

Ron LaBar

Previous player and coach for the FreeWheelers and Dallas Raiders and Dallas Mavericks

*Interview conducted by
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in 2016 in Dallas, Texas
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Disability Studies Minor
Special Collections and Archives
University of Texas at Arlington
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Biography

LaBar graduated UTA with an accounting degree in December 1977. He played wheelchair basketball for UTA for a year, and eventually became a player and coach of the Dallas Mavericks wheelchair basketball team.

Topics discussed

- Background
- Wheelchair basketball
- College experience with accessibility
- Jim Hayes
- Modifying wheelchairs
- Life after college

Rose

This is Sarah Rose.

Engel

And Trevor Engel.

Rose

<topic>Background</topic>

Interviewing Ron LaBar for the Texas Disability History Collection in Dallas on Thursday, January 14, 2016.

Let's start with before you got to UTA. Did you grow up in Wichita Falls?

LaBar

I was born in Austin, Texas, I grew up in Wichita Falls. I went to the Army when I was eighteen.

Rose

Tell us a little bit about your childhood, family.

LaBar

My dad is half Chinese, half Italian, my mother was Spanish. I played high school football, I went to high school in **SH Fighter**.

Rose

What position did you play?

LaBar

Middle linebacker and guard.

Rose

You said you played against Jim Hayes?

LaBar

We were on the same football field our senior year. In high school football game we found out after we met each other.

Rose

What were you interested in as a kid?

LaBar

Cars, girls.

Rose

Sports?

LaBar

Sports a little bit, I loved sports, I did. I wasn't that good at sports, I was slow as able-bodied. I was rough, but I was slow. In a wheelchair I was fast.

Rose

Interesting, so it was actually easier?

LaBar

Yeah, I never got to run out for the long pass or anything in recreational sports when I was young, but it was like I was made for wheelchair.

Rose

Wow. How did you wind up going to Vietnam?

LaBar

I didn't get along with my father and I was going to college my first semester out of high school, I was living with friends and I didn't want to be a burden on them so I went in the Army. Thought I'd go to college after I got out of the Army, do stuff after I turned twenty-one. Of course I didn't realize you had to have a job, get credit.

Rose

When did you graduate high school?

LaBar

I graduated high school in 1967. I went immediately to a college all summer and one semester.

Rose

What college?

LaBar

Midwestern State in Wichita Falls.

Rose

And Vietnam?

LaBar

I went to the Army of January 1969, 1968, and I trained a little over a year before I went to Vietnam. I went to infantry training, basic training, jump school, and Ranger school and the NCO Academy.

Rose

Wow. So you were in the Army?

LaBar

Yes.

Rose

Can you tell us a little bit about your time in Vietnam?

LaBar

I was there twice, eighteen months my first tour, I was in infantry **mut** for three months. Because I went to Ranger school I was able to get into the special operations group, they called them the **airborne Ranger outfit**. I spent fifteen months there. I got to do a bunch of special missions, about six of us would go out and get a prisoner or watch the enemy. They wouldn't know we were there. It was as scary as it could be, but it was much safer than being in infantry **mut**. Everybody I know that went to Vietnam with me at the same time of that infantry outfit, about thirty something of us, everybody got nailed, not necessarily killed, but shot or killed except for me and that's because I got out of there in less than three months. I ended up getting nailed anyway, that was another job.

Rose

Wow. What about the second tour? You came back to the US for a while?

LaBar

I came back to the US for a year, I had a year to go back in the service if I wanted to keep my rank. I don't know why, I thought that being in Vietnam fighting the war was the romantic thing to do. I was young and silly and wanted to go back in the war. I only lasted a couple of months, I stepped on a landmine. It was like in a movie, I thought I'd died.

Rose

Were you treated in Vietnam first? Korea?

LaBar

Vietnam, yes. They pulled me out immediately. The guys that had dropped us off were friends of ours. I stepped on a landmine maybe ten minutes out, five-ten minutes out after they let us off. They came right back and picked me up, they didn't wait on a medevac, which may or may not have saved my life, I don't know. I was in Vietnam for about a week, I went to the Philippines for about a week, I came back to the states and rehabed there for about three to four months.

Rose

Was that Walter Reed?

LaBar

Fitzsimons in Denver. I had my choice to go anywhere I wanted to. Normally because I was in Wichita Falls I would've gone to San Antonio, but I wanted to go someplace different so I went to Denver.

Rose

That's when you lost both legs?

LaBar

Right, yeah. It was a traumatic injury when I stepped on the mine, I lost them both. I lost them to just about the knee, and they couldn't salvage the knee so they cut them off above the knees. I messed up my hand right hand.

Rose

Can you tell us about the rehabilitation process?

LaBar

It went well for me, I recovered fast. If it hadn't been for my arm injury, I'd have been out of the hospital in four months. The other guys stayed in there six months to a year or more that had the same injury. I healed up quick. I was out of there in a hurry. It wasn't horrible, I didn't go through a bunch of surgeries or anything.

Rose

Were they planning to have you try to learn to walk again? Wheelchair?

LaBar

They taught me to walk quickly in about a month or so. I was up walking. In fact when I went to UTA back in those days when I was younger I was embarrassed to be seen in public in my wheelchair. I walked everywhere I went on campus. When I started playing wheelchair basketball about a year after I got on campus, people were amazed to see what my disability, they thought I had polio, or they knew I had a leg injury or I walked with a cane. They had no idea that I was a bilateral amputee.

Rose

Wow. Did you get to know any of the other veterans in the unit? Or did you just want to, when you're going through rehabilitation afterwards?

LaBar

I went to rehabilitation with a bunch of different vets from all over the service. I think we were all Army as a matter of fact. It might not have been, I don't remember. It seems like we were all Army. Fitzsimons Hospital in Colfax California, Denver Colorado.

Rose

Did you stay in touch with them? Or did you just feel like "I want to hide this disability."

LaBar

I stayed in touch with a few of them. I wasn't afraid to hide it, I just felt embarrassed with people looking at me when I was in my wheelchair with no legs. You know, because I was self-conscious, I guess I was a little bit, especially on campus. I didn't like to go shopping at any malls or do stuff not in my legs.

Rose

When you got out of the hospital where did you move to?

LaBar

I stayed in Denver, Colorado. I got a job at a bank as an intern. I got paid, it was a two-year program, when I completed that I moved back to Texas. I couldn't stand all the ice and snow in Denver. I stayed in Arlington for just a short while before I went back... Before I went into the service I wanted to move to Arlington. At the time I was married and my wife wanted to go to college there at UTA. We had a kid and I decided I'd stay at home and babysit so she could go to college. She went one semester and she did all right in school. I thought "If she could make it through college here at UTA, I probably could too." After that semester I signed up to go to UTA.

Rose

<topic>Wheelchair basketball</topic>

You had no idea about Jim Hayes or anything at that point?

LaBar

Nothing. I got a phone call because they found out about my disability. He promised me a starting job on the team because there were only five of us playing wheelchair basketball. I came out to the first practice, I hit two baskets the whole practice, I was terrible. I was a good athlete, but I was terrible at shooting the ball. I just did not play basketball.

Rose

Had you ever tried it before?

LaBar

When I would work out in the gym in between weightlifting sessions, I would go to try to shoot free throws. I couldn't dribble, I couldn't do anything, I did not play basketball. When I was a little kid and we played basketball, there'd five of us, I'd be on the team with three guys because I was no threat to score. The two good guys against the other three guys, and I tackle them. It just didn't sink in, I just didn't even want to play, it was just to do something for required physical education or participation. I was terrible, I could never score.

Rose

Why did you say "Yes" to Jim Hayes?

LaBar

He said I was gonna be able to start on the team, I thought "That'll be neat." As I told you before, all I wanted to do was score one bucket and I made three. I had six points, the only person scored more than me was that **ringer** they brought in, he had eight. That fired me up about playing basketball, I thought "You're not that bad at that this game." These other guys they were terrible too, blind guys should not play.

Rose

Had you tried to get into adaptive sports before that?

LaBar

No. In fact after I played that game we just bought a house. I had a half quart put on the back by my garage, had a goal put up on my house. I went out there every day for two or three hours and practiced basketball. I'm obsessive because I had that little modicum of success, I decided I wanted to play basketball.

Rose

What was it like at the first practice? Did everyone know each other?

LaBar

No, nobody knew anybody. I didn't know who Jim Hayes was. There was another double amputee like me, I think he was in the service too. He could play a little bit of basketball, so he was much better than me. I could catch and I could throw, I could do all the athletics stuff, I just couldn't shoot.

Rose

Do you know why Jim Hayes started the FreeWheelers?

LaBar

I have no idea. A little bit, there was a wheelchair basketball team in town that was the best team in the state. He'd heard about him so he wanted to do something along their lines.

Rose

Where was that again?

LaBar

They were called the Dallas Raiders, and now the Dallas Mavericks. They're good buddies with UTA, they practiced there together. That's where I went after I graduated school.

Rose

Was that a community team?

LaBar

It was a community team in Dallas, yes. They only started maybe four or five years before.

Rose

Was that veterans or people with polio?

LaBar

It had anybody in the community that wanted to play on the team. They were much better than us. There were several veterans on there that I had bonded with when I went to play for them.

Rose

You heard about that and wanted to start?

LaBar

When I went out and played and got to score those six points, I really wanted to play the game and get good at it. The only guy better than me was that guy from the Dallas team. Even though I didn't get to start, I could outplay those guys after one practice.

Rose

What about the other people at that first practice? You said there was one other double amputee?

LaBar

Right, I don't know how long he stuck around. I don't know if he ever played on the team or not. I don't think he did, he may have though, but I don't remember. Just about everybody else stayed on the team and practiced more with the guys. I think maybe he stayed until he finished college.

Rose

Do you remember any of the names?

LaBar

His name was **Moffat**. There was **Bob Ross**, he died. There was **Paul Pettigrew**, he died. Paul Pettigrew was a veteran. There was **Davey Thornton**, I think he's still alive living in Dallas somewhere. Jim Hayes...how many is that? There was that blind guy, I don't remember him.

Rose

A blind guy?

LaBar

Yeah, he was legally blind, he could kinda hear the ball a little bit. He didn't make it, he didn't play much after that. He played over me, I was mad at Jim for that. "You played this blind guy over me?" We laughed about it for years afterwards, it's funny.

Rose

Going back a bit, more into UTA and Jim Hayes, what were the expectations that you had coming out of the rehab hospital and what were you told? What did you expect adjusting to life with a disability?

LaBar

When I first got hurt, I just hoped that I would be able to eat, survive, get an apartment, I thought I was going to be sitting at home watching TV all day every day...reading books and doing nothing, I didn't think any girl would ever care for me. I never thought about having a family, I thought I was going to live a very minimalistic life. That was my expectation. I found out they were gonna pay me some money, more than I ever made before, then I could drive. I got a brand-new Corvette for my first car.

Rose

Hand controls?

LaBar

Yeah, I never had a new car, barely had a car to begin with. Life wasn't that bad.

Rose

That was the VA?

LaBar

Yeah, the service took care of me.

Rose

You hadn't been married before, right?

LaBar

No.

Rose

How did you meet your wife?

LaBar

She worked at the little store in the VA. I'd go down there and buy stuff and flirt with her, and finally started going out.

Rose

What was her name?

LaBar

Her name was **Celeste**. Worst choice for a wife, I could not imagine.

Rose

Then you had one kid?

LaBar

We had two. I had a son that passed away when he was twenty, about fifteen years ago.

Rose

<topic>College experience with accessibility</topic>
Were you married the whole time you were in college?

LaBar

Yes, I was married for seven years. In fact, I put her through college too. She went to nursing school at UTA.

Rose

What was college like?

LaBar

I had fun going to college, I didn't enjoy working in a degree in accounting. I worked for the IRS for a little while, I worked in GSA for government jobs. The jobs bored me to death, all I thought about when I went to work was playing wheelchair basketball. When I graduated college I had to wait six months to get a job at the IRS. They didn't have any openings when I was in class. I'd get up at eight o'clock every

morning and Jim gave me the keys to the gym. I'd go in the gym at eight o'clock in the morning and close it at five. As I said, I have an obsessive personality, I would do push-ups, laps, shoot the ball. I played for eight hours a day, and I think I played seven days a week, Saturdays and Sundays too. I was ridiculous, I was a terrible husband. I'm obsessive when I do something.

Rose

Did you interact much with the other students with disabilities during college before you got on the team?

LaBar

I didn't have anything to do with disabled people before I went on the team. As matter of fact I couldn't jump a curb, I couldn't go off the curb hardly. I'd go down backwards. The guys in wheelchairs taught me how to be independent. I couldn't do anything in the wheelchair hardly, I couldn't pop a wheelie. I was in a wheelchair six years, that's the simplest thing, to pop a wheelie in your wheelchair. I couldn't do any of the basic things from a wheelchair. All these guys in wheelchair basketball taught me all this stuff. That's where I got over from being in public, we'd go to games and do stuff together. Of course, they're all in wheelchairs and if they hadn't done that, I don't know what I would've done.

Rose

Did you ever get weird reactions?

LaBar

I don't think so, we probably did, I'm sure from some people. I said I felt a little uncomfortable with little kids looking at me.

Rose

What about traveling? We heard that there was a RV, a bus that got converted?

LaBar

They just put a lift on it, it was a big RV. It was a converted as far as I know.

Rose

<topic>Jim Hayes</topic>

Do you know how Jim Hayes got that?

LaBar

He could talk, he was personable. He met the people at Moritz Cadillac. It was Moritz Chevrolet back then I think. Moritz bought a bunch of other places. Jim was a master, he raised all the money, eventually got

scholarships for guys, got somebody to donate money for the uniforms, money for travel. Jim Hayes, his passion.

Rose

You said you used to have a lot of fun on the RV?

LaBar

Yeah, we're all joking around, talking to each other, making fun of people, gossiping.

Rose

Drinking beer?

LaBar

Yeah, we snuck beer aboard. Jim pretended he wasn't looking, Jim would never do anything with us. Once in a while we'd get him to go out to a bar with us, a strip joint, he felt most uncomfortable, he felt uncomfortable. He may of had a beer, I don't know. He reminded me of Hitler, he was hard on us, I can't remember if he had a beer or not. I just don't remember.

Rose

What kind of teams did you play when you were traveling in the '70s?

LaBar

We played either other college teams or faculties or groups of adults. We didn't play many teams, we played the Dallas team five times when I played for UTA. They schooled us every time. We played a team in college, team in Houston, got together a college team. The team in Austin got together a team, but they were newer than we were. They were easy for us to beat because they didn't know how to push their wheelchairs. We didn't play anybody for the first year or two.

Rose

Just training?

LaBar

Training, we played the faculty, we played the students. There was a group of young men, some of them got to be good. In fact two of them probably would've been our second and third left best players. They got to be that good. The able-bodies could just pick up the game if they played for six months, but if you're handicap, they're gonna be better than you. We always beat him, but they weren't easy to beat after year or so.

Rose

What sense did you have of how wheelchair basketball was spreading in Texas? Was Jim Hayes involved? Encouraging other people to set up?

LaBar

Absolutely. Definitely instrumental in that, trying to get teams together so he can have somebody to beat. We couldn't beat anybody that played. We'd been playing against anybody we could play except for the Dallas team. They were so far ahead of us, we learned a lot, but we just weren't that athletic either, except for people like me that was an amputee. I can do almost anything anybody can do, a guy with one leg, or a guy with a limp...he would have a lot more physical ability than me, but because I'm in a wheelchair all the time, he wouldn't be better in a wheelchair than me.

Rose

<topic>Modifying wheelchairs</topic>

You said you modified the chairs a lot? Jim modified the chairs?

LaBar

Absolutely.

Rose

Can you tell us about that process?

LaBar

He modified them, we did things to them that made them quicker, faster, lighter. When I first played, I played in my every day, a chair like this except it had hard wheels on it. When we played against Dallas, they were laughing at us because we didn't know any better. We had arm guards, they are playing with chairs that had cameras in them. We didn't have cameras. Their wheels were moved up so they could get better torque on the chair. We didn't know anything about wheelchairs.

Rose

Did you have a foot rest on your chair?

LaBar

I took mine off, but later on in the league the standard chairs had a foot rest, but I had my much reduced so they didn't extend very far.

Rose

You took an office chair once?

LaBar

Jim took an office chair, and asked me what I thought about making a basketball chair out of it. I didn't tell him this, but I thought it was absurd, and it was. I don't know how far he got in the project, but he gave it up sometime.

Rose

How quickly did you get wheelchairs with wheels with **tampers**?

LaBar

I did that after I got on the Dallas team, two years after I played I got on the Dallas team and my first tournament we were in the playoffs. We went to California and I saw the most radical wheelchairs that I had ever seen in my life. I saw this game played like I've never seen before. These guys were head and shoulders above us. Our coaches were saying "They put on their uniforms one leg at a time, same as we do. We're gonna be alright." I thought, "No way." This felt like a different culture, a different game than we played. It was. They laughed at us. I studied them, I took notes, and I started working on making my chair like theirs immediately.

Rose

Do you remember what the team was?

LaBar

Every team out there, there were teams from California, Oregon, Nevada, Arizona. There were eight teams.

Rose

Southwest teams?

LaBar

There were all playoff teams. There were three sections in the playoffs, seventy or eighty teams. Thirty something teams were in the first round, like the NCA playoffs, then you went to the next round, to the next round. We got eliminated of course in the first round, but we got to see eight of the teams. We were the second round because we got a bi for the first round. The team couldn't afford to travel to Dallas to play us so they took a forfeit, they would've beat us if they would've played us. They were the second place team, so they just took a forfeit.

Rose

Was this early **MWBA**? But it was all teams, any kind?

LaBar

Yes. I got to see one of the greatest players that ever played the game. He had long hair, he was paralyzed. He was maybe twenty-one or twenty-two, he played three or four years. This kid was incredibly...behind the back passes, he'd dribble and push his chair. He'd come underneath the goal and twist the ball, shoot it up and he'd think nothing of it. Nobody in Texas or Dallas could do this stuff. He could shoot on the move, shoot a bank shot while his chair was moving he could do all this. Everybody else to do stuff kind of like him but this guy was mesmerizing to watch him play.

Rose

What was his name?

LaBar

David Kiley, still friends with him today. I wanted to be like Dave, never was I like Dave. We competed quite hard against each other at some point. That really turned me on to ball.

Rose

You played two years at UTA?

LaBar

Kind of. I only played one year, but I was on the team as a coach, **renegade**. I got to play on the team, but it wasn't a solid conference. Because I was the coach, they could use me if I was the coach. Somehow Jim rigged the game so I got to play, I became the **ringer**. If they had me on the team, nobody in college was going to beat us, although we almost got beat once.

Rose

You were also playing for Dallas?

LaBar

Yes. I got to do that for one year, I got to play for the team for one year. I only played if the game was close or we had a chance of getting beat, otherwise I let the guys play.

Rose

When did you graduate college?

LaBar

It only took me two years. I had three years to go when I went to college, but only took me two years. I was there '76 to '77, I graduated in December '77.

Rose

With a degree in?

LaBar

Accounting.

Rose

Did that have anything to do with the fact that accounting was one of the majors that had more accessible classrooms at that point?

LaBar

No, I just went for business, I was taking a business math course. The teacher asked me what I wanted a degree in, I said "I don't know." I was going to get a history degree. He said I did so well in math, the only challenge in the college of business would be would be accounting for me. I took accounting.

Rose

You said earlier that the campus seemed really barrier free to you when you were there? Can you talk more about that?

LaBar

I can, but I don't know what I would add. It felt barrier free to me.

Rose

Is that when you were walking with a cane? Did you ever use a chair in college?

LaBar

I did my last year in college when I started playing wheelchair basketball. I had to show up in a chair. My legs broke one day and I had to use the chair a couple times in class.

Rose

What happened?

LaBar

I don't recall, they just broke down so I had to have a new piston put in them. Something happened, I had to send them to the shop.

Rose

Did you ever have classes moved? Did you have to go up and down stairs?

LaBar

There were elevators, I didn't have to do anything. When I had my legs, I could go up and down stairs, but I don't remember that being an issue. There were elevators.

Rose

What about what you did after college?

LaBar

My first six or seven months I played wheelchair basketball because I was waiting to get into the IRS school. I played eight hours a day, I played wheelchair basketball from eight in the morning to five in the afternoon.

Rose

Then you worked for the government?

LaBar

I went to work for the IRS for less than a year. It was a nice October day, it was so nice outside, and I was in the office doing an audit with my trainer. I told him that I was going to lunch, and after lunch he wouldn't be seeing me anymore because I was going home. That was it, I quit. I wanted to play wheelchair basketball, I didn't want to be in that office. I didn't want to do anything, I didn't need the money. My heart was set, I wanted to be as close as I could be, there's no such thing as a pro basketball player, I wanted to do it is my occupation.

Rose

How long did you play wheelchair basketball?

LaBar

I played for sixteen years.

Rose

With the Dallas team?

LaBar

The whole time with the Dallas team. I went one half a season another team in Nashville.

Rose

And the Nashville teams?

LaBar

I played on three Nashville teams. I played with Kylie on a couple Nashville teams.

Rose

Did you ever manage to learn some of his tricks?

LaBar

No, I couldn't go behind the back, I could do it, but I wasn't very good with it. I got to where I could push and probably out shoot him too because I stayed in that gym all day long every day. I could shoot a basketball well.

Rose

How did wheelchair basketball involved in the sixteen years you were playing?

LaBar

It got much faster, the chairs became more lightweight. Kids learned how to do more skilled things, play on one wheel, hop on one wheel, do wheelies. They changed where they could tilt up and land on their back wheels and do stuff, it evolved quite a bit. I didn't do much of that, I stayed old school, most of it. You could learn how to shoot on the move, on the cut, the key area, you could stay in the key five seconds without getting a call on you for lane violation. We got so much quicker and faster it changed to three seconds. Shot block got down to twenty- four seconds, used to we didn't have a shot block at all. It just got much faster.

Rose

Going back to Jim Hayes, can you talk me more about what he was like?

LaBar

He was obsessive too do with what he did. He loved everybody that was on his team and people that weren't. He was not someone you wanted as an enemy, if you were his friend, you were his best friend. He loved his group, he'd do anything for his guys.

Rose

Did you get to see him take on some of the accessibility projects at UTA?

LaBar

No, I didn't run around with him much after I finished school. After I dropped out of this program, we weren't the best friends. We became much better friends as the years went by and I wasn't a competitor against him anymore. I know he was a part of all that stuff, and I admired him for it. I didn't really work with him in that area.

Rose

Were you in touch with other disabled veterans, or was that just really wheelchair basketball as your circle?

LaBar

Wheelchair basketball. For sixteen years I stayed in that gym, even after I got in my 40s, I'd go there for three or four hours a day. Every day, the season would end, I'd be in the gym the next day.

Rose

Did you coach and help build the sport?

LaBar

I coached UTA to little bit, I coached the Dallas team after I finished. I always player coached when I was with the team, until I got into my mid-30s. I coached and I played, and I played and I just coached exclusively when I got into my late 50s.

Rose

The Dallas scene from what we've heard is one of the best wheelchair basketball scenes.

LaBar

The best team ever, they had one of the most championships ever.

Rose

It's also the whole wheelchair basketball scene here is the best team in the country

LaBar

It's the highest level here, more success than anywhere else. Jim would have a lot to do with that.

Rose

Were there other people who were really crucial you think in building it here?

LaBar

Probably myself and Abu Yilla. He was the one that made us an organization I believe. I'm the one that got people wanting more involved, wanting to play it because we played so hard and I had a lot of skills. If you played on my team, if you wanted to compete with me, you'd have to practice a lot to do it.

Rose

The people who were playing on the Dallas team when you are on it, was is still an older, young adult group? Or were there people who, how were people finding out about wheelchair basketball? Were these veterans? Spinal cord injuries?

LaBar

People were mostly coming for the team from the college ranks. It's so hard, if the guys were this good when I played, I don't know that I would ever played. Because the guys were terrible, I got to rise up quickly after one season, after one practice I was the best player on the Dallas or UTA team after one or two practices. After the summer when I went through and practiced on my own I was by far the best player on the team. Dallas tried to recruit me immediately since they saw me, but of course I was gonna go to college that first two years. Because I had much progress so easily, it inspired me to push it a little further. Now a guy would come out and start playing the team, you'd be discouraged in seconds. You think there's no way you could push a chair, shoot it, or do anything like these guys. I would've too. I would've gone "Forget this, this is over my head."

Rose

It's a junior scene now too, right?

LaBar

Yeah, you don't just coming off the streets like I did at twenty-six years old, it's too late. You gotta start young now.

Rose

How would you describe the community around wheelchair basketball in Dallas?

LaBar

I'm not sure I understand.

Rose

There's not a single disability community, but there certainly a community we've seen around adaptive sports, or wheelchair basketball, there's disabled veterans...

LaBar

I think the community supported the different teams. The men's team would go to the girl's events, the kid's team, you bring the kids out to watch the men play, and the girls. We all liked to support each other and were all for each other, we all wanted each other to win. If someone needs to practice, we would let each other participate in the practices and stuff. UTA lets Dallas have all the gym time, it works out. Dallas lets them go to their practices, UTA lets Dallas come to their practices. We all do the same drills, we work hard to try and get each other to the highest level we can.

Rose

Was there a lot of swapping back and forth in terms of what "Hey, this modification of the wheelchair does this."

LaBar

There probably wasn't, but we're all watching each other. If someone does something innovative, we'll see it, pick up on it, take it for granted.

Rose

Did you wind up overlapping at all with Per4Max guys? Willie Hernandez in the Dallas community. It's an elite wheelchair company that came out of UTA. What kind of brands of wheelchairs were you using later for the Dallas team?

LaBar

Per4Max was a little bit of an offshoot that a guy named Mike Gabriel and myself were trying to develop, just to play in. We got aluminum, we got the tubing, had it bent, made lightweight chairs. There's a guy in Florida that copied that, that Mike Gabriel knew, and he made lightweight chairs just like those chairs. He was bought out by company in Florida, they copied that design, modified and tweaked, and then Willie Hernandez started the wheelchair company. He did the same sort of thing, working off their stuff. Willie Hernandez is kind of an offshoot from the chair that Mike Gabriel and I put together back in the early '80s.

Rose

Is Mike Gabriel still around? Are you in touch with him?

LaBar

He lives in Florida, I never talk to him anymore. I tried to get a hold of him recently, but I haven't been able to. I assume he's still alive, he is one healthy guy. He was a veteran, a single leg amputee.

Rose

Where were you doing this work? In your garages?

LaBar

In the garage. Willie and I even worked together a little bit, I put a little money into his company and helped them invest, get a welder, get special wheels. I worked with Willie a little bit, and he worked with me and the business that my wife had.

Rose

What about Paul Schulte in Top End?

LaBar

Paul Schulte worked at Per4Max too. I was good friends with Mark, went to school, we went to Dallas won a bunch of national championships. Love Paul Schulte, a better person I couldn't imagine.

Rose

He's someone we'd like to talk to on the phone or if he comes through the area.

LaBar

Absolutely. He was here this last summer. I hated it when he left the area, I was hoping he would be a maverick for all his life.

Rose

Are there other people you saw as really key in developing sport wheelchairs?

LaBar

Willie was the key guy for that.

Rose

We're gonna be speaking with **Caesar Alevis** soon.

LaBar

Yeah, he works for Willie.

Rose

And was on the team during the later championships.

LaBar

He was, but he was just a player. He was a smart kid, nice kid.

Rose

One of the other minors interviewed Willie about wheelchair design a couple years back, we wanted a broader interview. Do you have any sense, going back to UTA, who else was an ally for the team or for students with disabilities?

LaBar

I didn't get involved in any politics, except for the league a little bit. There were some guys out there that did a lot of work and I just didn't pay attention to it. If you weren't a key player I barely paid any attention to you either.

Rose

What other key players do you think there were?

LaBar

Dave Kiley was one of the two best players, Curtis Bell was another incredible player. He was a single leg amputee. Stan Labatte, the commissioner is dead. Ed Owen is dead, he was a big time...

Rose

Tim Tibbetoe 41:20

LaBar

Tim Tibbetoe?

Rose

Doug Gardner is putting us in touch with him. He's still alive.

LaBar

Yeah, he's been around the sport forever, he would know everything about it. Great guy. So many of them are dead now.

Rose

After you started playing wheelchair basketball, were you still using your legs to get around most of the time?

LaBar

Shortly after I started playing wheelchair basketball, I quit using my legs. I found out I could do everything in a wheelchair, only better.

Rose

It was just easier?

LaBar

It was so much easier.

Rose

You've seen a lot of different wheelchairs just for day chairs, right? Can you talk about how it's involved since the '70s?

LaBar

They've gotten lighter, quicker, the wheels are easier to take on and off. They have frames, I'm back to the old style where collapses, most people use a rigid frame. For me it's easier to collapse my chair to get in and out of my car rather than to take it apart and put the rigid frame in my car. I've driven sports cars most of my life, it's just more convenient for me to collapse the chairs, it's easier for me to do it. Although for a long time I'd use a rigid frame.

Rose

<topic>Life after college</topic>

After you left UTA, where were you living?

LaBar

I lived in Arlington for ten years, moved to Alvarado for fifteen years, maybe more. Then I moved to Keller for three years. I've lived in Rockwall for the last eight years.

Rose

Did you have trouble finding houses that were accessible?

LaBar

When I was first injured, it was easy because I could get around so easy without much assistance. I had a bathroom once in a house that wasn't accessible. I'd just jump on the floor and scoot in there, jump on the toilet, get in the shower, sit on the chair to brush my teeth. Sometimes I wouldn't even use my chair in my room, I was so strong I could just jump in my bed easily. When I'd fall out of my wheelchair at a game, most people would stop the game for them. I'd be in my chair so quickly as soon as I'd fall, I'd be instantly right back in it. There'd be no reason to stop the game for me. Now it's a struggle.

Rose

Your shoulders?

LaBar

Yeah, I had my shoulder replaced back in May, and this has two rotator cuffs tears into it. I have a hard time pushing up ramps. If there were steps at a place and wasn't accessible, I'd just jump out of my chair, scoot the stairs and pull my wheelchair at the same time. I'm amazed at how strong I was when I was younger because I pushed that chair so much all day, every day.

Rose

You have the build.

LaBar

I also used to have some big arms too, not anymore. I'm comatose now.

Rose

After you stopped playing for the Raiders, you coached some? What have you been doing since then?

LaBar

What I did when I quit playing all the time, I got involved with my kids when I was forty-four. I spent about five years raising my family until I was divorced, I said I had two kids. I was involved in their lives, we had 2 ½ acres, a little bit a land of mess with. The house I was redecorating, remodeling, I stayed busy for about five years.

One of my friends asked me to get back in the wheelchair basketball, he was in the Raiders with me, I listened to it, I listened to it, and I thought "You know what, I need to get the exercise, I gained a lot of weight." Once a year, no matter what, I'd go out and shoot baskets. I only shot once a year during that period. I didn't think I could do much anymore, I wasn't trying to compete against the young guys. We started an older team, I think we took the name the Raiders because the Dallas Raiders went to the Dallas Mavericks, when the Mavericks came into town. We were the old Dallas Raiders again.

We got some of the old guys that were with us, and we were all about fiftyish, over the hill. There was another team here in town, a younger team, but they weren't good enough to be on the Mavericks, but they were good enough to have a team. We played with them in the league, of course we didn't get to play because we were the older guys, so we broke away from those guys and started an older team back. We picked maybe one or two young guys that didn't get to play, before the end of the year we competed against them, we beat them. They disintegrated, the good ones wanted to come play with us so we were happy with that.

Then in time we started making money with the popcorn stand and we grew in strength and we took over the Mavericks and became the Mavericks again. The older guys influenced the younger people to play with us. Little by little, people wanted to move, significant moved over to us and we had the best players.

Rose

When was this?

LaBar

Fifteen or sixteen years ago when it started. The old McGregor's came back, back in '97-'98. By 2007 or 2008 we'd taken over, we became the Mavericks again.

Rose

Was this mostly like UTA alums?

LaBar

Yeah, that was the majority of the players. Now they almost exclusively come out of UTA, they graduate UTA and are one of the better players. Mavericks have been playing with us for years, sometimes we'll take them onto some trips and stuff, just bring them along. Dallas, not only are they the best team, but they have the most money, the most resources. That was key to the team being as successful as it is.

Rose

How did they get those resources?

LaBar

They had a nice donation from Baylor Hospital years ago, they used to pay us like \$30,000 a year in expenses which would be the equivalent of probably \$60-70,000 a year now. Now they do a popcorn thing at the VA, where they raise money doing popcorn. They make a lot of money doing that. It pays for everything and gives them money left over. That's thanks to the VA allowing them to do that. That was because they had so many veterans on the team, which they don't anymore. They didn't want the VA to know about that.

Rose

You said Abu Yilla has been really really important.

LaBar

Yes. He was the man administratively. There's another guy named Ron Williams, he came around a little bit before Abu Yilla. He was big administrative stuff, raising money for the team.

Rose

They really helped build?

LaBar

The organization. Bill was a player and the organization, Ron and Yilla was mainly the organization.

Rose

This is the Dallas team? Not the MWNBA?

LaBar

Right, Ron Williams was the attorney for the FTA, drug and enforcement.

Rose

The other people you think we should be talking to?

LaBar

Ron Williams definitely.

Rose

Paul Schulte too?

LaBar

Paul Schulte was just a player, an incredible player, he didn't have a lot to do with the formation of the team. Everything was set for him, he walked into a great program, the program was happy to accept him.

Rose

In terms of developing wheelchairs?

LaBar

Not really, because he was such a fantastic player, his name got him into...he didn't really develop much. I don't know what he did in way of developing chairs.

Rose

Anything else you want to talk about that is important?

LaBar

Not that I can think of, probably think of something later

Rose

Just email me or text me.

LaBar

Okay.

Rose

Thank you so much!

[Recording breaks]

Rose

A little addendum, can you talk about your experiences with the national team and playing internationally?

LaBar

Back when I played, the first team I played for was word-of-mouth, everybody heard I was such a good player that I just got put on the team. We went to Halifax, New Jersey, and Halifax, Canada, Nova Scotia and played in the **Pan Am games**. I was just picked for the team, got to meet **Wayne Gretzky** since we won the gold medal.

The next team was the **gold cut** team. We had to try out for that, I played with Kylie on that team, Randy Snow, Curtis Bell, Ed Owen. You tried out, made the team. Back being you would practice a lot before, now you practice a lot before you go to these tournaments. We had to go through a weeks worth of the training at that much, you just show up and play the games. We went to Melbourne, Australia play those games. That was a week or two in Melbourne, it was a great time. **Won the gold plate** with Kylie once again. The third team I just got picked for. It was an international team, they may still have them. Kylie was on that team, Harry Vines was the coach. Abu Yilla was on the team, they let him play even though he was international player. He got to play on the team and that was great for him. Abu and I not only played together, we knew each other, he was my very best friend for a long time. There wouldn't be a day go by that we didn't talk to each other and tell each other about our lives.

Rose

And you knew Harry Vines too?

LaBar

Oh yeah.

Rose

Can you tell us about him?

LaBar

Not a lot, great guy, passionate about wheelchair basketball. Fantastic program, super coach, nothing but accolades for him. Nothing bad to say about him. If you rubbed anybody the wrong way, if you crossed him.... It was the saddest thing to seem with cancer.

Rose

What about his wife?

LaBar

She took his place and she was always there with him in everything he did.