# The Detroit Pistons Were My Father’s Second Family

Jack McCloskey built a championship team that was both loved and loathed. I only began to appreciate who he was years later.

By Molly McCloskey

One night, when I was a sophomore in college, my father came to see me play basketball in Philadelphia. It was 1984. I was on the team at St. Joseph’s, and he was the general manager of the Detroit Pistons. He and my mother were long divorced, and I saw him only two or three times a year, when he came to town for a Pistons game or to scout a player. I had lost my starting spot at the beginning of the season, and that night I didn’t play much or particularly well.

My father waited for me after the game, and as soon as I saw him I burst into tears. I can still see his expression, tender and somehow unsurprised, even though we both knew that my performance was irrelevant. I had landed a full scholarship, but it was clear that I wasn’t going to develop into a college player of even minor significance. Something else was at stake, and I think we knew that, too. The game was the language he spoke, and I was losing my fluency.

I grew up the youngest of six, all of us obsessed with basketball. My oldest brother, Mike, was on the freshman team at Duke; my first team was called the California Fancies. I was four, my brother Roman was six, and our basket was an iron pot set on the coffee table in the rec room of our house in Winston-Salem. As “Kip Reynolds” and “Mike Jetson,” we routed a series of make-believe opponents. My father was then the head coach at Wake Forest. Every fall, the team came for brunch, and our house would fill with his other family, giants who scooped me up and set me on their shoulders. I was captivated by them, and named my imaginary friend Walker, after the co-captain Dickie Walker.

There was a feeling of fun, of constant tumult, in our house, but my father could be a hard-ass, too. He’d grown up in eastern Pennsylvania—his father and grandfather were coal miners—and in the Second World War he had skippered a landing craft off Okinawa, a vessel that transported troops and tanks between larger ships and the shore. He had no tolerance for the spoiled, the entitled, the soft. His pitiless code of masculinity meant that my brothers got the worst of it; he might call them “Mary Jane” if he thought that they seemed weak or inclined to quit when things got challenging. Above all, he hated attitude. What finally brought him to the pros—in 1972, he got a job coaching the Portland Trail Blazers, and my family moved across the country—was an inability to keep sucking up to high-school recruits. One day, he went to see a star senior in New York. The kid was spinning the ball, acting cocky. “Hey, Coach Jack,” he said, “what’s Wake Forest gonna do for me?” My father pondered this. “You know what we’re gonna do?” he replied. “We’re gonna stick that ball right up your ass.” Then he walked out.

Things got off to a bad start in Portland. The Blazers had the No. 1 pick in the 1972 draft. My father wanted Bob McAdoo, but the Blazers’ owner chose LaRue Martin. McAdoo went on to win Rookie of the Year at Buffalo en route to the Hall of Fame, while Martin is still widely regarded as the worst first pick in N.B.A. history. My father clashed with the star forward Sidney Wicks. Losses

piled up. At my new school, boys taunted me: “Your dad sucks!” I never said a word about the teasing at home. I somehow knew that my job was to bear the ridicule on my father’s behalf.

After two years with Portland, my father was fired. By 1976, he was floundering, trying to sell time-shares in Hawaiian condos from a rickety desk in our den. And then, that spring, my parents got divorced. My father had fallen in love with someone else. He rented a grim little apartment in a Portland exurb, where my brother Roman and I, still young enough to be living at home, visited him. I remember depressing Friday evenings with takeout burgers, limned, for me, with the frightening realization that the bottom could drop right out of the most solid-seeming things. But within months my father was gone from Oregon altogether, having returned to the N.B.A. fold when the Los Angeles Lakers’ coach, Jerry West, hired him to be his assistant.

My mother got a part-time job at a weekly newspaper, and we moved to a house in a cheaper part of town. Then we set about what she called “raising each other”—trying to navigate our new reality without the ballast of my father.

His first year in L.A., he got remarried, making a new home with the woman for whom he’d left my mother. Roman and I visited them twice. I don’t remember much of those stays, apart from sunshine, palm trees, and Jack Nicholson at courtside. It felt to me as though my father had stolen away to a glamorous new life; to my continuing shame, I told my mother I wanted to live with him, an idea that no one but me found appealing. Indeed, for reasons that were never articulated, my father would not invite me to visit him again for another twenty-five years, by which time we were as good as strangers.

His job in L.A. was short-lived. When West moved to the front office after three seasons, my father was passed over for the head job. He went to un-glam Indiana, to be an assistant with the Pacers, and finally to Detroit, which was then home to the worst team in the league.

I was a sophomore in high school, in 1979, when my father—a “rumpled, graying, mostly unknown . . . old basketball man,” as one sports blogger has described him—took the Pistons job. Throughout high school, Roman and I would meet him at his hotel when he was in town for a game against the Blazers, and he would take us to dinner, awkward outings that only underscored our growing estrangement from him. We would go to the game, feeling briefly like V.I.P.s with our complimentary tickets, and then he would be gone again.

One of my father’s visits to Portland coincided with a meeting I had during my junior year with my high-school coach and the principal after I had been caught drinking. My mother, weary from parenting two teen-agers alone, insisted that my father go with me. I was nervous. The coach, after reminding me of everything I stood to lose if this sort of behavior continued, benched me for four games. Once we were outside, my father, who’d been serious throughout the meeting, laughed and elbowed me, as though we’d pulled off a caper. I was relieved—no sign of the hard-ass—then disappointed: what became of me seemed of little consequence to him.

By my senior year, my team was heading for the state tournament and I had begun attracting attention from small Division I schools. I sent my father newspaper clippings from our games. I wasn’t playing basketball to win his attention; I played because I loved it and I was good, but I wanted him to know that I was good. I don’t remember him ever coming to any of my high-school games. (He must’ve seen me play sometime, because I can still hear him scolding me: “You’re yanking the chain.” He meant that I was pulling back on the jump-shot follow-through—the extended arm and flexed wrist that are the mark of proper form.) It never occurred to me that he

might go out of his way to see me play, or that I might be entitled to ask him to—that I might be entitled to ask him for anything at all. Within the world of sports, he was becoming famous and important. A couple of times a year, he breezed into town. He was more dashing and elusive than the bland, ploddingly present fathers of my friends, but the thrill was fleeting. I made do with a kind of phantom, those moments he manifested on the television or in the excited chatter of boys and men I knew, and it would be years before I admitted to myself just how much I had needed from him, and how little I got.

One night, I played against the daughter of Jimmy Lynam, who had left the head job at St. Joseph's to be an assistant with the Blazers. Jimmy was at the game, and afterward he told the women's coach at St. Joseph's that he ought to have a look at me. The school was nearly three thousand miles away, but my parents were from Pennsylvania, my siblings and I had all been born in Philadelphia, and my father had coached at Penn. Philadelphia basketball felt like family, a return to the unsundered past.

Meanwhile, my father was building his team in Detroit. He made thirty-eight trades in ten years, earning him the nickname Trader Jack. He started with Isiah Thomas, whom he drafted in 1981. Isiah wanted to play in Chicago, his home town. He told my father, "You don't have anybody I can pass to." My father said he'd bench him before he'd trade him, and promised to get him some better teammates. My father had a knack for spotting overlooked talent, and he wanted players as obsessed with winning as he was. The center Bill Laimbeer, whom he plucked from Cleveland, had been drafted a lowly sixty-fifth. According to the coach Chuck Daly, who would soon join the Pistons, Laimbeer couldn't jump over a piece of paper, but my father had seen him battling to the final buzzer in hopeless games, and knew he wanted him. My father drafted the future Hall of Famers Joe Dumars and Dennis Rodman as Detroit's eighteenth and twenty-seventh picks. Even the owners of the Pistons were mystified by Dumars: "Who is *he*?" My father loved him from Day One, inviting him home for Thanksgiving his rookie year. Dumars told me recently that, as the new guy, he'd been holding back on the court. One day, my father said, "You don't have to wait to be great. You're ready. Go ahead and do it." That night, Dumars put in an explosive performance: "He cleared the way for me with that conversation."

Rounding out the front court were the power forwards John Salley and Rick Mahorn. Salley was charismatic and all smiles, while Mahorn was an enforcer, known as McNasty when he'd played for Washington. Vinnie Johnson, dubbed the Microwave because he heated up so fast, was the third guard. When my father traded Adrian Dantley, beloved in Detroit, for Mark Aguirre, who had a reputation for being selfish and spoiled, Pistons fans were angry. But Aguirre blended in beautifully, and all the shuffling finally paid off. In 1989, my father's tenth year with the team, the Pistons swept the Lakers for their first championship. They won the title again the next year in Portland, on a sweet jumper by the Microwave with .7 seconds on the clock. Both championships were won against teams that had let my father go, which must have been particularly gratifying.

By then, the Bad Boys were legendary. The moniker had gained traction after CBS used it during a 1988 halftime feature about the Pistons and it got picked up by the league for its end-of-season video on the team. The players embraced it. Detroiters loved the Bad Boys with a crazy love, but just about everywhere else they were reviled. I still meet men who, when they learn of my connection, hiss, "I *hated* that team." The Bad Boys were extremely physical—some say dirty, not averse to hard fouls or provoking brawls—and were viewed by many as undeserving upstarts who brought something ugly to the sport. It wasn't just the will to win but the way they won, the

emphasis on grind over dazzle. The sportswriter Keith Langlois compared the players to “a bunch of hard hats swinging picks and wielding shovels.” My father’s truculence and competitiveness clearly set a tone. Years earlier, when Pat Riley accidentally broke the coach Stan Albeck’s nose during a casual three-on-three game in L.A., my father had wanted to fight him over it. At sixty-two, my father went one-on-one with Mahorn, to see if Mahorn was ready to come back after an injury. “I was, like, this old motherfucker? I kicked his ass,” Mahorn told me recently, laughing. “But he was out there playing hard.”

*Sports Illustrated* ranked the Bad Boys among the most hated N.B.A. teams of all time, describing them in apocalyptic tones: “Between the joy of Magic and the majesty of Michael was the dark and frightening rise of the Bad Boys.” The Chicago *Tribune* writer Sam Smith called them “as cunning as Satan.” Laimbeer was the most despised Bad Boy of all. Once, at halftime of a playoff game in Atlanta, a fan went on court with a chainsaw and a cardboard replica of Laimbeer’s jersey and sawed it to pieces. (Those were the days when you could bring a chainsaw to an N.B.A. game.) Laimbeer welcomed the animosity. They all did, to varying degrees, using it to throw opponents off their game. My father believed that a lot of other G.M.s, not to mention the N.B.A. commissioner David Stern, blamed him for the Pistons’ style of play. In an e-mail to me, he wrote, “The commissioner did not like our team for being so rough—I call it competitive so he also did not care for me.” Jerry West, with whom he’d coached in L.A., would later observe that my father assembled a team that reflected his character. He meant it as a compliment. “We embodied his damn personality,” Mahorn told me. “A bunch of average kinda dudes that just had badass attitudes.” Dumars agreed: “We were take-no-prisoners, and that was Jack.”

Just how good the team was can get obscured by all the Bad Boys mythology. Isiah was one of the most talented point guards in N.B.A. history, and Michael Jordan would call Dumars the best defender he ever faced. Laimbeer, a star rebounder, was one of the first big men who could consistently hit the three. Rodman had a contained maniacal energy that made him a stunning defender and rebounder. And they were deep—during both championship seasons, no player averaged more than nineteen points per game.

I missed a lot of that era. In 1989, two months before the Pistons’ first championship, I moved to Ireland. I was twenty-three. I’d gone for what I thought was a few weeks’ visit but had instantly loved it and ended up staying twenty-five years. For a few of those years, I played on a local club team, practicing in cold, rural gyms, the game being the only thread of connection I still felt to my father. He visited me the first summer I was in Ireland, and never again. Five years passed in which I didn’t see him at all.

But, in the early two-thousands, he started urging me to visit him. Every other summer, I would go for a few days to Skidaway Island, off the coast of Savannah, where he’d retired with his wife. For the first hour or so, he seemed delighted to see me, but by evening I would feel as though I were underfoot, and that he was waiting to get back to whatever it was I’d interrupted. There were moments of affinity, though. One day, he drove Roman and me around Skidaway in his convertible blasting “Spirit in the Sky,” and you never saw three people sing so joyfully about dying.

Not long after I reëntered his life, my father began to drift away again, but in a different manner. In the summer of 2012, I went to Portland for a family wedding that he was also attending. I had just published a book, and, as it happened, would be reading from it at an event the following day. At

the reception, my father and I were chatting, and he mentioned that he'd be going to his daughter's reading. He was clearly proud. And then he said, quite sweetly, "Now, who are you?"

One night, soon after I moved back to the U.S., in 2014, I settled in to watch "Bad Boys," a recent installment in ESPN's sports documentary series "30 for 30," which began as a look at the biggest stories from the network's first thirty years on the air. I wasn't prepared for what I saw. While the segment was ostensibly about basketball and winning and being the baddest boys ever, the word "family" came up repeatedly. John Salley said he'd thought it was a crock talking about family in the context of professional sports until he joined the Pistons. "And then I had to readjust myself," he said, "because we were a family." When Rodman wept at the podium after winning Defensive Player of the Year, my father put a hand on his back to steady him. Isiah explained, "That type of family unit that we had was ideal for [Dennis] at a time he really needed it." Dumars remembered, "It was us against the world."

The moment that struck me most was the Hug. It took place in 1991, after the team's loss to the Chicago Bulls in the Conference Finals. Technically, it wasn't *after* the loss, because there were still about eight seconds on the game clock when most of the Pistons walked off the court, right past a stupefied Michael Jordan, their final act as champs a refusal to pass the torch graciously.

As they headed for the tunnel, my father emerged from the opposite direction. He hugged Laimbeer, then Isiah. The camera zoomed in on his face. He was crying, holding Isiah tight. I've rerun that moment a dozen times. I even found a longer version of it that shows my father pulling away in the direction of the court and Isiah steering him back toward the locker room, talking in his ear, consoling him.

Eventually, I realized why the image hit me so hard. It wasn't just that this was my father at his very best: loyal, vulnerable, utterly invested. It was because it made clear that there were two things I needed to forgive him for: not having been there for me, and having been there for others.

Before my father succumbed fully to dementia, he apologized to me. We were sitting at his breakfast table, and he said quietly and with no preamble, "I'm sorry we weren't closer when you were growing up." I could tell that he had rehearsed this declaration, and I can't say I was unmoved. But he made our estrangement sound like a mutual failing. I was also dismayed by what came next. I had always believed that he kept his distance from me when I was young because going in and out of my life was too painful. But it wasn't that. "I was just so wrapped up in basketball," he said.

I mumbled something about also being sorry—as in, Yeah, it's too bad. Then I took my dishes to the kitchen, leaving him there alone.

As the Alzheimer's progressed, my father began phoning me. His vocabulary was ransacked by dementia, but his utterances rang strangely true.

Once, he said, "It's so cold on this ship."

Another day, he told me, "I'll be leaving the area soon."

He died at ninety-one, on the opening day of the 2017 Finals. Isiah Thomas was providing commentary on NBA TV and paid tribute. "He fought for us in a league and in a time where it was all about the Lakers and the Celtics," he said. "We never would've been the type of team or people that we became had we not met [him] . . . I can sincerely say that we loved Jack McCloskey."

A month later, after the memorial service, I sat in my father's kitchen talking to Isiah. I mentioned the apology. "If you could change one thing," he asked, "what would it be?" I said that I wished my father would have allowed me into his life when I was young. "Everybody would like a do-over," he said softly. Then he added, "How many happy love songs are there?"

I asked if I could call him sometime to talk about my father, and he gave me his number. When we spoke, not long afterward, I mentioned the Hug. "I've had three great hugs in my life—my mom, Jack McCloskey, and my wife," he said. "That's an embrace I'll never forget. We had given all that we could possibly give. There was nothing more to do with that team than watch it die and be a part of that." I envied the two of them, the bond on display in that moment. But there was also something unexpectedly reassuring about seeing my father in a better light, through someone else's eyes.

I began seeking out other people who had known my father, tracking down Bad Boys, rival coaches, a former *Sports Illustrated* journalist who once interviewed him. I was greedy for details, as though my father were a cold case I might yet crack.

I phoned the ex-Piston William Bedford at the car dealership where he was working. He let out a low whistle when I identified myself, and said, "Oh. My. God," as though I were a long-lost sister. Bedford had been drafted sixth in 1986 by Phoenix; by the time my father traded for him, the following year, he was known to be struggling with a drug problem. He told me my father had gone to twelve-step meetings with him. "It was unbelievable to have a G.M. like that," he said. "Jack was in my corner a hundred per cent."

I was glad to hear that my father had come through for him, but I was also well aware that this was during a period when two of my siblings and I were dealing with alcoholism. It wasn't the first time during my investigations that I'd been conscious of an ignoble impulse: the desire to set someone straight. When people waxed rhapsodic about my father—what a straight-up guy he was, a man you could count on—I would think of the day he walked out on us, the years I wasn't welcome in his home, my mother getting by on her own.

During the height of *Covid,* I bought myself a blue basketball, and went shooting in the park near my house on a few quiet mornings. I hadn't played in years, but it came back easily. Elbow in. Follow through. *Don't yank the chain.* I didn't learn much from my father about the fundamentals of the game, or about life, really. But he modelled one thing I did have to admire: the art of keeping going.

Last year, I gathered all my father's letters and e-mails to me and read them through. I had begun wondering if there were dimensions to him that my resentment, or the vagaries of memory, had obscured. One note from 2002 came with the clippings I had sent him from my high-school games. "It is not that I don't want them, but you never know how long one is gg to be here, so I felt you would like to have them," he wrote, then added, "You did not get everything." He was referring to the fact that he had held on to a sketch I'd made, as a child, of Charlie Davis, who was my father's star guard at Wake Forest, the first player who really stole his heart.

Finally, I dug out an envelope of photos and letters I had collected the spring after his death. A few of my siblings and I had gone to the house on Skidaway to claim mementos, and the envelope had sat in my closet ever since. I thought I knew what it contained—hadn't I filled it myself?—but there were surprises. A photo of my grandfather, shockingly handsome, before black lung and Camel cigarettes ravaged him. A pocket diary my father kept while on Okinawa after the war: fuel dumps,

bomb disposal, the names and Stateside addresses of his men. And a photograph of me. I am four years old, standing in the back yard wearing shorts, no shirt, and a baseball cap and glove. A few years later, I became embarrassed by my tomboyishness and ripped the photo up. But here it was. Scored this way and that, like a cracked mirror. On the back, written in my father's hand: "Molly—she tore this pic, but I saved the pieces & had it restored as well as they could."

Like that moment at the wedding—*Now, who are you*?—it was us all over, a string of botched attempts that, in the end, maybe did amount to something. ♦

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