Philip "Flip" Saunders 1955-2015

"Thank you for everything you have done for me coach! U will truly be missed."

Zach LaVine, Wolves guard

"Flip was one of the most genuine and caring people I have ever met. God works in mysterious ways, but this loss really hurts."

Kris Humphries, Washington forward and Minnesota native

"We lost an incredible man, thankful for everything he's done for me."

Corey Brewer, former Wolves forward



Star Tribune file photo

THE BEGINNING OF IT ALL: Flip Saunders talked shop with Timberwolves owner Glen Taylor, General Manager Kevin McHale and a 19-year-old Kevin Garnett in 1995.

NBA recalls Flip's sharing nature

Friends told of how Saunders helped them even before they asked.

By JERRY ZGODA
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Three days before his team meets the Timberwolves in the NBA season opener, Los Angeles Lakers assistant coach Mark Madsen learned midway through Sunday's practice that his friend and former coach Flip Saunders had died at age 60.

Madsen played for Saunders on the Wolves team that reached the 2004 Western Conference semifinals against the Lakers, the team with whom Madsen began his playing career and now is an assistant to Byron Scott.

Even among the opposition, Sunday's news hit hard.

"I couldn't believe it, no one could believe it," Madsen said by phone. "Whether people knew him or not, it was a reflective day for everyone at the Lakers facility. It was a day of loss. But it was also a day of celebration for a great life, a great person, a great human being."

Those who knew him, played for him and loved him remembered Saunders on Sunday as a lifelong coach and part-time magician who attracted people no matter where he went.

"He was almost like a pied-piper kind of person," said Trey Schwab — a former Marquette assistant coach who worked with Saunders collegiately at Tulsa in the 1980s and professionally in the CBA and with the Timberwolves in the 1980s and '90s — to the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. "If you were mad at him, you couldn't stay mad at him for very long."

Madsen won't forget that 2003-04 season, which he calls "one of, if not, the most memorable and fun years I've had playing at a professional level." And this from a guy who was part of the Lakers' 2001 and 2002 NBA championship teams.

He also won't forget quieter moments, such as the time when Saunders coached Detroit and called Madsen, volunteering to appear at Madsen's summer youth basketball camp in Champlin Park.

"I didn't ask him," Madsen said. "He just called me and said, 'Hey, I want to come by your camp, I want to speak to the kids.' And he came. He was shooting threes with the kids. He was showing them basketball tricks, spinning the ball on one finger, moving it around his back. The kids absolutely loved it."



DAY FOR TEARS: A photo of Kevin Garnett seated in front of Flip Saunders' parking space appeared on Garnett's Facebook page Sunday.

Chicago Bulls coach Fred Hoiberg — a member of that 2004 Wolves team — won't forget that playoff run to the Western finals. He won't forget moments away from the court, on plane flights, times he said Sunday helped him to decide he, too, wanted to coach first at Iowa State and now with the Bulls.

"We'd be flying home from a road trip and he'd come down and sit next to me and talk to you," Hoiberg said. "It's something I used with my players in college, something that I'll use as long as I'm on this side of things."

Hoiberg had just finished leading Bulls practice Sunday when he learned of Saunders' death.

"To hear the news was a shock," he said. "I'm still in shock. It's so sad."

NBA players around the league reacted on Twitter. Included were many Wolves players, who were sent home Sunday afternoon after halting practice because Saunders had died that morning.

"We all have been blessed by your wonderful life, Coach Flip," Wolves forward Shabazz Muhammad tweeted. "You will be deeply missed. Rest in peace."

Washington All-Star guard John Wall remembered a man who coached him in his rookie season with the Wizards.

"Coach Saunders guided me in this league," Wall tweeted. "He believed in me and taught me what it takes to be a good player and a better man. RIP Coach."

Milwaukee second-year forward Jabari Parker recalled Saunders' three seasons coaching Detroit, where he won 64, 53 and 59 games but never reached the NBA Finals.

"Rest in Paradise Flip," Parker tweeted. "You were my favorite coach when I rooted for the Pistons as a shorty."

Former Gophers coach Jim Dutcher remembers Saunders as the playmaking point guard who played for him during Dutcher's first two seasons as head coach. He also remembers a broken nose Saunders sustained in practice on a Friday before the Gophers played Michigan State the next day.

"I mean, he really broke it," Dutcher said Sunday. "He got knocked out and when he fell, he sprained his ankle, too. And so it's an afternoon game and how are we going to play without him? He showed up and said, 'Coach, I'm good to go,' and I said, 'Flip, you can hardly walk.'

"But he started and played and never missed a game. He was really a competitor, a student of the game and he was a heck of a coach."

NBA COACHING STATS

REGULAR SEASON

Season	Team	W	L	Pct.
1995-96	Wolves	20	42	.323
1996-97	Wolves	40	42	.488
1997-98	Wolves	45	37	.549
1998-99	Wolves	25	25	.500
1999-00	Wolves	50	32	.610
2000-01	Wolves	47	35	.573
2001-02	Wolves	50	32	.610
2002-03	Wolves	51	31	.622
2003-04	Wolves	58	24	.707
2004-05	Wolves	25	26	.490
2005-06	Detroit	64	18	.780
2006-07	Detroit	53	29	.646
2007-08	Detroit	59	23	.720
2009-10	Wash.	26	56	.317
2010-11	Wash.	23	59	.280
2011-12	Wash.	2	15	.118
2014-15	Wolves	16	66	.195
Career		**654**	**592**	**.525**

POSTSEASON

Season	Team	W	L	Pct.
1996-97	Wolves	0	3	.000
1997-98	Wolves	2	3	.400
1998-99	Wolves	1	3	.250
1999-00	Wolves	1	3	.250
2000-01	Wolves	1	3	.250
2001-02	Wolves	0	3	.000
2002-03	Wolves	2	4	.333
2003-04	Wolves	10	8	.556
2005-06	Detroit	10	8	.556
2006-07	Detroit	10	6	.625
2007-08	Detroit	10	7	.588
Career		**47**	**51**	**.480**

Source: basketball-reference.com

WORDS FROM TAYLOR

"It is with tremendous difficulty and deep sadness that the Timberwolves acknowledge the passing of our President of Basketball Operations and Head Coach, Flip Saunders. Flip was a symbol of strength, compassion, and dignity for our organization. He was a shining example of what a true leader should be, defined by his integrity and kindness to all he encountered. Today is not a day to reflect on Flip's accomplishments in basketball or what he brought to us as an organization on the court, but rather to indicate what he meant to us as a co-worker, friend, member of the community and the basketball world at large. We as an organization are devastated by his passing, and our hearts and prayers go out to Debbie and the entire Saunders family as they endure this extraordinary loss."

Playing days at the U still echo inside Williams Arena

By AMELIA RAYNO
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Just before the start of the Gophers basketball intrasquad scrimmage on Sunday evening, an image of a young, baby-faced Philip "Flip" Saunders flashed across the Jumbotron in the arena he loved so much.

As the team and a modest crowd observed a moment of silence for the former Gophers point guard, a sound as slight as a sniffle could be heard. But moments earlier, Williams Arena was abuzz with stories, memories and choked-up condolences for the family of Saunders, an Ohio native who many said adopted Minnesota as his own.

"In sports, when you get recognized by one name, that's how you know you've really made it," said Quincy Lewis, who played for the Gophers from 1995 to 1999 and now works for the U. "You can just say 'Flip' and everyone knows."

Saunders, who passed away Sunday a few months after beginning chemotherapy for Hodgkin's lymphoma, came to the Twin Cities as a 5-11, scrappy teenage guard, playing at Minnesota under Bill Musselman and Jim Dutcher from 1973 to 1977 before embarking on a 38-year coaching career that included stints at Golden Valley Lutheran College and as one of Dutcher's assistants from 1981-86.

Lewis was a freshman with the Gophers when Saunders began his first stint as Timberwolves coach. Later, he played for Saunders when the Timberwolves signed him as a free agent for the 2003-04 season.

"We always had a sense of pride, having a Gopher on the bench," Lewis said of Saunders, tears threatening. "It wasn't until I really played [for] him that you really got the full genius that he is as a basketball coach and a basketball mind."

On Sunday, fans remembered moments long before Saunders' time in the NBA, recounting his goofy role in the Gophers' pregame warmup spectacles during the '70s, when the team would perform acrobatic-like drills to entertain fans.

"They used to put on quite a show," said Denny Siems, who along with his wife, Deb, and their neighbors Denny and Dori Lynde have followed the Gophers to road games for decades.

Beyond the laughs, though, was a sense that Saunders left his print on a program that saw many struggles before he came and has seen plenty of struggles since he left. Paul Helgerson, a St. Paul native and season-ticket holder since 1963, remembers watching Saunders as a player, with a quick admiration. In his senior season, Saunders combined with future Hall of Famer Kevin McHale to lead Minnesota to a 24-3 record.

"At that time, he was kind of a savior to the program," Helgerson said. "He and McHale and those guys, in those days, sort of revived everything."

Even since, Saunders remained involved with the Gophers. Each year he invited coach Richard Pitino to Timberwolves practices to speak with the team, Pitino said.

"It was because I was the Gophers coach," Pitino said. "He loved the Gophers, and this university was obviously extremely important to him."

Gophers fans in the stands on Sunday showed the love went both ways.

"His legacy will live on," Lewis said. "Because it's supposed to. I mean he's Flip. He's done it. It's just a tremendous loss for all of us and basketball around the state of Minnesota."