

When ball isn't life.

By: Andrew Savory

Sean Loucks is sitting beside a window inside a coffee shop in Toronto's East end. Every now and then he reclines in his chair and extends one of his legs. Loucks, now 51, has had five surgeries – one on each hip and three on his back.

You wouldn't know it until you see his lips tighten when he stands. "I still don't have all the strength and feeling in this leg. It's almost like that cheesy Jim Carrey film," Loucks laughs. "Go ahead, drive a spike through it!"

The *Ace Ventura* reference is just a glimpse into Loucks' other passion away from the court – film. He once took acting classes at George Brown College and even made it to the screen as a coach in the 2000 film *Finding Forrester*, which starred Sean Connery.

In between sips Loucks reminisces about who he's met on and off the court. The list is extensive.

"I beat world heavyweight champion Lennox Lewis," he pauses before cracking a smile. "I usually just leave it at that. But the reality is Earl Haig beat Kitchener Cameron Heights in the Runnymede Basketball Tournament and we covered each other."

Loucks doesn't recall these interactions to flatter himself, but to appreciate what the sport he loves has taught him. Both a student and teacher of the game, Loucks laments how the explosion of basketball in Canada has lead many parents to call him and ask, "can you train my kid to make it to the NBA?"

He looks out the window, shaking his head.

"We grew up, we didn't talk about pro ball or scholarships, we just played ball. That's the difference between us and the kids today; it's not about who we are playing for or aiming for, it's 'where are we playing today?'" Loucks says.

Loucks never chased the game of basketball. He dedicated himself and followed as it opened one door after another. In 1989 he found himself on a court in Israel competing for a bronze medal in front of NBA Commissioner David Stern at the Maccabiah Games.

Ten years later he was an employee of the Irish National Education system looking through the broken windows of a gym in the inner-city neighbourhood of Ballymun Flats in Dublin, ready to introduce the game of basketball to a group of kids that welcomed a distraction from religious tension and economic challenge. He remembers the penknife used by one of his students to jab at the gym mats. He also remembers the tears on the faces of children asking to be walked home when practice ended.

Loucks is modest when attributing the arch of a 40-year career both on and off the court. "I was always very *Forrest Gump*-like. In the right place at the right time."

Born in Montreal in 1965, Loucks' family moved to Toronto when he was four to reduce the commute made by his father, who frequented the two cities on business. At the time, Toronto

was experiencing a boom in growth, multiculturalism and urban sprawl. The Loucks family settled in an apartment at Don Mills and Sheppard in Toronto's north-end.

It wasn't until Loucks was fourteen that his friend Fuad Bhegani introduced him to Julius Irving on television. Loucks took an immediate interest in the game. He spent night after night at the Parkway Forest Community Centre, trying to replicate the moves of Dr. J. Months later Loucks won his first ever roster spot when his opponent stepped on his shoe and broke his foot.

That summer set a precedent by which Loucks developed a work ethic that eventually got him noticed by York University basketball coach Bob Bain, who invited Loucks to play on the York University men's team in addition to representing Canada at the Maccabiah Games.

Following the the Maccabiah Games in 1989, Loucks was invited to tryout for the Tiberius basketball club in Israel. The job came with a catch. Military service. Already nursing an Achilles injury, Loucks returned home.

Over the next nine years Loucks was a self-described "jack of all trades," alternating between jobs at Wood Gundy, ScotiaMcLeod, Goodman & Goodman, the All-Canadian Tennis Academy and working at the front desk of The Sports Medicine Specialists for former head physician of the Toronto Maple Leafs, Dr. Mike Clarifield. All the while, Loucks was coaching high school basketball and playing 200 games of basketball in five men's leagues across Toronto.

It came at a cost. He suffered his first back injury at 16 and was told he might not be able to play basketball again. "Every time someone told me I couldn't do something, I would be stubborn about it," Loucks says, explaining that his one regret isn't how hard he played, but how often.

In 1998, Loucks played briefly as a 33-year-old rookie for Denny Notre Dame basketball club in Dublin. He doesn't linger on the nostalgia of the professional experience. "Have you ever seen the movie *Slapshot*? It's more like that. You're hoping payday is going to come next week. You're on the bus crammed in with seven footers, some in their 30s, often playing on a hard-tiled floor. It's not quite the life of the NBA."

He's kept a collection of tryout invitations and contract offers from various clubs as keepsakes. Ultimately, that's all they are to him.

"Some of those are vague memories, but the average person doesn't care if you were an all-star or played in any game. It's semi-impressive to some people," Loucks says. "The real thing is the countries and places you get to see on this planet. Even more so, the friends you make for life."

With lingering injuries taking their toll and a disinterest in returning to the internal strife that plagued the management of the professional club that he coached in England, the Worthing Bears, Loucks returned to Toronto in 2001 with a vision of expanding his role in the basketball community.

Beginning in 2003, he started the Albany avenue Basketball Association (ABA) to provide house leagues, skills development, and tournaments for boys and girls as young as six and as old as eighteen. Situated in the heart of the Annex in a Royal St. George's College (RSGC) gymnasium, Loucks admits that the logistics and financing of the league were difficult to

manage for the first few years, but watching the league grow to embody the principles that originally drew him to the sport—character and community—has left an indelible mark not only on Loucks, but also his former players.

Nick Medline was coached by Loucks at RSGC and as a member of the ABA. According to Medline, Loucks was anything but the stereotypical hard-nosed basketball coach. “What he is gifted at is bringing out the individual in each player,” Medline said. “He was committed to making you better, being patient, and helping you realize who you were as an individual and as a player during those important teenage years.”

Loucks’ favourite memories don’t come to mind easily. The best he can do is narrow the list. He begins by telling stories about teams that went undefeated or won championships before embarking on a tangent about the academic and vocational accomplishments of some of his former players.

Basketball was never his direction, it was the vehicle through which he experienced the world and established bonds that have lasted him far longer than the hardware on his shelf. He doesn’t dwell on the shooting titles he’s been awarded or the dunk contests he’s competed in. He’s more likely to tell you about where the core group of players that he began coaching when they were in grade three, and watched mature into young men over the course of ten seasons, are today.

What Loucks remembers is the relationships he has built both on and off the hardwood. “I’m extremely proud of the guys who go on to play at the post-secondary level, but equally proud, if not more, of the guys who leave with a love of basketball and play intramurals and teach their own kid in the driveway,” Loucks says.

An unwavering passion for the game has left Loucks a man known by many titles: coach, manager, actor and teacher. But no longer as a player. At the age of 39 he dunked for the last time and in 2010 at age 45 he played his final men’s league game. This past March, he had what he hopes to be his fifth and final surgery.

An alumnus of Loucks’ RSGC and ABA basketball programs, Mackenzie Rich echoed Loucks’ bond with the game best, “I hope to love my wife the way Coach Loucks loves basketball.”

In 2010, Loucks became a husband to Gillian. Two years later, the couple welcomed their daughter, Abbey, into the world. Abbey, now four years old, enters the coffee shop. She lets go of her mother’s hand and runs over to the table to tug at Loucks’ navy crewneck sweater.

“Daddy, do you know what we got?” She asks. He shakes his head. “New shoes.” She says.

They may not be basketball shoes, but with a cool November breeze awaiting outside and a wide-eyed daughter in his arms, Loucks hopes to see the court from one more perspective – as a father.