basketball leagues for toddlers through adults. He developed a youth T-ball program. His sports programs grew more than 100 percent.

Hilferding asked his friend, Jim Murray, an extraordinary referee and former Division I player at St. Peters College, Jersey City, N.J., to help train his budding refs. He recently expanded the basketball program to include refereeing.

He has trained his staff so well that his department ran seamlessly with teenage volunteer Johnny Attanasov, at the helm. Johnny, 14, a Riverview High School freshman, was in charge of the gym while Hilferding attended a YMCA trip to Prague.

Another of Hilferding's basketball travel team players, Klajdi Mulla, 16, is learning to coach as well as referee.

The Prague trip was born of a casual inquiry by Hilferding. A general conversation with Mike VanHewyn, director of YMCA International sports, led Hilferding to request permission to attend the European Alliance of YMCAs. An international conference is held once every five years in Prague.

YMCA CEO Carl Weinrich approved the trip.

The trip, Hilferding said, was phenomenally successful, once he endured the 40-hour journey to Prague.

"It was scheduled to be an 11-hour trip," Hilferding's blue eyes transform swiftly to green, but "engine problems, connection tribulations and language issues caused interminable delays." Once Hilferding arrived, "it was perfect."

YMCA staff from Denmark, Switzerland, Norway, Finland, Germany and the United States worked together to educate teens on physical fitness.

Hilferding provided the equipment and education for the American sports; flag football, ("a huge hit," he said), dodge ball, basketball, baseball, kick ball and ultimate Frisbee.

Hilferding was happy to teach in Prague, but more elated to return home and realize that his "gym rats," as he affectionately refers to Johnny and Klajdi had performed their duties seamlessly.

"You know, I always thought I'd be a varsity or a college coach, not a sports director, but I realize that I love it. It's not work for me; I sincerely enjoy teaching and influencing the next generation of kids."

"My Grandpa told me that if you love doing something, do it, even if it's a sacrifice. Eventually, it'll work out.

"I fit at the YMCA. Our values are the same."

Hilferding is, he said, "at peace."

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