

## Paul Shirley

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

The little boy dribbled the basketball on the gravel driveway and dreamed of playing in the NBA. He imagined the announcer saying, "Paul Shirley shoots...It's good!" Many small town Kansas kids have dreams of playing in the NBA, but today we'll meet a young man who actually made it to the big leagues. Through his writings, he shared that experience with others. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Paul Shirley is a former basketball player and writer, the author of the book *Can I Keep My Jersey? 11 teams, 5 countries and 4 years in My Life as a Basketball Vagabond*. He grew up in rural Kansas. In fact, he described the location of the family home as being "at the intersection of two unnamed gravel roads" outside of the town of Meriden, population 701 people. Now, that's rural.

Paul Shirley loved basketball. He and his brothers would watch games on television and, at halftime, go outside to re-enact those games with themselves as their favourite star players. He grew tall and went on to a successful career at Jefferson West High School, both academically and in basketball.

Unfortunately, he was not recruited to play for the biggest colleges. He was considering some of the mid-major colleges or Ivy League schools when he had a contact with Iowa State.

Iowa State had used up all its basketball scholarships, but Paul's mother pointed out that Paul was a National Merit Scholar. Coach Tim Floyd was then able to put Paul on an academic scholarship and he joined the basketball team at Iowa State.

Paul proved he could play at a high level and went on to start. By his junior and senior years, Iowa State was in the NCAA top ten and contending for championships. After college, he did well at an NBA invitational camp and hired an agent with hopes of playing in the pros.

What followed was an emotional roller coaster of a career, where he would repeatedly catch on with an NBA team for a time and then get demoted and go play for teams in Europe. As the title of his book stated, he played for eleven teams in five countries during a span of approximately four years. As the book title also suggests, it was not always fun.

For example, he was invited by the then-world champion Los Angeles Lakers to Lakers training camp. After a few weeks, he was released. Paul said to the equipment manager, "Can I keep my jersey?" His request was turned down, illogically enough, even though Paul's name and number was stitched on it. When Paul wrote his book a few years later, he gave it the title *Can I Keep My Jersey?*

Through the years, Paul Shirley played with the Atlanta Hawks, Chicago Bulls, and Phoenix Suns of the NBA, while enduring several injuries and limited playing time. He also played for minor league teams in Kansas City and Yakima, Washington and for pro teams in Greece, Spain, and Russia.

Of course, there is a big gap between the salaries and creature comforts of an NBA star versus a minor leaguer. This makes for entertaining reading in Paul's sardonic style. The book is like a window into the everyday life of an NBA bench player.

Paul's professional writing career began when he chronicled one of his NBA road trips in an on-line journal. He has gone on to write for Esquire, Slate, ESPN.com, and the Wall Street Journal.

Today, Paul lives in southern California where he writes and teaches. He maintains a website called [flipcollective.com](http://flipcollective.com) and a writers workshop called Writers Blok. He also writes for a Spanish-language newspaper, teaches English at a preparatory program for Los Angeles policemen, and co-hosts a podcast about the NBA.

The little boy dribbles the ball on his parent's driveway and then makes a layup. Little did he know that, one day, he would make a layup like that in the NBA as a member of the Chicago Bulls. We commend Paul Shirley for making a difference by sharing his experience inside pro basketball. When it comes to his writing about his experience, it's good!

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.