

Daily Memphian

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Calkins: For the first time, Hardaway tells his story — and it explains a lot

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Geoff Calkins



Geoff Calkins has been chronicling Memphis and Memphis sports for more than two decades. He is host of "The Geoff Calkins Show" from 9-11 a.m. M-F on 92.9 FM. Calkins has been named the best sports columnist in the country five times by the Associated Press sports editors, but still figures his best columns are about the people who make Memphis what it is.

Penny Hardaway told a story. About a sermon he once heard.

The pastor put a bunch of sheets of paper on the floor behind him.

“This is my life story, all these sheets of paper,” the pastor said. “But y’all are grabbing one sheet! It’s going to be one sheet instead of understanding the story.”

It wasn’t subtle, what Hardaway was referring to.

He was referring to the TSSAA and the NCAA.

Hardaway has no use for those who don’t seem to understand why he does what he does. Friday, he made that perfectly clear.

It was quite an occasion, really. The first keynote speech of Hardaway’s career.

Fred Jones asked Hardaway if he would give the keynote address at the Southern Heritage Classic luncheon. Hardaway immediately said he would.

He thought long and hard about what he should tell the crowd.

“Because that’s a heavy load,” he said.

Hardaway finally decided to tell his life story for — this is the way he described it — “the first time ever.”

Oh, if you have lived in Memphis for any length of time, you certainly know the highlights. You know the basic trajectory.

How Hardaway’s mother left him with his grandmother when Hardaway was just 5.

How Hardaway’s grandmother raised him up right.

“She was the kind of woman that would sit on the front porch in the summertime, have a blanket on her lap and have a gun next to her,” Hardaway said. “Also, every New Year’s Eve, she would open the back door and she would shoot her gun until it was empty. I said, ‘OK, I know what I’m dealing with now.’ ”

Hardaway was funny and thoughtful and surprising. He talked about being cut from his junior high team, then asking if he could stay on as the waterboy. He talked about being jealous that Kobe Bryant took his place alongside Shaquille O’Neal.

“Rest in peace, Kobe Bryant, but Kobe ended up getting the position that I already had,” Hardaway said. “Every championship that they won, I was like, ‘Gosh, it should have been me.’ ”

But more than anything else, Hardaway talked about making it out of difficult circumstances — and about how that shapes his work today.

“My first hoop was a shopping cart,” he said. “Somebody in the hood went to the grocery store, stole a cart and brought it back to our street. My second basket was a milk crate. Everyone remember the milk crate?”

Nearly everyone in attendance did.

Hardaway made it to the NBA anyway. His grandmother had a lot to do with that.

But after 16 seasons and six knee surgeries, he was cut by the Miami Heat.

Hardaway admitted he struggled with that reality. He asked God for a chance to go out on his own terms.

But less than a week after getting cut by the Heat, he was in a Memphis hospital, meeting with a childhood friend named Desmond Merriweather, who had been diagnosed with cancer and needed help coaching his middle school team.

Maybe you know how the story goes from this point. Hardaway falls in love with the kids, falls in love with coaching, and eventually takes over when Merriweather dies.

But Hardaway tells the story with a particular sense of wonder. He sees God's will in every twist and turn.

When Hardaway was at Merriweather's funeral, he asked God why he couldn't have left the NBA on his own terms.

"For the first time, I think God answered me," Hardaway said. "He told me, 'I gave you a gift — basketball. I gave you a dream — you lived out your dream. Now I'm planting you in your purpose.'"

Hardaway's purpose is to help other kids. He believes it has been since Merriweather summoned him home.

Which explains Hardaway's frustration, doesn't it? Whether you ultimately agree with him or not?

"Now I'm here and I'm getting in trouble for doing what I just told y'all," Hardaway said. "I mean, we got a group of people who are judging me as if I did that for monetary purposes, not knowing my heart. I did all that from the heart."

Again, you don't have to agree with Hardaway. You can say he still should have known the TSSAA would come after him for giving \$11,000 to James Wiseman's family. Or that he shouldn't have played Wiseman at Memphis when the NCAA said it would be ill-advised.

But hearing Hardaway Friday explained a lot of things. It certainly explained why he is so dismissive of what must seem like petty rules.

The man lifted himself out of poverty. He returned to Memphis to help others do the same. And now — at a time when too many young men are being lost forever — he is getting second-guessed for fulfilling his purpose in life?

The second-guessing may not be over, either. Memphis is still waiting for a decision by the IARP. It’s theoretically possible the program could be banned for the postseason. That decision could come any day.

But Hardaway seems unfazed by any of it. Now we have a clearer sense of why.

He is as certain of his mission as he is dismissive of those who would stand in his way.

“At the end of the day, I look at it like this,” he said. “It’s not how they see us, it’s how we see us.”

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