The Graduate | Derek Anderson is 'just a class act'

Former UK star leaped from the NBA to success as an entrepreneur and charitable foundation head

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Derek Anderson in front of the Seelbach Hilton last week. His enterprises are based in Atlanta. (By Larry Muhammad, The Courier-Journal)

You remember Derek Anderson, Doss High School graduate and member of the University of Kentucky's 1996 national championship basketball team, who went on to play 11 seasons in the National Basketball Association with seven teams and won a title with the Miami Heat in 2006.

Now the former high school all-star is based in Atlanta, operating his Derek Anderson Foundation (www.derekandersonfoundation.com) and multiple other enterprises, including a video production company, Loyalty Media Group, which is branching into feature films.

"I have eight scripts I've written, and I'm out here meeting with producers and directors," said Anderson, 36, reached on his cellphone in Los Angeles. "We have a television series in production, 'Georgia Nights' — something like 'The Wire,' about the government and politics of Atlanta — but I started writing scripts and learning to operate camera equipment so I could do things on my own."

Last year Anderson produced "The Untouchables of Kentucky: The Greatest Team Ever" (www.untouchablesofkentucky.com), a DVD documentary about the Rick Pitino-coached UK championship team he played on. It featured interviews with every player, Pitino, current coach John Calipari and actress/fan Ashley Judd.

In 2004 Anderson was the subject of a short film segment about his off-the-court life for a series of basketball films on Black STARZ!, a 24-hour cable and satellite movie channel.

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DA Enterprises, which Anderson sold after leaving Louisville, included the eight-restaurant Pizza Magia chain; Anderson Atrium, a 14-suite office building complex on West Broadway; and A-1 Plaza, a strip mall across the street with a bank, restaurant, beauty-supply store, and sports-gear boutiques for children and adults.

His Derek Anderson Foundation, which supports worthy causes and helps inspire disadvantaged high school students with $1,000 scholarships, promotes traveling summer basketball camps and other causes, such as the Louisville Urban League, Home of the Innocents and the Atlanta Breast Cancer Walk.

"Few people believed I would even make it out of the Southwick housing projects and go to the NBA," he said.

Talk about your rags-to-riches stories. Anderson grew up literally homeless, a child of the bricks fending for himself.

"Derek really had no parents around him," said Terrance Moorman, assistant basketball coach at Doss when Anderson played. "He was living from friend's house to friend's house. But he always had the grades — he was just smart, a 3.0 student, and English was his thing. It didn't hurt that he was 6-6 either. He had this tremendous work ethic on the court, could tell guys where they needed to be, and if guys didn't do it, he was athletic enough to overcome their stubbornness and do it himself."

Doss athletic director Kevin Salyer said, "Derek was team captain his senior year. He wasn't real vocal. He kind of let his game do the talking and led us in scoring pretty much 99 percent of the time. His last year we were playing a tournament in Las Vegas, played a team from New York, and when they ran their stuff they would back-door you all the time. Down near the end, Derek got fouled, hit both free throws to put us in the semifinals. Next game, he got smashed in the mouth, and that team beat us, but in the third quarter he'd come back and scored 16 points to pull us back within two. They only beat us by two. He's just a class act. He was senior class president."

Anderson went to Ohio State before transferring to UK, winning an NCAA championship, overcoming injuries to play in the NBA and getting a championship ring.

But his second year as a pro player, he began laying the groundwork for his entrepreneurial ambitions.

"I had set a time limit of 10 years or so for playing," he said, "so I decided to develop some business skills in case I didn't make it. And after I retired from the NBA, I just kept on doing what I was doing."

The "bio" page on his website reads in part, "I never give up on being the BEST at whatever I tried to do, or be. I had to overcome family issues, homelessness, my environment, and my own personal decisions but I NEVER STOPPED BELIEVING IN MYSELF!"

Asked what advice he would give to disadvantaged youngsters, Anderson replied without missing a beat: "Stop making excuses for the way you grew up. Start making changes for the way you want to live."