

H I G H P R O F I L E

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M. QUENTIN WILLIAMS

Lowgators presidency another notch on long, impressive resume

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His mother is a former flower child who lived in communes and counseled prison inmates. His dad left before he was born in the Virgin Islands. His first real home was a rundown tenement on Manhattan's Lower East Side, where graduation meant going from misdemeanors to felonies.

Despite it all, or maybe because of it, M. Quentin Williams decided to prove that it doesn't matter where you start in life. It's where you finish.

"I've been extremely fortunate," Williams says. "I've had the opportunity to do some interesting things, and all of them prepared me to get to this point."

Williams is president of the North Charleston Lowgators, one of eight teams in the NBA's new National Basketball Development League (NBDL). The minor league, which makes its debut next month, is set up to develop players and front-office personnel for the NBA. For Williams, the NBDL is yet another entry on a resume that already reads like a blueprint for overachievers.

In high school, he graduated fifth in his class while blossoming into an all-state football and track star. He spurned scholarship offers from nearly three dozen schools before deciding on

Boston College, where he was a two-sport athlete and dean's list student. He fell in love with the law, became a malpractice defense lawyer and later an assistant U.S. attorney. He chased kidnappers and bombers as an FBI agent. He helped formulate league policies as an executive with the NFL, and he negotiated multimillion-dollar player contracts for the Jacksonville Jaguars.

That's a whole lot of living for anyone, let alone someone just 35 years old. And it doesn't even count an eclectic mix of part-time jobs he's held over the years, a list that includes working as a bouncer at a Manhattan nightclub and transporting nuns into New York City.

While Williams has been there and done that, it takes some serious prodding to get to the details. For example, he talks in general terms about investigating white-collar crimes for the FBI in New Haven, Conn.

Interesting stuff, but none of it seems to register much excitement with him. Finally, as an afterthought, Williams reveals that he did help out on at least one big case.

"There was this Yale professor who was injured by a letter bomb," he says. "It turned out to be the Unabomber."

Did he do any undercover work?

"Let's just say, `No comment.'"

Typical Williams. He talks about his achievements, not because he likes to be noticed, but because it's expected of him.

"That's Michael all right," his mother, Marjorie, says, using Williams' first name. "He really doesn't like talking about himself. Sometimes it's like you have to pry information out of him when it comes to his accomplishments. But he is very intelligent, very goal oriented, and he always knows where he's going."

`HE'S NOT A JOCK'

Williams' temporary office, like the occupant, is compact and tidy. There are no trophies or plaques on the nearly bare walls, and the desk has piles of paperwork arranged in neat piles. Williams, a muscular man who still works out regularly, has a knowing grin beneath his almond-shaped eyes.

It's the grin of someone having fun.

It wasn't always this way for Williams, who took a winding road to get here from Norfolk Street on the Lower East Side. Now a trendy mix of cafes and pricey brownstones, the neighborhood of his early childhood was a gritty ghetto crammed with rows of dilapidated tenements and miles of faded-brick housing projects. Williams' mother, who grew up in the city as the daughter of a Greenwich Village painter, moved back to New York just months after her son was born in the Virgin Islands.

"I think we had a kitchen and a bedroom," Williams says. "You could say we were poor." Marjorie worked as a substitute teacher at the Henry Street Settlement House and took care of her son, forming a bond that remains strong to this day. But no amount of love could erase the fact that the Lower East Side was no place to raise a child. Even the child knew it. After a group of men tried to break in one night to steal what little they had, Williams told his mother he had seen enough.

“He just came up to me one day and real matter-of-factly told me he didn’t want to be brought up there,” Marjorie says. “It was surprising since he was only about 4 years old, but that really told me something about him.”

So Marjorie packed up her boy and headed north, out of the city, and started over in the suburbs of Westchester County. They got a tidy little place in working-class Yonkers, and while still living from paycheck to paycheck, they learned some great lessons together.

“We went through a lot of poverty, and I think that’s what made him so strong,” Marjorie says. “And because of that experience, he doesn’t look down on people. He always tries to find something nice in people, and he has this thing about attitude. He’s always positive.” About two years after they moved to Yonkers, Williams’ younger brother Mark came along. The artistic half of the brother combo, Mark is a Los Angeles-based actor whose credits include appearances on “Melrose Place” and “Ally McBeal.”

Marjorie worked as a counselor at a girls’ home, and Williams’ grandparents, who lived about 25 miles away in Scarsdale, helped out with the boys from time to time.

Despite the change in address, it still wasn’t easy raising two boys alone.

“We had a lot of struggles financially,” Marjorie says. “When the other kids were getting stuff for Christmas, expensive toys, I would go to the store and buy five very cheap things, and my kids never said anything.

“Michael says to me now that he appreciates everything. That makes me happy because I always taught them to be honest, speak their minds as long as they were polite and never look down on anyone.”

With his father out of the picture, Williams was taught by his mother to swim, catch a ball and ride a bicycle. He didn’t play organized sports until the eighth grade, but when he did, Marjorie borrowed her mother’s car to take him to football and baseball practice. She even took the boys on camping trips.

“I think I got all this from her,” he says of his personality. “She had a huge influence on my life and what I ultimately have decided to do with it.”

Williams’ grandfather brought the boys to a local gym to work out. It’s there that Williams met Jayson Brustman, 44, an attorney who was impressed with the bright teenager and became his mentor.

“He was only 12 or 13 at the time, but he was the nicest young man you ever wanted to meet,” Brustman says. “He’s not a jock. He’s really just a very smart person who also happened to be a very good athlete. But that’s what’s so great about him. Intellectual people can relate to him because he is smart, and people who are athletes can relate to him because he’s been an athlete.”

Williams quickly put both attributes to work. He was a standout student at Charles E. Gorton High School, and after all those hours in the gym, the natural athlete was transformed into a speedy running back and free safety on the football team and a sprinter on the track team.

Between books and blocks, Williams still found time for various part-time jobs, including working in the mailroom at Mercy College and driving nuns into the city. He also did volunteer work at Yonkers General Hospital, where the doctors and administrators saw his potential and tried to get him interested in a medical career.

But Williams had his mind set on playing NCAA Division I football, and with his combination of academics and athletics, the college recruiters weren't far behind. Princeton, his mother's choice, liked the well-rounded student. Yale got alumnus Calvin Hill, a former running back for the Dallas Cowboys, to call the Williams house. West Point wanted to make Williams a football player and an Army officer. National power Miami wanted to make him a Hurricane.

In all, 32 schools offered Williams a scholarship, but he eventually settled on Boston College. Williams, who was a 55-meter sprinter on the Eagles' track team, was a cornerback on a football team that won two bowl games.

Boston College had a banner season in 1984, rising to No. 4 in the nation as it went on to win the Cotton Bowl.

Quarterback Doug Flutie, who won the Heisman Trophy that season, also provided one of the most memorable plays in college football history, connecting with Gerard Phelan on a 48-yard "Hail Mary" touchdown pass to beat Miami on national television.

Williams, who missed the game because of a broken hand, sounds like he could be looking into a mirror when he describes Flutie.

"He wasn't the biggest or most powerful guy on the field," he says. "But he was very smart in how he went about his business. He also had a strong competitive instinct and was driven to be the best."

HARDEST DECISION

After earning an economics degree, Williams was unsure of his next step so he worked as a clerk for about a year at a New York law firm. To make ends meet, he also worked as a nightclub bouncer, a job that put him in contact with a variety of characters, including a then-struggling actor named Vin Diesel, who was a bouncer at a nearby nightclub.

"At night, when he was going to one of his jobs, he would always call me from the subway to let me know he was OK," Marjorie says. "I saw blood on his shirt one night and he made up a story about it. He didn't want me to worry."

After some soul-searching, and some gentle pushing by Brustman, Williams decided to go to law school at St. John's. He landed a job with a malpractice defense firm, working there for about a year before learning that the FBI had accepted his application.

"There was this mystique about the FBI when I entered," he says. "It was right after 'Silence of the Lambs,' and I remember thinking that I was running the same obstacle courses as Jodie Foster in the movie. It was a great experience. I felt guilty at the time about having so much fun."

Williams became proficient at shooting a variety of weapons, learned to drive like an expert and worked himself into fighting shape. The newly minted special agent was assigned to the bureau's New Haven office, where he worked everything from bank robberies to kidnappings to white-collar crimes such as bank fraud. He also worked in the undercover program and helped out on the Unabomber case.

After four years in the FBI, Williams was offered a job as an assistant U.S. attorney in Connecticut. He spent less than a year prosecuting drug crimes, gang-related activity and white-collar offenses before a friend who had worked with him in the New Haven FBI office got appointed director of security for the NFL.

Williams was offered a job as senior manager/player liaison, with his primary responsibilities being the prevention of player off-field misconduct by creating league policies and communicating them to players and club personnel.

“That was perhaps the hardest decision of my career,” he says. “I really loved the work in the U.S. attorney’s office, but I also knew that if I wanted to get into sports there wouldn’t be many opportunities to do that.”

About two years after he joined the league office, the Jacksonville Jaguars, coached by former Boston College coach Tom Coughlin, asked Williams to join the team as staff counsel and director of player development. He later became the Jaguars’ legal counsel and director of player administration/community affairs, working on all player-related issues, including the negotiation of contracts, salary-cap administration and off-field player development.

“It was very interesting dealing with agents,” he says. “I let them know up front I was going to be fair and I expected them to do the same. Some of them tested me at first to see just what level of fairness I was talking about. For the most part, though, they were very fair, reasonable guys who were trying to do the best for their clients.

“I still keep in touch with some of the agents. In life, if people are fair with each other, everyone can live with that.”

‘SKY’S THE LIMIT’

While he was with the Jaguars, a friend called and told him about the NBDL and asked if he could submit Williams’ name for a team president’s position. Williams, seeing the chance to help build a league from scratch, jumped at the opportunity.

As president of the Lowgators, Williams oversees all of the club’s operations, including business affairs, human resources, community relations, ticket sales, marketing, promotions and communications.

“The NBA wants to ensure that the game and players are being developed properly,” he says. “It also wants to develop front-office personnel, officials and coaches and try out proposed rule changes and new marketing techniques. This also will allow the NBA to tap into markets where they haven’t done so before.”

The eight-team league will begin its inaugural 56-game schedule Nov. 16, with North Charleston playing at the Greenville Groove. The Lowgators’ home opener will be the next night at North Charleston Coliseum. The 11-man roster will include at least one player with regional ties and possibly some who were among the last players cut from NBA teams.

North Charleston also will be the featured franchise of the new league, appearing in 15 of its 18 ESPN2 games and being the focus of a 13-episode reality television show.

“I think people will be impressed with the quality of the players,” Williams says. “Some may have even been in the NBA but need a little more experience.”

Williams’ own experience has made building the Lowgators a lot easier, coach Alex English says, adding that his boss is soft-spoken but commands the respect of everyone who works for him.

“He knows what needs to be done and he’s a taskmaster, which is great because you always know where you stand with him,” English says. “He’s also been very revolutionary in his hiring. We have three African-American females heading up departments and they all do a wonderful job.”

NBDL players must be at least 20 years old, but Williams says there could be exceptions for younger players who are drafted by NBA teams and then cut. They will make about \$30,000 a year, far below what some of them could make playing in Europe, but Williams says NBDL players have the advantage of being seen nightly by NBA scouts.

“I think the end result will be a great number of players who go from the NBDL to the NBA, and a lot of coaches and front-office personnel taking that next step up,” he says.

Even if fans don't pack arenas around the league, the NBA's large wallet assures that the NBDL will be around for a while. The same probably can't be said for Williams, who said he hopes to be one of those call-ups to a front-office job in the NBA.

Brustman is convinced it's only a matter of time.

“You can see the metamorphosis and achievements over the years,” he says. “I think he has great ability to go a long way. The sky's the limit for him.”
