

# CHC: Phil Cox Looks Back at Career

by Bill Traugher

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Phil Cox electrified Vanderbilt basketball fans with his ball handling and deadly shooting from 1981-85. His jersey number "00" was as unique as the player that wore it. Vanderbilt coach C.M. Newton recruited Cox out of Harlan County, Kentucky.

"There was a friend of my family that had gone to school with Coach Newton," Cox said recently. "By word of mouth, Coach Newton offered me a scholarship to Vanderbilt. I wasn't recruited by Kentucky, and wasn't recruited by Tennessee. I was named Mr. Basketball in the state of Kentucky and mostly OVC-type schools were interested in me. I was very fortunate that Coach Newton believed in me."

Cox averaged 35.3 points per game as a junior and 28.7 points as a senior at Cawood High School. He scored 40 points or more four times as a senior and left Cawood as the school's all-time leading scorer. The sharpshooter shot 58.4 percent from the field and 83.0 percent from the free throw line. Cox also led his prep school in assists as a senior with 190.



"There was no doubt that I was disappointed by not being recruited by Kentucky," said Cox. "Anybody that grew up in the state of Kentucky makes you a Kentucky fan. I loved listening about players like Dan Issel, Jimmy Dan Conner and Bob Guyette. They played years and years before me. I just loved listening to Kentucky basketball on the radio and occasionally getting to watch a game. Attending Vanderbilt was the best for me. Vanderbilt and the community was an awesome place."

Cox entered Vanderbilt at a time of a rebuilding stage. Richard Schmidt was coming off two seasons with 13-13 and 15-14 records. Newton would replace Schmidt while adding Cox as his first recruit. Cox's first college basketball was very memorable.

"In my first college game I had 30 points against Duke," Cox said. "I had two points the first half, and 28 points the second half. We were playing Duke at Duke and won there. In my sophomore year we beat Duke in Memorial Gym."

"Against Tennessee I ended up making two free throws at Stokley to beat them. In that same year in Nashville there was a controversial call when I ran over Tyrone Beaman. They called a block and I made a couple of free throws. Each time there were just a few seconds on the clock and we won.

That play against Beaman is one of the more historic in the Vanderbilt/Tennessee rivalry. It was on February 24, 1983 in Memorial Gym and the Vols were winning 68-67 with five seconds remaining. Cox received a pass from Al McKinney near midcourt and streaked to the basket and collided with Beaman. The official called a block with one second and Cox made both free throws for a Commodore victory.

"No doubt about it that Tennessee is the biggest rivalry to the fans," said Cox. "I didn't realize there was such a rivalry between the two. One time when we beat UT in Knoxville, there were a few hundred people waiting at the airport when we came back to town. They had posters and were cheering. The big rivalry was Tennessee.

"We never beat Kentucky in my career. Any time you played Kentucky, you wanted to play well. I think there was one game in Nashville that we lost in overtime. Kentucky had excellent teams. And to be able to play in Rupp Arena would give me cold chills."

During Cox's senior year, he became Vanderbilt's all-time scoring leader with 1,724 points passing Mike Rhodes (1978-81) who collected 1,699 points. As a senior, the guard was named to the First Team All-SEC while receiving the Civitan Sportsmanship Award.

"There's no doubt that's one of the best memories that I have at Vanderbilt," Cox said about breaking the record. "To be able to come from a small town in Kentucky to Vanderbilt, and get a quality education and to become their all-time leading scorer is special. I held it for 20-something years. I had great teammates and a wonderful coach, but you had to put the time in. I wasn't going to let anyone outwork me.

"There is some natural talent, rather it is in music or athletics whatever it may be. I believe it has to do with how hard you had to work. The reason I was able to handle and shoot the ball was the odd number of hours I put in. When I was in junior high through high school, I lived in a gym. I played in the summer and year round and developed a love for the game."

Another talent that Cox developed was in the art of free throw shooting. Cox led Vanderbilt in free throw shooting percentage in three of the four years he played. On the Vanderbilt free throw career leader board Cox ranks third all-time in free throws made (442), fifth in attempts (513) and third in percentage (.862).

Cox set the then-record of SEC consecutive free throws by making his final four attempts of the 1981-82 season, then netted his first 43 tries in 1982-83 for a total of 47 straight. As a freshman Cox also had free throw streaks of 37 and 23 in a row.

"That is something that takes a lot of practice," Cox said. "When I was in high school, I would not leave the gym until I made 20 free throws in a row. That would be working during the season and in the summer. I laid the groundwork then for the success later. You have to have the discipline to do the right thing. If you work hard, put in the time and make the right decisions it will pay off down the line.

"Shooting a free throw is like a golf swing. There is a lot of mechanics to it. If you don't have the right mechanics in golf you aren't going to hit it straight. Free throw shooting is the same way. If you want to be an 85% to 90 % shooter you've got to put the time into it

or you will be a mediocre shooter."

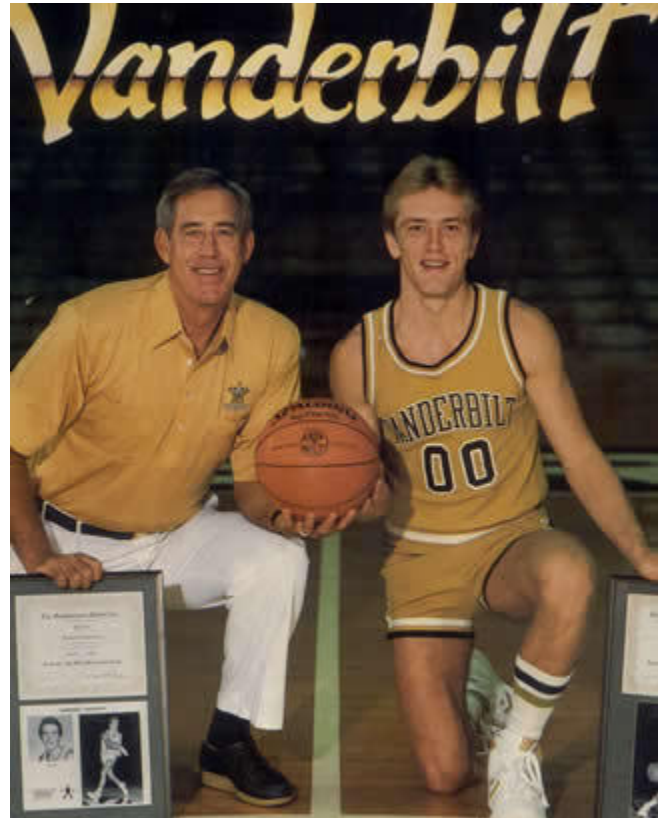
In 2004, Vanderbilt's Matt Freije would break Cox's all-time scoring record when he totaled 1, 891 points. Cox was aware that his record was going to fall.

"People were calling me and asking about the record about to be broken," said Cox. "At the time I played there was not a three-pointer. My thoughts were that Freije was very deserving and a great player. I was happy for him. Records were made to be broken. He was a class act and fun to watch. Hopefully in the next 20 years I'll stay in the top four or five in scoring. It doesn't take away from me what I did."

Coach Newton would coach Vanderbilt for a total of eight seasons where he was 129-115. Newton was the SEC Coach of the Year in 1988 and 1989. He took the Commodores to the NCAA Tournament in 1988 and 1989. The 1988 club was defeated in the Sweet Sixteen by eventual champs Kansas.

"The first thing you learn about Coach Newton is that he is a true gentleman," said Cox. "Today I'm a principal. I've been an athletic director, a coach and a lot of things. I do reflect on what he taught me not just as a basketball player, but how you treat people.

"And how you communicate with people. He was a great communicator. If my parents would come down from Kentucky with friends to watch me play, he would take the time to say hello and be visible and was very sincere. I have taken his qualities to where I am today."



So what was it like playing in Memorial Gymnasium before the roaring fans?

"It is incredible," said Cox. "When you make that shot or make that free throw and 15, 000 people are cheering for you. It's incredible. I loved playing in front of that crowd. They recognize good basketball from the other team not just our team. They are a very appreciative and knowledgeable crowd. I will tell you this, there is nothing like the excitement playing in Memorial Gymnasium. The fans are just awesome."

After Cox graduated from Vanderbilt he played one month in the Continental Basketball League in Bangor, Maine. He came back to Vanderbilt and served as a graduate assistant under Newton.

Cox would then become the head basketball coach at Lincoln Memorial University (1986-91) in Harrogate, Tennessee near the Kentucky border. Cox's overall record in five years at LMU was 84-60. He had replaced current Belmont coach Rick Byrd. LMU's yearly record with Cox

was 20-11, 21-9, 25-5, 13-13 and 5-22. LMU was the Tennessee Valley Athletic Conference champions in Cox's first two seasons.

"I had a lot of success," said Cox. "It goes back to being able to recruit. You are as good as what you've got. There was a lot of traveling. For me it was great experience. I was in my 20s and I loved coaching. I don't coach anymore. I've coached middle school for 10 years. I haven't coached in several years since I've gotten into administration. I'm the athletic director and oversee all of our sports. That's my way of staying involved."

After leaving LMU, Cox moved to Knoxville where he was married and earned a Master's Degree. He is today the assistant vice-principal for Jefferson Middle School in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. Cox and his wife Kim, have a daughter Callie 13, and sons Trevor, 9 and Eli, 4.

So what is it like for a former Vanderbilt basketball legend to live in Big Orange Country?

I get ribbed weekly," laughed Cox. "Particularly when I wear my Vanderbilt hat or sweatshirt. I think the people are very acceptable. I hear a lot of people tell me they cheered for me except when we played against Tennessee. People up here have a lot of respect for Vanderbilt and for what the SEC stands for. It's kind of a juggling act. I know when Vanderbilt beats Tennessee; I'll go out and decorate the front office with Vanderbilt stuff. I try to have fun with it.

"I love Vanderbilt University and I always will. That's what it comes back to. You talk about all these records, but in the end its what you do with your life. I feel that I've been very fortunate. The position I am in I can help kids and give something back. It is a different challenge. What I learned from my teammates, Jeff Turner and Coach Newton have remained with me all my life.

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