Orange is for Crayons

A key players in that championship season reaches new heights in a first-grade classroom.

By Scott Pitoniak

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Craig Forth is seated at a round table in a cluttered classroom at Red Mill Elementary School in East Greenbush, a sleepy Albany suburb that sits a three-point shot or two east of the Hudson River. The starting center on Syracuse University’s 2003 national championship basketball team is surrounded by five of the 23 first-graders he teaches. Small hands clutch yellow, No. 2 pencils as the students attempt to print words on lined sheets of paper.

“Liza,” Forth says, firmly but reassuringly, “please make sure to close off the top of your capital ‘A.’ Otherwise, it’s going to look like an ‘H.’”

A boy next to her gazes at the garbled words on his page and becomes agitated.

“Mr. Forth,” he says, shaking his head, “my letters are terrible.”

“Don’t worry about it, Michael,” the teacher replies, patting him gently on the back. “This is only practice, my man. It will get better. You just have to keep working at it.”

A few minutes later, Forth instructs the students to put their pencils into storage bins and gather their lunch bags and boxes. After he gets them to quiet down and form a line, one of the teacher’s aides leads the parade of energetic 6-year-old munchkins out the door and down the hallway to the cafeteria.

Forth, who at 7-feet might just be the tallest first-grade teacher in America, rises out of his chair and smiles.

“Hard to believe I’ve been doing this for seven years,” he tells a visitor. “Time flies when you love what you’re doing.”
A decade after setting bone-crushing picks for Gerry McNamara and directing traffic and blocking shots from the back of SU’s vaunted 2-3 zone, Craig Forth vigorously pursues his true calling. Yes, he loved basketball with heart and soul growing up, and he always gave it his all. But he wasn’t necessarily consumed with dreams of becoming the next Shaquille O’Neal.

From an early age, life was nudging Forth in this direction. And as you watch him gently mold these young impressionable minds, it’s apparent these assists are far more important than those he dished in the Carrier Dome.

“Being able to make a positive difference in a kid’s life,” Forth says, “is extremely rewarding.”

He majored in inclusive education and geography at SU and student-taught at four Syracuse-area schools. But his real teacher training began many years before that. As a fourth-grader at Red Mill, Forth impressed teachers with his empathy for his peers. In time, they asked him to mentor students who were struggling.

“He’s always had this capacity to relate to kids and show a caring side of himself,” says Columbia High School Athletics Director Michael Leonard, who was Forth’s kindergarten teacher at Red Mill way back when. “Kids really respond to him. Especially kids with special needs.”

That sense of empathy and understanding was developed within Forth while he dealt with the autism of his younger brother, Jeremy.

“Being with Jeremy and seeing his daily challenges exposed me to a different world and gave me a better understanding that what he needed was different from the stuff that me and my other two brothers needed,” Forth says. “He taught me a lot — especially patience — and he’s still teaching me things all these years later.”

As the starting center for the Syracuse Orange, Forth was known for setting effective picks for his teammates and anchoring the 2-3 zone defense. (Photo by Dennis Nett)

Forth sits with students at one of the tables in his classroom and helps them with their subtraction problems. Forth now teaches in the same district where he grew up and set the basketball scoring record at Columbia High School. (Photo by Dennis Nett)
Jeremy’s condition prompted Craig to become active in the Challenger youth softball, basketball and soccer programs that gave kids with emotional, physical and mental disabilities an opportunity to participate in organized sports. Along the way, he befriended a girl named Jaime Adams, who suffers from Rett syndrome, a neurodevelopment disorder that affects a person’s ability to talk and walk and often results in seizures, scoliosis and stunted growth.

“I don’t know what it was about Jaime, but we just hit it off like we were brother and sister,” Forth says. “I would push her around the basketball court or the softball diamond in her wheelchair, and she would get such a kick out of it.”

The night Craig set the career scoring record at nearby Columbia High School he gave the ball he was presented to Jaime. It still sits on a shelf in her room more than a decade later.

“She can’t talk,” her father, Burke Adams, says, “But she is able to communicate in her own way. And you can see her face light up any time Craig’s around.”

In retrospect, the teacher who inspired Forth most was his ninth-grade Earth Science teacher, Chris Ciccone.

“I was anal retentive about grades and when I didn’t go well on the first pop quiz Mr. Ciccone gave us, I began freaking out and questioning whether I could do this,” Forth recalls. “He wound up taking me by the hand and walking me through it and by the halfway point of the school year I had become proficient. I look back and can identify that as the point when I really knew I wanted to teach.”

An All-State basketball performer at Columbia High School, Forth averaged 19.2 points, 14.5 rebounds and five blocked shots per game his senior season. He ultimate chose Syracuse over Boston College because he’d be able to complete his dual major in four years, rather than five.

Forth excelled in the classroom at SU. He twice was named an Academic All-American and won the Big East Conference Scholar-Athlete of the Year Award and the Doris Soladay Award at the top male scholar-athlete at Syracuse during his senior year. His
academic successes prompted some of his basketball teammates to endearingly refer to him as “The Brain.”

Forth started four straight seasons — 136 games in all — for SU and averaged 4.7 points and 4.6 rebounds per game while becoming the seventh most prolific shot-blocker in school history. But some citizens of Orange Nation believed the big guy underachieved and were quick to shower him with boos when he missed a layup or a dunk or got into foul trouble.

“I think because he didn’t score a lot there was a perception that he didn’t contribute a lot, and that’s bunk,” says Syracuse head coach Jim Boeheim. “Craig did a lot of things that didn’t show up in the boxscore — things like setting picks and making high-post passes and making sure everybody was where he was supposed to be in our zone.”

“Craig was a smart player and a big reason we won it all. He was the starting center (as a sophomore, too) on a national championship team. How many people can say that?”

There were occasions when Forth was dominating. In a game against Connecticut during the championship season he scored 14 points and hauled in 13 rebounds while holding Emeka Okafor, the Huskies’ National Player-of-the-Year candidate, to just two points. There also was a memorable 18-point performance against a highly ranked Missouri team and a 12-rebound, 10-point showing vs. Maryland in an NCAA Tournament game.

But these efforts were too few and far between in the eyes of his harshest critics, who often tortured Forth on the talk shows and in cyberspace. Their wrath bothered him, but, to his credit, he never allowed it to change him.

“Craig’s always been a person who was hard on himself, so he just pushed himself even more during adverse times.” Leonard says. “I’ll always admire the way he handled himself. Most of us would have lashed back and become bitter. But Craig remained the good person he had always been.

“I remember walking out of the Dome with him after a tough game, and he’s going over to security guards and saying good-bye to them by name. That was typical Craig — just a good, caring person.”
Time, Forth says, has brought perspective and healed old wounds.

“I look back at things differently,” he says. “I focus on the positives from my Syracuse experience – and there were many. I received a great education there. I met my wife (Amanda) at SU, and we have a daughter (Addison) who is everything to me. And being part of an NCAA title team was pretty cool, too.”

Carmelo Anthony and Gerry McNamara obviously were the leading men on that championship team 10 seasons ago. But they were aided by a splendid supporting cast that included Forth, whose selfless, team-first approach helped set the tone.

“The thing I remember about the title game is how loose we were,” he says. “Before the game, guys were in the locker room snapping towels at one another, acting as if we were about to go out for practice instead of playing in a high-stakes game that much of America would be watching. I think one of the reasons we were so loose was that nobody was giving us much of a chance. Everybody expected Kansas to win. The pressure was on them.”

The 81-78 victory against the Jayhawks was fueled by McNamara’s NCAA title game record six three-point baskets in the first half and Anthony’s 20-point/10 rebound/7-assist effort despite a sore back. But Forth also chipped in, setting G-Mac free with screens while contributing six points and four rebounds in 24 minutes.

After graduating in 2004, Forth spent a year playing professional basketball in Croatia and Slovakia. The following year he returned to East Greenbush, where he played one season of minor league basketball with the Albany Patroons while beginning his teaching career.

At the age of 29, Forth no longer plays hoops. These days, he sates his roundball appetite by coaching the Columbia High School girls varsity basketball team.

“I don’t have a need or a desire to continue playing,” he says. “Been there, done that. I’m at a stage of my life where I want to pass along what I’ve learned, and help other players become successful. It goes back to who I am. I’m a teacher in everything I do – whether it’s here in the classroom, coaching girls basketball or raising Addison.”
Forth’s days are as cluttered as his classroom, which is stuffed with books and Crayola-colored art work. He usually arrives at school at 7 a.m. and doesn’t leave until 6 p.m. His schedule is more hectic than in recent years because he is taking on additional responsibilities while prepping to become a principal. And his days will become even longer once he resumes coaching basketball in November.

That doesn’t leave much time to follow the Orange.

“I’d love to sit down and watch games,” Forth says. “But with a 2-year-old in the house, I’m spending more time watching Dora the Explorer than college hoops.”

He does, however, keep tabs on the alma mater via the internet.

“I was hoping they might win another championship last year,” he says. “And they might have if Fab Melo had not had the eligibility issues.”

The students Forth teaches weren’t even born when he was playing, so unless their parents tell them, they have no idea.

“They walk into class on the first day,” he says, “and all they’re thinking is, ‘Oh my God, my first-grade teacher is a giant.’ I try to put them at ease as quickly as possible. Hopefully, they eventually walk out of here thinking Mr. Forth is a gentle giant who’s trying to help them become the best students and people they can be.”

Nearly a decade after playing his final game in the cavernous Dome, it’s apparent that Craig Forth is still the center of attention — in a tinier, but far more important, arena.

Scott Pitoniak is a Rome, N.Y., native, Syracuse University graduate, nationally columnist and best-selling author. His book, “Color Him Orange: The Jim Boeheim Story,” has been updated by Triumph Books and is not available in paperback.