

BY MICHAEL GORDON

Hoop Dreams

Fuels Corporate Vision



CEO EXEC INVENTS JB INTENSIVE TRAINER

From the hardwood floor of Madison Square Garden, comes former Knicks and Pacers player Jonathan Bender, a towering forward who retired early from the NBA and entered corporate America as an entrepreneur and inventor of a device to strengthen knees for athletes.

Today he is a multi-millionaire who had enough faith in himself to achieve his dreams.

Jonathan Rene Bender, born and raised in Picayune, Mississippi, started playing ball at a very young age. "In our neighborhood the only thing we were exposed to was sports and hip-hop," Bender chuckles.

Bender didn't really have anybody in his family who created wealth or did anything really out of the box, so he started playing ball locally. "I grew six inches one summer and just kept growing," Bender explains. "I got really tall and at about 15 years old, someone came to my house from the AU tournaments suggesting I should play for the McDonald games." Bender broke Michael Jordan's record during the games and at the tender age of 17, he became a prospect for one of the top ten picks.

Skipping college, Bender went on to play for the Pacers in 1999 – a pivotal point that would change his life forever. "Coming from a small town, I looked at the NBA as the biggest company in the world. It was the top of the top, as far as I could envision," Bender said.

Only a few basketball superstars have ever successfully transitioned straight from high school to the NBA. The names Moses Malone, Kevin Garnett and Kobe Bryant come to mind. Too

soon afterward, though, Bender blew out his knees. It was his fifth year and he started to reflect on his life, wondering where he would like to be in 20 or 30 years – because by then, playing basketball would be out of the question.

“I remember I had a moment while sitting on the bench during a game. As I looked at Mel Simon who owned NBA’s Indiana Pacers with his brother Les Morris, he explained to me the idea of being an entrepreneur,” Bender said. “Mel had a construction business, owned real estate throughout the country, including countless malls.”

Bender was inspired by Mel Simon to pursue his entrepreneurial dream. “I never knew how to budget my own money, how to do a balance sheet and how to build wealth,” Bender said. “Mel gave me those tools.”



In fact, Bender walked away from the NBA in 2006 with visions of entering the corporate world. His new uniform became the business suit and tie. A year later, he was struck with an idea for a product from watching people playing in the park while sitting inside his parked car. He studied the mechanics of movement and consulted with some top physical therapists in the United States. Bender knew about muscle structure. He knew about joint movements and how they interplay with sinewy muscle from personal experience.

So he created a mock-up device using CVS and Wal-Mart products – a contraption that included adhesive tape, some ankle pieces and a belt. Bender put this device together and spent the next couple of years developing and tweaking what he called the JB Intensive Trainer. Finally, he dropped the product onto the market. “This was the toughest thing I had to do outside of making it into the NBA,” Bender said.

The apparatus he created has helped people who suffer from back, knee and sciatic nerve pain. The JB Trainer has also received attention from top health and fitness experts for its therapeutic and rehabilitation capabilities. “Anyone can use this product – especially injured athletes, baby boomers and older people,” Bender explained. “It’s used for lower back pain because it engages the core. It engages the glut muscles, the quad muscles, the hamstring and the calf while unloading pressure off the knees and hips,” he added. “The feeling is like walking inside water with no gravity.”

The NBA has endorsed Bender’s product. He believes that his religious faith has opened countless doors for him starting with his days as an NBA basketball player. “But, God is my perfect mentor today,” Bender said. “And I have created additional accessories for the JB Trainer for the next generation of athletes.” ■

JONATHAN
BENDER