

# IN THE NEWS

## Raptors And "Lenny" Wilkens Part Company

By Kurt Wildman  
Sports Columnist

After withstanding months of sustained criticism, it looked as if Toronto Raptors basketball coach Leonard "Lenny" Wilkens had finally gotten a break.

The N.B.A. All-Star show, coinciding with a brief Raptors 5 of 6 game winning streak, had seemingly muted the media vampires and bleating fans who wanted Wilkens' blood on the bench.

They did their best to minimize the impact of the Raptors' cataclysmic injury crisis. Their silence during the team's healthiest, most successful period all season, however, appeared to be a tacit admission that the collection of busted body parts, including Vince Carter's wonky knee, not Wilkens' coaching, was the true reason for its poor performance.

How naive I was.

With the resumption of the Raptors' losing ways, Wilkens became a bigger target than ever. And as most Toronto sports media outlets had predicted, after a poor 24 wins in 82 games, Lenny's three-year tenure as head coach ended by "mutual agreement".

Assessments abound about Wilkens' apparent failure to craft a personality for the Dinosaurs and maximize their performance. Somewhere among the vitriol, fair comments and concerns about the coach's court-side passivity, time-clock management, and substitution patterns can be discerned.

Still, suggestions that Wilkens has never been up for the job are ridiculous. The idea that a bounty of better coaches exists is dubious.

Setting aside Van Gundy, Phil Jackson, those who still associate Pat Riley with the



Lenny Wilkens. Photo credit: nba.com and NBA Media Ventures, LLC.

Lakers, and dyed-in-the-wool Lenny-haters, rational observers examining the Raptors' situation will admit no coach could have done tangibly better during this season's Purple Power outage.

### Roster Strength

You don't win without talent. And at full strength, the Raptor's talent base, though strong, is not the best in the East, much less the N.B.A.

The Indiana Pacers, who have a true point guard, are younger, more gifted physically, and nastier. The Milwaukee Bucks collective of Payton, Cassells, Thomas,

Mason, Kukoc and Redd possess more skill, playoff and championship experience, and have a higher basketball IQ than Toronto's Top Six. The Sixers with Iverson, Keith Van Horn, a semi-rejuvenated Derrick Coleman, point guard Eric

Snow, and versatile Aaron McKie are at worst the equal of Toronto's star jerseys. The New Jersey Nets are flat out better in every category and, like the Sixers with A.I., include a more effective superstar in Jason Kidd.

No one should forget that in the 2002-2003 pre-season, Sports Illustrated picked the Raptors to finish 11th in the Eastern Conference.

### Health Care Crisis

Even though he should have made his way out of the glue factory by now, that dead horse called the Raptors injury situation warrants a further beating.

"Junk Yard Dog" Jerome Williams had bone chips in his elbow and a bad neck. Lindsay Hunter, so valuable to the team in the first half of the season because he could play at high speed and actually beat his man off the dribble to penetrate the key, was entrenched on injured reserve with a bad back. Utilitarian centre Eric Montross (foot) and the anticipated second/third scorer Lamond Murray (ankle) both began the regular season on the injury list; both remained there at season's end, having never played a single game. Alvin Williams, the team's truest money player, played through chronic maladies. Voshon Lenard, Antonio Davis, Michael Bradley, Jelani

McCoy, and Mamadou N'diaye each missed multiple games with injuries.

Of course, there are Vince's knees and his freshly rolled left ankle.

### The Comparisons

Still, some insist that another coach would have gotten more from this team, injured or not.

Early in the season a number commentators had virtually anointed Jeff Van Gundy, who quit his job with the Knickerbockers, as Wilkens' best replacement.

Those commentators conveniently ignored Wilkens' success against Van Gundy in head-to-head competition in the 2000-2001 Eastern Conference semi-finals, and his dramatic 12th hour march into the 2001-2002 playoffs (without Vince) as Van Gundy's Knicks emptied their lockers.

In comparisons with Boston Celtics coaching icon Red Auerbach, Pat Riley of the Miami Heat, Phil Jackson and others, critics point to Lenny's "failure" to win more than a single N.B.A. Championship (1979 with the Seattle Supersonics) in 30 years of coaching.

Again, those who persist in discounting Wilkens' coaching legacy ignore the

obvious advantages other coaches have had, advantages premised on the superlative talents of their players and divorced from their coaching abilities.

Auerbach coached squads of legends year after year in an N.B.A. without free agency.

Riley had a little help from Magic, Kareem, Worthy and some of the best supporting players in history. Without them, he has never won a championship and, in recent years, has been losing regularly with the Miami Heat, a team whose personnel decisions he controls. Indeed, while coaching the Knicks who featured Patrick Ewing, Riley, like Wilkens who coached some very good Cleveland Cavaliers teams around the same time period, was never able to defeat Jackson's Bulls spearheaded by Jordan.

Even Jackson's success in coaching Chicago's Bovine Ballers to double three-peats and the best single-season won-loss record in N.B.A. history, and his recent success with the Los Angeles Lakers, has been firmly grounded on having at least two of the N.B.A.'s "Fifty Greatest Players" on his team at the same time.

His double three-peat feat in Chicago revolved around Michael Jordan and, for good measure, Scottie Pippen. That almost says it all, except that he also had help from, among others, the best three-point specialist in N.B.A. history Steve Kerr and from Dennis Rodman, arguably the best combination of fitness, basketball intellect, defensive ability and rebounding mastery ever.

In Los Angeles, where Jackson procured his third three-peat in 2002, the Zen master and North Dakota grad inherited not only Kobe Bryant, the true heir to Jordan's throne, but also Shaquille O'Neal, the one player in the league who cannot be stopped by anyone or anything except bad toes and poor free-throw shooting.

No matter how much you like the Raptors' at full strength, Jackson, as the Raptor's hypothetical floor boss, would for the first time have to try to win without having a couple of superstars to mix with the ultimate role-players.

When faced with the loss of a critical player through injury or retirement, Jackson's results have been

Continued on page 4...

Law Office of  
**Denise Badley**  
B.A. (Hons.), LL.B.  
BARRISTER SOLICITOR NOTARY

• IMMIGRATION • FAMILY LAW • REAL ESTATE

- Surprisingly Affordable Rates
- Flexible Appointments
- Legal Aid Accepted
- Ask About FREE Consultation

2089 Danforth Ave., 2nd Floor  
(Woodbine Subway) Toronto  
(416) 690-6195 Fax: (416) 690-6271  
dbadley@connection.com

**ASHBOURNE ROBINSON**  
Barrister • Solicitor • Notary

**K**nowledgeable  
**E**xperienced  
**E**ffective  
**N**otable

AREAS OF PRACTICE  
Real Estate  
Family Law  
Immigration Law  
Wrongful Dismissal  
Wills & Estate  
Criminal Defence  
Commercial Law etc.

150 Consumers Road, Suite 105  
Toronto, Ontario M2J 1P9  
Tel: (416) 502-9610  
Fax: (416) 502-9619

Louis A. Robinson, LL.B.

# Leonard "Lenny" Wilkens: A Bulletproof Legacy

...continued from page 3

decidedly poorer. Earlier this season his team was going nowhere fast without O'Neal. Even more telling, he could not capture the N.B.A. title in the two seasons co-extensive with Jordan's first retirement, even though Pippen and others remained on the roster.

In contrast, the only superstar Wilkens has coached is, arguably, Dominique Wilkins with the Atlanta Hawks. And since the selection committee strangely didn't see fit to include Dominique as one of the "Fifty Greatest", it seems the only "Top Fifty" player Lenny has had the advantage of coaching is ... well ... himself.

Unlike others who have carefully selected the environments in which they coached, ensuring they had either the players or the power to make themselves look good, he has humbly served his teams as coach and, in the beginning, as a player-coach.

## A Distinguished Career

Until signing with the Raptors, he had only coached teams for which he had played. Between 1969 and 1972, then in 1974-75, he had to absorb losses while dividing his attention between playing the point and running the bench for the Sonics and Portland Trail Blazers.

Once he retired from playing, his results progressively improved to excellence. He became the all-time leader in wins for Seattle and Cleveland. He won the N.B.A. Championship 1979 and Olympic gold medals in 1992 and as head coach in 1996. He obtained the most coaching wins in N.B.A. history, was named one of the 10 best N.B.A. coaches of all time, and became the only person, other than U.C.L.A. legend John Wooden, to be named to the Basketball Hall of Fame as a player and as a coach.

## The Losses

Media chatter escalated as Lenny encroached on Bill Fitch's record for most career coaching losses.

It reached an apex on April 4, 2003 when a Raptors' home loss to the San Antonio Spurs gave Wilkens his 1,107th loss and sole

possession of that record, 8 years after he set the mark for most wins.

While detractors claim this latest "distinction" blights his legacy, younger coaches like Rick Carlisle, respected for the job he's done with the superstar-free Pistons, still revere Wilkens and note, as he did recently in the Toronto Star, that despite three decades of coaching, Lenny has maintained a 54% winning percentage.

## Management on the Hoop

Even if the accumulating losses of the last few years have removed some of the lustre from Lenny's legacy, you can blame the front office for a lot of the tarnish.

During Wilkens' tenure in Atlanta, General Manager Pete Babcock made radical changes to a playoff-calibre team. He excised veterans and infused youth, including the troubled Isaiah Rider.

It didn't work.

Wilkens took the fall and Babcock stayed on trying to make his vision work. Despite more radical changes and new coaches of his choosing, Babcock's Hawks have performed no better without Lenny.

Unsurprisingly, Babcock now needs a job.

What is surprising is that it took until late this season for him to join the unemployment line.

Here in T.O., Wilkens received top billing in "Blame Lenny Part II" as the Raptors decided on a future without him.

While Raptors management, particularly GM Glen Grunwald, may gloss over the issue of its own accountability for this regressive season, the damaging roster decisions with

which Wilkens had to live are notable.

Grunwald et al. mis-diagnosed M.V.P. candidate Tracy McGrady's case of home sickness and Torontophobia, getting nothing in return when the better of the two cousins bounced to Orlando.

They brought in a broken-down Hakeem Olajuwon and paid him guaranteed big money

for a degenerating back and legs. Because of his decision to bring in Olajuwon, Grunwald effectively lost the emerging Keon Clark.

Obviously, Grunwald and the management team have also suffered because of the injuries. No doubt they must be the experts on

ten-day contracts as the team set the league record for man-games lost. Undoubtedly, they deserve props for securing Rafer Alston and, more significantly, Voshon Lenard, at low cost.

*After 30 years it is understandable if something in his coaching fails to resonate with players in the 21st century. Still, three years of mixed results in Toronto cannot alter accomplishments etched in the rock of a hallowed career.*

*For those who remain as Lenny moves on, however, the story is still being written. They may yet follow in the footsteps of a classy legend and duplicate his success.*

*But it is unlikely.*

## Why Should You Own Your Own Home?

By Desemal Thomas  
Real Estate Professional



Is owning a home one of your objectives for this year? If it is NOT - it should be!

This is a good time to get into the market despite the rise in house value in some areas it is offset by the excellent interest rate. Home ownership can be a complex and overwhelming affair for the first-time buyer - closing cost, land transfer tax, amortization, cash back, variable rate mortgage are some of the industry terminology thrown at you by professionals who ASSUME that you know right off the bat what these mean. Without patronizing you, I shall explain all you need to know about buying your first home and later selling your first home in simple, easy to understand terms in a series of follow-up columns.

Now that you have made the decision to buy the next logical step is to find out if you are qualified to buy. In other words is your credit rating such that a lender will take you on as a reasonable risk? Don't run scared if you have a little blight on your credit rating if other factors are in

place such as a stable verifiable income and a consistent history of paying current bills among other qualifiers there will be lenders who will be happy to take you on. In other words you don't have to have an R1 (the best credit rating) to get a mortgage. Prospective buyers who have a discharged bankruptcy can also qualify for a mortgage.

Your next step is to actually get qualified for the mortgage, whom should you contact? Your bank or a mortgage broker? Whom you choose can sometimes make quite a difference in the interest rate you get and the amount you qualify for. Your bank can only push their mortgage products whereas on the other hand the mortgage brokers have a list of lenders products that he or she can choose from. My advice, contact a mortgage broker but bear in mind that they are not made equal. Beware of mortgage brokers who promise you the most amazing interest rate or mortgage approval without even seeing you or reviewing your documents. If your mortgage broker cannot provide you with a mortgage verification in writing - be afraid; be very afraid. In my next column, we will look at various mortgages conventional, high ratio, variable rate, vendor take back, mortgages arranged by builders if buying new etc.

For questions and comments feel free to contact Desemal Thomas who is a Licensed Realtor with Exit Realty Experts she can be reached @t 416-431-7676 or at [desemalpoint@thomes.com](mailto:desemalpoint@thomes.com) or email her at [point1@sympatico.ca](mailto:point1@sympatico.ca)



**Guardian**  
Corporate Pharmacy

**COME TO CORPORATE PHARMACY  
OR LET CORPORATE PHARMACY  
COME TO YOU**

For you:

- Prescription medications
- Home healthcare needs (canes, wheelchair, walker, etc.)
- Vitamins and supplements
- Health!

**Remi Ojo**  
Pharmacist/Owner

**PHARM  
ASSIST**

**78 Corporate Dr.**

**416-279-0828**

*Guardian Corporate Pharmacy is Black-Owned and Operated*

We accept most insurance benefits  
(Ontario drug benefits, Liberty Health, Green Shield, etc.)