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Former CU basketball star on rough road back

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Hoping to be a center of attention again, David Harrison (35) is playing in the NBA summer league in Las Vegas. (Sam Morris, Special to The Post)

LAS VEGAS — It's 4:45 p.m. on a predictably

sweltering summer afternoon here, and David Harrison is running a tad late. He strolls into the lobby of the Four Seasons Hotel and quickly apologizes. He is affable and engaging, smiling and interesting. He is the same as he's always been.

The irony is he isn't anything like he used to be, and he couldn't be happier about it.

Harrison sits on a plush couch. It's a long way down for a 7-foot man. He is here trying to get back into the NBA, and the Cleveland Cavaliers have given him a shot to play with their summer league team. But Harrison's chances at employment lie beyond what he does on the 94-foot-long hardwood, all the way into his head. It has betrayed him before.

Harrison

Basketball

[View slide show of Cleveland Cavaliers summer roster center David Harrison .](#)

is fighting to not only get his career back, but more important, his life. The former University of Colorado star's life careened out of control in four seasons with the Indiana Pacers. What started as a promising career for a physical young talent dissolved into a stint in drug rehabilitation and led to the 26-year-old Harrison trying to find himself, and his game, all over again.

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"Chaos begets chaos," Harrison said Wednesday. "I am the product of a chaotic system. I know what I was doing was wrong. It's easy to sit around and be mad, angry, upset and all that stuff. But it's not as easy to sit back and actually look in the mirror."

At Colorado, Harrison was a star. When he attended a CU game during a recruiting visit as a blue-chip player from Brentwood Academy in Nashville, Tenn., fans chanted his name. When he arrived in Boulder, he was the toast of the town.

Not only was the giant a top-notch recruit, he was intriguing. He was outspoken. He played with fury. But he also partied relentlessly, never quite reaching the promise predicted for him. Emotion was his calling card, and it often got him in trouble.

He argued with opposing fans, most notably with blue-clad Kansas supporters at Allen Fieldhouse in Lawrence.

He openly questioned CU coach Ricardo Patton's authority.



David Harrison, a former CU star, wants his performance in the NBA summer league to help him return to the league. He is playing for the Cavaliers in Las Vegas. (Sam Morris, Special to The Post)

And, beginning on draft night in 2004, those emotions began to unravel him. Indiana chose him with the 29th overall pick.

"I smoked pot"

Harrison convinced himself he should have gone higher. It ate at him. He tried to answer the critics by being a focal point on the team, but he wasn't. He averaged just 14.2 minutes in four seasons with the Pacers.

The ball rarely found him but trouble soon did, starting his rookie year. He was part of the Pacers' infamous brawl with Pistons fans in Auburn Hills, Mich., on Nov. 19, 2004. He pleaded no contest to a misdemeanor assault charge and was sentenced to a year probation, but was the only Pacers player involved not suspended by the NBA. Indiana's Ron Artest, Steven Jackson and

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Jermaine O'Neal were suspended a total of 131 games.

Artest's suspension lasted 86 games, including the playoffs, and Artest lost more than \$5 million in salary.

"He had the craziest group of characters assembled on one team," said Harrison's brother, D.J., who also played at CU. "There was nowhere to hide on that team."

In 2006, David Harrison said he was present for an incident in which Jackson was punched and then hit by a car by the patron of an area strip club.

In 2007, teammate Jamaal Tinsley was shot at by someone with an assault rifle outside a downtown Indianapolis hotel. The Pacers' equipment manager was wounded in the gunfire.

By the 2007-08 season, the negative atmosphere around the team and the lack of progress in his career had taken a toll. Harrison slipped into heavy marijuana use.



Harrison had 10 points and 10 rebounds against the Mavericks. "He has an NBA skill set," Cavs coach Mike Brown says. (Sam Morris, Special to The Post)

"I internalized a lot of it," Harrison said. "It literally drove me crazy. I didn't really have friends anymore. I stayed in my house, and I smoked pot. That's what I did. I didn't want to leave the house. I literally feared for my life sometimes there."

"That's what I created in my mind. I didn't understand that those things may or may not happen to me. And if they do, I have no control over it anyway. So why am I sitting around worrying about it?"

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Harrison failed a random drug test and was suspended five games by the NBA on Jan. 11, 2008. The league instructed him to attend a mandatory rehabilitation program in Rayville, La., after the season. Before the season was over, the Pacers had suspended him again, for one game, after an ejection and a locker room outburst in San Antonio on March 7. Soon after, the season ended and the Pacers opted to not offer him a contract extension.

On his last day with the Pacers, Harrison had a short conversation with team president Larry Bird, his biggest defender in the organization.

"David did some things that I don't want to get into," Bird said in a phone interview last week. "But what I wanted to do is just help him as much as I could. Emotionally at times, David would get down on himself and do some things. But as far as a person, I can't say I ran into a better one."

"I've been in this league for 30 years and a lot of guys have come and gone. There's a lot of them you get attached to, and David was one of them."

Harrison said letting down Bird is the biggest regret of his professional life. As he speaks, he tears up.

"To this day, if Larry told me to come back to the Pacers and play for free, I'd do it," Harrison said. "I owe everything I have to Larry Bird. I wish there was some way I could repay him. I think the best way I can is to fix myself. I don't think I'm a drug addict or an alcoholic or any of those things. I'm just very self-centered. I'm selfish."

Back to basketball

Harrison's current turnaround is largely rooted in Rayville. There, everyone else's problems were bigger than his. He spent two and a half months there, living in a "summer camp/prison hybrid," as he calls it. He walked out better for the experience, he believes. The NBA, however, was not ready to take him back.

Minnesota invited Harrison to its training camp last October, only to waive him two weeks later. No other team called, so he went overseas, signing with the Shougang Beijing Ducks in China, where he played with childhood friend Dontae Jones.

The quality of basketball was far below NBA standards, but Harrison didn't mind. He admits basketball hasn't always been tops on his list of priorities. His potential, a big man with soft hands and a gift for the game, has at times been more of a burden than a blessing. Harrison rolled his eyes the moment he stepped foot on Chinese soil, wondering what he had gotten himself into, but he could have kissed the ground by the time he left this past spring.

"It was a good feeling to know that I was the centerpiece again, and how to lead a team and all of those things I started to do in Boulder and things I wanted to do in Indiana and didn't really have the ability to show there," Harrison said. "There I realized, 'I'm going to play basketball.'"

In 42 games for the Ducks, he averaged 42.2 minutes and 21 points and shot 62 percent. He

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last played in mid-March before a calf injury sidelined him.

So he is in Las Vegas, trying to convince NBA teams he can play at the highest level and commit himself to his job. It could be a long road back.

"Skill-wise, there's no question David should be in this league," Bird said. "It's just the other little things that's keeping him out. Your reputation is everything. . . . As a player, I know what he can do.

"It's just that he's got to prove to people that he's going to put all of that other stuff aside and take this job seriously."

Harrison's first shot at putting the pieces of his career back together was offered by Cavaliers coach Mike Brown, who coached Harrison one year while he was an assistant with Indiana.

"He's a big, strong athletic guy with agility," Brown said. "He's a guy I think that has kind of chosen the wrong path at times, but has also been a little unlucky. It's unfortunate, because he has an NBA body. He has an NBA skill set. If he's in the right situation at the right time in his life, he's going to help somebody."

Through it all, Harrison still lives in Indiana and has a 5-month-old son named Dillon. He is not married.

Harrison's summer league play gradually improved as his conditioning got better and his

calf injury healed. He had a double-double of 10 points and 10 rebounds, with three blocked shots, against Dallas.

"I still have a lot of time ahead of me," Harrison said. "I'm not focused on the fame, the money, the women, anything really. It's just more now, what are people going to say about me when I'm dead? What are people going to say about me to my son? I still have time to write my own story."

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Harrison timeline

A look at the road 7-foot center David Harrison has taken during his college and professional basketball career:

April 2001: As a national top-15 recruit, Harrison signs a letter of intent to play at Colorado for coach Ricardo Patton.

March 2003: Harrison's averages of 13.9 points, 8.3 rebounds and 3.3 blocks help lead the Buffs to the NCAA Tournament.

2003-04 season: CU goes 18-10 and fails to earn an NCAA Tournament bid in Harrison's final season in Boulder before he declares early for the NBA draft.

July 7, 2004: Last player selected in the first round of the NBA draft (29th overall by the Pacers). Signs a three-year contract worth nearly \$2.7 million, with a rookie salary of \$696,300.

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Nov. 19, 2004: One of several players involved in the Pacers' brawl with Pistons fans in Auburn Hills, Mich.

Nov. 20, 2004: Scores 19 points, grabs eight rebounds and blocks three shots against Orlando. It's the first double-figure scoring effort of his NBA career and one of nine during his rookie season.

Feb. 23, 2005: Suspended by the NBA for one game for directing obscenities at Pistons fans in Auburn Hills.

Feb. 26-March 3, 2005: After the one-game suspension, scores in double figures six straight games — shooting 74.3 percent and averaging 12.2 points in that span.

2006-07: Harrison misses 44 games because of a shoulder injury. He has arthroscopic surgery after the season.

Jan. 11, 2008: Suspended five games for violation of the NBA's substance abuse policy.

March 7, 2008: Suspended a game by Pacers for conduct detrimental to the team.

Summer 2008: Attends an NBA drug rehabilitation program in Louisiana; Pacers opt to not offer a contract extension.

November 2008: Signs with the Shougang Beijing Ducks and has averages of 21 points and 11.2 rebounds in 42 games.

July 2009: Plays with the Cavaliers in the NBA summer league in Las Vegas.

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