



Newly named Knicks President Steve Mills speaking at a press conference in the summer of 2017

EDITORS' NOTE Steve Mills was named President of the New York Knicks in July of 2017. He had returned to The Madison Square Garden Company in September of 2013 and had served as general manager of the Knicks since March 2014. A 30-plus-year veteran of the sports world, Mills' career has included 16 years with the National Basketball Association, where his talents led to a notable ascent from account executive to Senior Vice President of Basketball and Player Development. This was followed by 10 years at The Madison Square Garden Company, where Mills had a wide range of responsibilities that included overseeing business and basketball operations for the Knicks and Liberty, along with business operations for the Rangers and for all other sports-related activities at The Garden. Mills' decade-long career at The Madison Square Garden Company included a role as president of MSG Sports, during which he oversaw all business operations for the company's three professional sports teams and sports properties, which included college basketball, boxing, and track and field. Mills originally joined the Knicks as Executive Vice President of Franchise Operations in September of 1999 and became President of Sports Teams Operations for Madison Square Garden in 2001. Prior to his move to MSG, Mills played an integral role in the development of the National Basketball Association, where he held several positions with increasing responsibility, including his last role as Senior Vice President, Basketball and Player Development. His responsibilities included managing the league's relationships with all domestic and international basketball organizations, including the NCAA and USA Basketball, as well as overseeing the NBA's developmental programs and player initiatives during one of the most critical periods in league history. Mills also played a key role in the

creation of the Women's National Basketball Association and served on the team responsible for the negotiation of the NBA's Collective Bargaining Agreement. Mills started his career with the NBA in 1983 as an account executive in the corporate sponsorship department of NBA Properties. Before returning to MSG, he most recently served as partner and CEO of Athletes & Entertainers Wealth Management Group, LLC, a company he created in 2010 that links sports and entertainment stars with investment and management leaders to create new business opportunities. Mills earned a degree in sociology from Princeton University in 1981.

ORGANIZATION BRIEF The New York Knickerbockers (nba.com/knicks), commonly referred to as the Knicks, are an American professional basketball team based in Manhattan. The team, established by Ned Irish in 1946, was one of the founding members of the Basketball Association of America (BAA), which became the NBA after merging with the rival National Basketball League (NBL) in 1949. Beginning in 1950, the Knicks made three consecutive appearances in the NBA Finals, all of which were losing efforts. It was not until the late 1960s that the Knicks began to regain their former dominance with two NBA championships in 1970 and 1973. The Knicks of the 1980s had mixed success that included six playoff appearances; however they failed to participate in the NBA Finals. The playoff-level Knicks of the 1990s were led by Patrick Ewing. During this time, they made two appearances in the NBA Finals, in 1994 and 1999, but were unable to win an NBA championship. Since 2000, the Knicks have struggled to regain their former glory, but won its first division title in 19 years in 2012-13.

Building a Basketball Team

An Interview with Steve Mills,
President, New York Knicks

When did the game of basketball first captivate you?

Basketball has been a part of myself and my family for as long as I can remember. My dad, Ollie, coached many high school sports on Long Island, and growing up we played everything, including lacrosse, baseball, basketball and football.

Competing on the field or the court and doing well in school was always how my entire family was defined.

When the opportunity presented itself to come back to the organization, what made you feel the timing was right?

I had left to go out on my own. I taught at Princeton, which was something I had always wanted to do. I also partnered with a friend to start a company to help athletes and entertainers manage their financial lives and prepare themselves for after basketball.

While doing that, a few jobs became available that some people encouraged me to consider. One was to head the players association, and another was the athletic director's job at Princeton. At the same time, Jim Dolan approached me about coming back to The Garden.

What intrigued me most about the Knicks was the opportunity, for the first time, to focus just on basketball, which is so much a part of who I am. The opportunity to build a basketball team – especially the Knicks – was something I wanted and something I believed I could do.

How critical was it to put a clear strategy in place and to communicate that strategy to all of the stakeholders?

In our early discussions, Jim wanted me to think through focusing on player development and how we could build an infrastructure that allows us to be best in class in terms of how we grow our players and make them better.

He gave me the support to create a system and structure, and the room to develop a different approach.

Is the focus more on attracting the right talent or on creating the right culture?

We are in a talent business, so we need to have talent, but talent without structure and organizational purpose doesn't work.

Fortunately, because I have been around so many sports, I know it's not only about having the most skilled players to ensure winning. It's important to find ways to develop and

integrate young players to become viable contributors to the team.

Is it challenging to find talent today that possesses an unselfish team mentality?

Past players will always look at the current group and think they don't work as hard as they did. It's always been this way.

These days, players come up differently.

Today, high school basketball can be as important to players as AAU basketball, and every player comes in with his own development coach.

It's up to us to find ways to introduce them to how to play together as a team.

On the AAU circuit, they play more games today than guys used to, but they no longer play pick-up games. We need to understand that this is the modern player, and we're not going to change that aspect.

How important is it to be patient when it comes to achieving your long-term goals?

New Yorkers are much more patient than people give them credit for. Sometimes, we manufacture the impetus to win now, but I've seen enough times when that doesn't work.

There are certain things New Yorkers want to see. They want consistency in what we're trying to do and they want guys who play hard. They want players who are gritty and resonate with the New York mindset. What resonates with fans are players with the characteristics New Yorkers see in themselves – consistent hard work, toughness and a plan you adhere to.

I have fans stopping me all the time telling me not to give up on the young guys. They want to see a team that grows together.

Are you surprised by how international basketball has become?

Not at all. I was involved the first time the NBA had an international team come play here, and I was amazed at the skill level of the Russian team. At that point, the NBA wasn't a sport that was televised frequently, even in the U.S., so I knew it could only grow fast from there.

The Knicks have taken special care to provide support for its players off the court. What is the value in that?

It's one of the most important elements in building the right environment and structure within our team. Inevitably, issues a young man may be having off the court will impact how he performs on the court.

We have a chance to help guide them through their first experience with the NBA lifestyle. It's a combination of on-the-court player development and off-the-court player development.

We hired Craig Robinson, a teammate of mine at Princeton, to oversee our player

development. He has a business background, became a college head coach, and held a similar job with the Milwaukee Bucks. His ability to see young men as whole people, and not just as basketball players, makes him perfect for what we are trying to achieve.

His experience being around these guys and helping to shape them allows him to help guide their overall development.



Steve Mills presenting the Knicks' City Edition Uniform to player Lance Thomas

What role does the NBA G League play in development?

The G League has improved immensely this year as we were able to institute the concept of two-way contracts. This way, we don't run the risk of a player going to another team – we have their rights. The two-way contracts allow us to bring along even more productive players and to have a greater developmental focus. We don't have to worry about putting all of our resources into players who can walk away.

The Westchester Knicks G League team practices at the same facility as the Knicks, so we're able to closely monitor the players' progress. We get the chance to be close to that team and coaching staff, and really get to know who they are.

Is there still a special feeling when you enter The Garden?

The excitement is always there for me. As a kid, I went to The Garden once to see the Knicks play. That it didn't seem accessible or attainable for me growing up as a basketball fan makes the thrill still resonate with me today.

When I first left MSG, I felt comfortable that I was not leaving in a bad way. My management style wouldn't allow for that. When I came back to work for the Knicks, the first time I walked into The Garden, people welcomed me back. In business and in life, one doesn't always get that response.

Players do a lot of important work off the court with charitable organizations. Is that message well understood by fans?

Collectively, we try to tell that story as best we can, but a lot of stories go untold. This led to the advent of outlets like the Players' Tribune, where players can share their own stories without them being filtered through someone else's point of view. That is important.

The NBA encourages us to promote the positive things players are doing off the court. It's vital for us to constantly be in communication with our players, to understand their interests and philanthropic endeavors, so we can appropriately tell their stories and make sure fans and others know what they're doing to give back to the community.

Your father was such a special person, not only for his work in the sport, but in how he helped people. How did your relationship with your father influence you?

My mom and dad were divorced when I was young, so my dad wasn't always in the house, but he was always a big presence for me and in our community.

Having the ability to watch him coach, to see how he approached coaching and how he wanted his teams to play – I gained a great deal from that. The responsibility he put

on himself to help the community provided a big lesson for me. I was probably six years old when I went with him and his friends to clean out an old delicatessen they were turning into a youth center. I remember being in the basement working to transform that space into something special for the community.

I also learned a lot about discipline from him. The first time he had the opportunity to win a national county championship, one of his players got into a fight at a party the night before. My father removed him from the team, but to this day, that individual has so much respect for my father.

There's an irreplaceable lesson in that and in how my father worked to groom young men. Most of all, I learned from my dad the value of being true to what is important. ●