

Paul Atkins



The city of Norwalk has certainly produced its share of elite basketball players over the years and many agree the name **Paul Atkins** belongs in the upper echelon of that impressive list.

Atkins established himself as an outstanding talent on the hardwood during his playing days at Brien McMahon High School, then on the collegiate level, before culminating his career playing professionally overseas.

Even the Fabulous Harlem Rockets Comedy Basketball Team recruited him to play with them for a brief stint.

But for Paul Atkins, it all began in the Norwalk YMCA Bidy Basketball League playing for Edwards Company and veteran coach Doug Bussing. By the time he was 12, Atkins' skill on the court was shining brightly.

And by the time he arrived at McMahon a few years later, his skill and grace with a basketball was well known. Soon the rest of the FCIAC and eventually the state would find out what Norwalkers already knew.

As a junior in 1976-77, Atkins averaged 16.5 points to help the Senators to a 25-1 record, the FCIAC championship, and their first state title in school history.

The following season, as the only returning starter from that title team, the 6-foot-6 Atkins put the Senators on his shoulders and carried them to a 22-3 record, a second consecutive FCIAC title, and to the state semifinals. He captured the FCIAC scoring crown with a 23.7 average and finished his career with 1,055 points.

The bigger the game, the better Atkins was, perhaps never more so than when he posted back-to-back 35-point efforts in the FCIAC semifinals and championship game, of which he was named MVP. He also scored a career-high 39 points against Ridgefield in the regular season.

Atkins capped his outstanding career off by being named first-team All-FCIAC and All-State, as well as MVP of The Hour's 1977-'78 All-City Basketball Team. At the time, his legendary coach Ralph King called him "the best pro prospect Norwalk has produced since Calvin Murphy."

King wasn't alone. Nearly 200 colleges recruited Atkins, who chose the University of Texas. Before joining the Long Horns, however, he played two seasons at Henderson County Junior College in Texas, where he was named All-America in 1980.

After earning his associates degree, Atkins decided to forego playing at Texas and instead enrolled at New Mexico State his junior year. After one season there, he transferred to Dallas Baptist College, where he averaged 27.6 points.

The Boston Celtics were impressed enough to draft Atkins in the sixth round of the 1983 NBA Draft. He had a good training camp and was one of the last players cut by the team that would win the NBA title that season.

But the front office still saw Atkins as part of their future and assigned him to their CBA affiliate in Wooster, Mass., where his coach was former Celtic great Dave Cowens. A few weeks later, however, while practicing with the Bay State Bombardiers, the 24-year-old Atkins was diagnosed with a tumor in his leg, which was diagnosed as a form of Lymphoma cancer.

He quickly returned to Norwalk for surgery and after nine months of treatment, Atkins was declared cancer free. He would slowly regain his strength and weight, and soon returned to the basketball court.

He played in the New York Summer League, which led to his pro career overseas, spending two-plus years in Buenos Aires, another season in Venezuela, and three and a half years in Belgium. Then when he returned to the States, the Harlem Rockets gave him a call.

In 1996, at the age of 36 and with the recent birth of his son Jesiah, Paul Atkins finally walked away from the sport he loved.

Tonight, 20 years later, his hometown honors him for a career well done.