



In the Game

For Brian Agler '80, head coach of the WNBA's Los Angeles Sparks, getting fired led to success.

WRITTEN BY Julie Vitto

Sports are in his blood.

The WNBA's Los Angeles Sparks coach, Brian Agler '80, grew up in a small town in Ohio where sports were the main attraction. Wittenberg Hall of Honor inductee and a Prospect native showed promise in basketball and baseball early on, playing under the guidance of his father, who was a coach and administrator at Elgin High School in Marion where Agler flourished as a point guard.

Agler went to Wittenberg to be surrounded by great coaches and teammates whose goal was to top their division. They did more than that. In his freshman year, Agler helped the Tigers win the 1977 NCAA Division III championship. He started all 112 games as a player at Wittenberg, scoring a career total of 1,243 points, was named most valuable player in the Ohio Athletic Conference and was voted an All-American as a senior.

The physical education and special education major, Agler credits the coaches at Wittenberg with instilling the necessary traits he says helped him excel at the professional level. Those traits, he says, are valuable, not just with coaching, but in any leadership position.

"You have to know how to treat and to motivate people," he says. "And you have to understand what it takes to nurture people to work together. I was fortunate enough to be around quality people. Those are the foundation pieces."

Even with a solid foundation, Agler says it's hard to excel at an extremely high level without going through adversity. "How you deal with adversity is a big part of coaching because you don't win every game. You have to learn how to be gracious through success and defeat."

Agler played professionally in England for a year before returning to assist the men's basketball coaching staff at Muhlenberg College in Pennsylvania, and then at Northeastern Oklahoma A&M College.

"I was lucky," says Agler of the transition from playing to coaching. "Former coaches of mine, both at the college level and the high school level, took on new coaching positions, and they both asked me to come and be an assistant. The door opened up for me, and I took advantage of that."

The opportunity to coach women's basketball presented itself at Oklahoma A&M. He was asked, and he accepted, eager to learn and improve with a team of athletes regardless of gender.

"Things timed up for me pretty well," he says. "I was always one who pursued opportunities. I didn't let things stand in my way. It didn't matter where I lived, it didn't matter how much money I was making. What mattered to me was to do something that I was passionate about."

In 1985, Agler received his master's degree in education from Pittsburg State University in Kansas. "My goal was to coach at the college level and then move up into a major college," he says. "At that time, receiving a master's degree was pretty important. The more education you get, the more doors it can open, and the more things that you're prepared to take on."

Agler followed his game plan and moved up the ranks to coach Division I basketball at the University of Missouri-Kansas City in 1988, and then at Kansas State University from 1993 to 1996.

Following the popularity of the women's 1996 U.S. Olympic basketball team, which won gold at the Atlanta games, two rival professional leagues were formed: the now-defunct American

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Basketball League (ABL) and the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA). Agler was named the first head coach and general manager of the ABL's Columbus, Ohio, franchise, the Quest, and led his team to win the ABL Championship for two straight seasons.

After the ABL dissolved in 1998, Agler joined the WNBA and was named the first head coach and general manager of the newly formed Minnesota Lynx. The team was off to a promising start in its first two years of existence, but injuries slowed its momentum. In 2002, Agler was replaced.

“The best thing that's ever happened to me was probably the most difficult thing to go through,” Agler says of being fired. “If you want to bounce back and become better, you have to self-reflect. When you eliminate all excuses and you reflect on the things that you can control and change, and then you work to improve in those areas, you can come back from adversity.”

Agler might have been down, but he wasn't out. His next opportunity came at the recommendation of his WNBA colleagues. In 2004, he became assistant coach for the Phoenix Mercury and then with the San Antonio Silver Stars in 2005. By 2008, Agler found himself back on top and was named head

coach and general manager of the Seattle Storm, leading the team to win its second WNBA championship in 2010.

In 2015, Agler assumed his current role as head coach of the Los Angeles Sparks. In 2016, he steered the Sparks toward their third championship, defeating the Lynx by one point in Game 5 of the WNBA Finals. That night, Agler became the first head coach to win WNBA titles with two different teams. So far, the 2017 season has ushered in another milestone for Agler as, in June, the Sparks helped him to earn his 300th career win as a coach.

Agler says his approach to coaching has evolved over the years and is something of a hybrid of different philosophies, especially after transitioning from college to professional level basketball. “When you're coaching professionals, you're coaching adults,” he says. “Student athletes are still making that transition.”

He goes on to explain that it's ultimately what the players think that matters. “My job is to figure out a way to get our players to play well together. When it comes down to it, they're the ones that are playing, so they have to bring out the best in each other. Sometimes it falls into place automatically, and sometimes it doesn't. And the times it doesn't, I've got to be behind the scenes



trying to work and push and nurture so it can flourish.”

The future of the WNBA looks bright to Agler for many reasons. One reason, he says, is the name recognition Magic Johnson brought to the Sparks when he became part-owner in 2014.

“I think our league is growing,” he says. “It’s becoming more popular. It’s sort of developed its own niche in the world of sports. It’s world-wide. The athleticism is impressive. The skill level is impressive. The coaching is improving. The attendance and awareness of the public is growing. It’s getting more attention on television and social media. Sponsorships are improving. Across the board, I see a great evolution of how and where this is going.”

Proud moments Agler has enjoyed throughout his winning career are too many to count. Still, he has career goals he’d like to achieve, such as coaching internationally. For now, though, he feels a sense of purpose with the Sparks as he coaches them toward the playoffs this year. “I’m where I’m supposed to be,” he says.

During the off season, Agler lives back home in the Columbus area with his family and makes a point to visit Wittenberg and

its athletic program throughout the year. “I would just encourage all the alumni to come back to campus and spend some time meeting with professors or friends or catching an event,” he says. “It’s always refreshing. After each visit, I just feel good about my decision to attend years ago.”

He frequently offers advice to aspiring athletes that might want to be in his position someday. “Understand that you’re always going to improve, and you should always be looking to improve,” he says. “Whatever that passion is, let that lead you to where you’re going. And be open to opportunities that might present themselves.”

The head of a true basketball family, Agler notes that his wife, son and daughter have all been actively involved in playing and coaching over the years. In fact, his son Bryce currently assists him with the Sparks.

Competitiveness, camaraderie and continuing to improve are just a few elements that draw Agler to a sport in which he’s earned coveted titles and developed invaluable relationships over the years. “All those things can keep you really focused,” he says. “Even if you have longer range goals, it’s good to also have immediate goals. I enjoy living in that. I like that challenge.”