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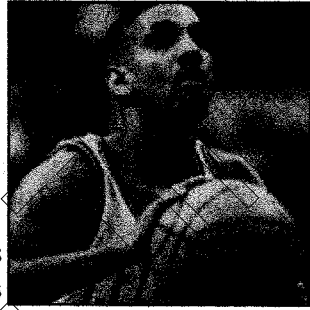
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**SPORTS**

**Celtic Pride**  
**NCC Hoops Coach A.J. Wynder Fulfilled a Dream in Boston**  
 By Joshua Casper

Nassau Community College men's basketball head coach A.J. Wynder once held a job cleaning toilets. The thought of playing in the NBA was a distant dream, even though he'd constantly remind himself that Larry Bird was once a garbage man.



Seven years later, when the Boston Celtics were playing the New Jersey Nets, Celtics coach Chris Ford called Wynder's name. Wynder was going into the game—for Larry Bird.

It was a call that once seemed destined, even before Wynder's life took an abrupt turn. At 18 the future seemed bright for Wynder, who was born in the Bronx and attended St. Agnes High School in Rockville Centre. He was preparing for his first season as a point guard at the University of Massachusetts when he was stabbed in the abdomen during a fight, avoiding death by a mere two inches to the right. He lost 30 pounds after the incident and had to withdraw from UMass. Wynder went to Virginia to live with his grandmother, taking a job at a nearby Army base.

"I had to clean the latrines and the bathrooms. That was how I sustained myself," Wynder recalls. "It helped me mature as a person. I asked myself: How was I going to be able to be successful?"

**THE ROAD TO RECOVERY**

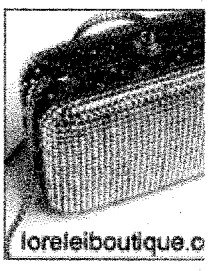
Wynder worked to regain his strength and eventually returned to basketball shape. Fairfield University offered Wynder a scholarship, where he helped lead the team to back-to-back MAAC Championships and NCAA Tournament berths. After pulling upsets in the first two rounds of the 1987 MAAC Tournament, the 15-15 Stags found themselves in the championship game. Down by two with four seconds left, Wynder dribbled the length of the court, pulled up and hit a 15-foot jumper to send the game into overtime, where they won, earning a trip to the NCAA Tournament.

"That was the greatest single play in Fairfield history," says Tim O'Toole, captain of the 1987 team and current head coach of the Stags. "A.J had an unbelievable role in turning the program around."

Despite his heroics, Wynder wasn't selected in the 1987 NBA Draft.



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He played that summer in the United States Basketball League, but come fall he was still looking for a team. He was then invited to a tryout camp with Wyoming of the Continental Basketball Association, but there was one catch: Wynder had to pay his own airfare—\$370. He only had enough for a one-way ticket.

"When I landed in Casper, Wyoming, all I saw was mountains, sky and a lot of tumbleweed. I cried. I don't know if I was destined or crazy," Wynder says. "You could play well for four or five days and if you didn't on that sixth day, you'd be cut."

But Wynder did make the Wyoming Wildcatters, coached by Cazzie Russell.

"I love that kid," says Russell. "He really personifies perseverance. Early on in his career he was feeling his way, getting his feet wet, but he became a mainstay on the ball club. He came out on a one-way ticket and the rest is history."

#### A DREAM REALIZED

Wynder went on to establish himself as the premier point guard in the CBA, leading the league with 9.5 assists per game. NBA scouts began to take notice. During the 1990-91 season, the Celtics signed Wynder to a 10-day contract.

"I really didn't believe it. I was excited, but after what I had gone through, until I was in that uniform it was not going to be real," Wynder explains. "It's something I always remember—that first game in Boston Garden on the parquet floor."

Less than a month later, Wynder thought his tenure with the Celtics was over, after he was released after his second 10-day contract. But on his way to Wichita Falls to rejoin his CBA team, he heard his name over the public address when he arrived in Dallas. There was a plane ticket waiting for him, to return to Boston. He had been re-signed for the remainder of the season.

"I actually had mixed emotions. I wanted to be in the NBA, but I also wanted to compete for a CBA championship," Wynder says. "I thought to myself, 'Man, do I really want to go to the NBA and be a cheerleader?' But I'd never wanna turn down an opportunity like that, so I went back to Boston."

Wynder spent the rest of the season on the active roster, appearing in six games, averaging two points. He didn't see action in the playoffs, but filled an integral role, playing the "part" of Indiana's Michael Williams and Detroit's Isiah Thomas on the scout team, helping the Celtics point guards prepare for their playoff opponents.

"A.J. came on board and picked up plays quickly. The veteran guys

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respected him. That dude fit right in...That's what endeared him to us," remembers former teammate Ed Pinckney. "You can't meet anyone that has better character than A.J. He was perfect for his role on that team. It didn't matter who he was playing against, he competed hard."

## NEW BEGINNINGS

Wynder was later invited to NBA camps seven times, but wasn't able to crack the 12-man rosters, and headed back to the CBA. In 1993, Wynder was with the Tri-City Chinooks when head coach Calvin Duncan made Wynder an assistant coach.

"A.J. was like a coach on the court. I really liked certain things he would do—how he could learn to read defenses and see things ahead of time. He was a student of the game. I always thought that A.J. was more than just a basketball player, but a basketball mind," describes Duncan.

Wynder was selected among other top CBA players to represent the United States in the Pan American Games in 1995 in Argentina, where Team USA won the silver medal. He still holds the record for highest three-point percentage (.615, or 8-12) in Team USA history.

"It was an honor for me to represent my country," recalls Wynder, who is now an athlete representative on the collegiate committee of USA Basketball's competition committee. "We played in front of 90,000 fans yelling 'olé, olé' every time we hit a shot. The players couldn't even hear me call out the plays."

After injuring his ankle, Wynder was debating whether to continue playing when Nassau offered him the head coach job. Since taking the position in 1997, Nassau has gone 144-53, and Wynder was named Region XV Coach of the Year in 2002. He has sent a number of players on their way to four-year colleges, like Chris Grant, now with D-I Morgan State, and Keil Zepernick, who played with the Roanoke Dazzle in the NBDL and the Long Island Surf and Kansas Cagerz of the USBL.

"My experience at Nassau has been wonderful," Wynder says. "It is fulfilling to have an impact on young people's lives and give them some direction. The playbook for my life is the Bible, doing things that God wants us to do—be that light for someone else."

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