

FEATURE



FOR THE LOVE OF THE GAME

*From Kansas to Italy,
Bob Hill has coached more than a half dozen collegiate
and professional basketball teams.*

By: Ben Schooley Photography By: West Vita



I never took a job for the money. I took every job to win."

And Robert "Bob" Hill has certainly won. From a humble beginning in Ohio, Hill has gone on to coach more than a half dozen collegiate and professional basketball teams, and has amassed a resume that stretches from Kansas to Italy. Hill has coached some of the most famous players in the game, and has devoted the better part of his professional career to going wherever the game takes him. Now working in a consulting and development capacity for the NBA, Bob and his wife Pam are enjoying the fruits of their labor right here in Cordillera Ranch. And with over 30 years of coaching, the Hills have certainly earned it.

The consummate athlete, Hill has spent his entire life involved in athletics. He would run cross country as a way to get in shape for basketball, and then play baseball in the spring. A stand-out in both basketball and baseball, Hill was offered scholarships in both. "My dad never went to college, so it was really special that I was able to go to Bowling Green. When I went, it was on a full scholarship for both baseball and basketball. That's pretty rare now. Athletes tend to specialize more. Looking back, I probably should have picked one, but I enjoyed both sports and it was a great four years."

As Hill completed college, he quickly began looking toward professional sports. After excelling at sports throughout his collegiate years, some professional squads took notice. "I went to a veteran's camp with an ABA team, but the (San Diego) Padres quickly drafted me in '71. So I went to the Northwest League in the state of Washington. It's in the Tri-Cities area. We were the first championship team the Padres ever had. However, at the end of the summer I was released." Before Hill could even look toward his professional basketball aspirations, the world of coaching was quickly introduced to him. "After playing minor-league baseball, I had gone home and received a call from Pat Haley, the head coach for Bowling Green. He asked me what I was doing, and when he learned I had just returned to the area, he told me to pack my stuff and get on campus. He needed an assistant coach and I was more than happy to give it a try." However, in order for Hill to enter the coaching ranks, he actually had to re-enroll in school. "Back then you had to have your Masters Degree. So what the school did was they made me a full time coach and they paid me a very, very low salary and I had to go to grad school. I was in a fraternity and my big brother was another assistant coach, so I just roomed with him. He helped me out a lot. I never had any money, so it didn't bother me being broke." During this time, Hill had also recently begun dating his future wife, Pam, whom he married in 1974.



With a growing family (their oldest son Cameron had recently been born), Hill realized that coaching could be his career. "I didn't think about coaching that much when I was in college, but once the reality set in that I wasn't going to be a pro athlete, you begin to realize you need a career. After getting released (from the minor leagues), it just kind of evolved. I didn't wake up and say 'I'm going to conquer the world of coaching'. It was just a natural progression."

And that progression continued to take the Hills higher and higher up the coaching ladder. After a brief stint at the University of Pittsburgh, Hill became an assistant at the University of Kansas, which is one of the strongest basketball programs in the country. "After Pittsburgh, we were on to the University of Kansas. I knew they had great history and tradition, and I was thrilled to get that job. So we jumped in Pam's old Camaro with our youngest son and drove down there. We were blessed to spend 8 great years there, and it was really a very special place. We also had our other 2 sons there (Chris and Casey)."

One thing the Hills realized quickly is that athletics at their level is hard, not only on the court, but it is hard on the family. The travel, the work demands, and the erratic schedule were difficult to navigate, but the Hills managed. Pam says, "It was difficult for me. I recognized his work ethic early on, and it wasn't a shock to me that I was going to spend a lot of time alone. We never knew it any

other way. He was just always working." Bob adds, "It was hard for me, too. You move forward as a father and your kids get older, and become more and more of a presence; it becomes harder and harder to leave. I would make an effort to get up and see them off to school, even if I had gotten in at 3am. In college ball you have to travel during the summer, but in the off time, I spent every second at home. As the boys got older it was great because the kids could go to practice and come to the games. I included them in as much as we could. The kids went to every game, and we were there for everything." Looking back, Pam recollects the entire experience for the children. "We moved them probably 16 times. The kids were constantly moving. They all have different recollections of where HOME is. This unit of family came so close together – we knew we had to depend on one another, and we took our things and created a home. They're the best of friends now. You can put them in any environment, and they make the most of it. They flourished in every environment. We tried to screw 'em up, Bob joked, but they're great kids. They've done such a great job w/ all of it."

Never someone to be static or complacent, Hill strove to continue pushing his career forward. "My next stop was with the New York Knicks. Hubie Brown was the coach, and I had worked his camp during the summers. Mike Fratello was his assistant, and Mike put

the staff together for those camps. Rick Pitino was an assistant, and when he took a job with Providence, I was given the opportunity to take Rick's spot." With his new job, and a higher salary, Pam took off to New York to find a home. "I figured we could buy a nice house in the New York area. Pam looked for weeks, but couldn't find anything in New York that we could afford!! So we bought this little corner lot house in Madison, NJ. It turned out to be a great little place, and we enjoyed it while we were there for two years."

Following a brief stint in the CBA, Hill was given an offer to coach in Italy. "I had a few interviews with NBA teams, but we got this offer to go to Italy. Bologna, Italy. I had gone over and done camps, and they had asked if I had ever considered coming over. Sure enough, they call me up after the New York Knicks job, and so off we went. At the time I was interviewing the Charlotte Hornets, and I was unsure about that job, too. But we ended up going to Bologna, signed the contract, and I took (former player) Michael Ray Richardson with me. And we did good there, eventually becoming Italian Cup Champions." For the family, it was quite the adventure. "Cameron went the whole year of Italian school not understanding a damn word the teacher said", Hill laughs. "All 3 of the boys were playing basketball and just had really great years. We lived two blocks from the train station, and Pam would just take them out of school and go tour the country. At Christmas time we'd

“ I NEVER
TOOK A JOB FOR
THE MONEY.

I TOOK EVERY
JOB TO WIN. ”





all go skiing in Austria, so we tried to fit in a lot of fun."

With success following him at virtually every level, Hill finally broke into the NBA as a head coach, although it was a brief tenure. "The New York team was decimated by injuries. Patrick Ewing was a rookie, and they were just struggling. So they got rid of Hubie (Brown) and made me the head coach. We had 6 CBA guys on the roster, and we continued to have a hard time, so they got rid of me. One of the realities of pro sports is that if you take a job, you're going to get fired. It's just part of your existence. You don't take it personal. You just move on to the next opportunity."

Following several years as the Indiana Pacers' head coach, that opportunity would eventually bring him to San Antonio as the Spurs head coach. "We came to San Antonio in '94. I had a reputation and a good coaching record, and it was a great organization. The team was very mature – lots of vet players. They had drafted well, the character on the team was high, and it was a fun team to coach. Early on I wasn't sure how good we'd be, but I was confident. We started out that year 6-9, and we went to Houston. We had David (Robinson), and they had Hakeem (Olajuwon). It was a big deal. I remember just putting a bunch of motivational stuff on the board in the locker-room, and it must have worked because we won. We finished 56-11 the rest of the way, went to the Western Conference Finals, and David was the MVP." While Hill enjoyed success with the Spurs, the team as a whole had very positive effect on him. "The culture of that team was spiritually motivated, and was led by David and Avery (Johnson) and Terry Cummings. My teams have always had a moment of

silence, but we were in Tennessee for an exhibition game against the Knicks, and David gave a prayer during our moment of silence. I had never had a player give a prayer. He caught up with me and asked if they could have a prayer before every game. So I told him I was happy to have a prayer, so the next game Avery gave the prayer, and then Terry. That prayer became a significant part of preparation for the game. We were in Seattle once, and we could never beat Seattle. But they were feeling good. Avery gave this prayer about a passage in the bible about a hurricane that destroys the city, and he compared the Spurs to the town. The team went nuts. We won the game. We won a lot of games with that team."

The Spurs, with David Robinson and Sean Elliot both injured, struggled the following year. And as Hill has seen before, they let him go. Never one to sit around, different offers found their way to Hill's desk. "I had two offers – one from the Greek League, and it was for a ton of money. The 2nd one was Fordham University. I just kind of felt it wasn't the right time to leave with the kids at the ages. I wanted to be available to them. They would have had to stay here, so I made a huge mistake and took the Fordham job. It was awful. I have had a very privileged career, so I understand what it takes to win, and I knew almost immediately that it just wasn't going to work at Fordham. Then I made a mistake thinking I could change it. It was an impossible situation." The balance between money and winning is one that Hill has never wavered on. And the Fordham job was no different. "You coach for achievement, to win. Not to see how much money I can make. That's just my nature to want to win. I always felt that if I did a good enough job, I'd get paid. And I have. But I never took a job for the money; I took the job to win."

Knowing that New Jersey was not where they wanted to live, they returned to the area they fell in love with while coaching the Spurs: the Texas Hill Country. Pam says, "The kids were graduating, and when Bob was coaching the Spurs, we really fell in love with the community. So we decided to come back here and follow our kids to college. We spent a weekend and we found 3 houses – 1 in San Antonio, 1 in Boerne, and our realtor told us about this new place, Cordillera. We drove thru the gate and Bob and said 'We're in'. We

loved it immediately. Our realtor showed us 2 or 3 houses and then we came to a Damon Christofilis (Cordillera Ranch Preferred Builder) spec house. The house wasn't totally done yet, but we loved it. Damon has been amazing to work with. We came to an agreement, flew in, and Damon was ready to go, and so we moved here in 2003."

Happily relocated in their beautiful home in Cordillera Ranch, opportunities continued to be available to Bob. However, the Hills felt that they had finally created a HOME and were not about to let that go. Pam explains, "We were here a year and he got the Seattle (Supersonics) job. For the first time ever, we said we're keeping a home. We went to Seattle and rented an apartment in the city. So we had this beautiful home in Cordillera Ranch and the city life of Seattle. Not one of the 3 boys ever really lived here, but if you ask them where is HOME, they all say Cordillera Ranch. For the first time, this will be HOME, and we couldn't be



happier."

After some time in Seattle, the team was moved to Oklahoma City, and Bob returned to Cordillera Ranch. He is actively working with the NBA now, and tours the country training and talking with the NBA's "D-League" players and helps them to develop both on and off the court during the summers. A perfect fit for Hill as his passion for the game and for the players is evident. Pam adds, "I would tell you that his love of what he's doing and his commitment to doing it right is his passion. He would coach for free. It's entirely ingrained in who he is and what he does. I manage the finances because Bob doesn't care about that. You can tell a player that is doing it for the money, or is it doing it for the love of the game." Hill finishes, "It's been my life's work and it's what I do. It's what I'm going to do. I've got some things on the table right now and we'll see how things play out." 🙏