

Catalyst Profile
Harry Nolan

Three years out on the court playing Division I basketball taught Harry Nolan, the WCU alumnus of 1980, a little something about grit, which is, as the former Catamount explained, perseverance to achieve a goal over a period of time. This lesson of commitment, sometimes even in the face of failure, stayed with Nolan as he pushed his way into the criminal justice field.

As a child, the New York native spent hours each day shooting hoops in the neighborhood court. In both junior high and high school, he tried out for basketball teams, but failed to make the cut. After finally getting a break in junior college and growing to a staggering 6 feet and 9 inches, he was picked up by WCU.

“They took a chance,” said Nolan. “They honored my scholarship and continued to develop me.”

By his third year, he was starting as co-captain of the team. From Head Coach Steve Cottrell, this alumnus learned that you “play like you practice.” Beyond the court, criminal justice professor Charles Taylor acted as a mentor, keeping Nolan “academically in tune” while following his “adventures of playing basketball.”

As the son of a police officer, Nolan knew that once his time on the court came to an end, he would take to law enforcement. Thus, after graduating in 1980, he snagged a job as an officer in Raleigh. From there, he worked his way up to be Chief of Police in Lumberton, North Carolina and Grand Rapids, Michigan.

In 1996, after five years of night classes, Nolan graduated with his master’s degree in organizational leadership from UNC-Pembroke. The degree was an “endurance test,” not quite the suicides he used to run for Cottrell, but a challenge all the same.

“You learn to keep coming back and to overcome adversity,” said Nolan. “You have to ask yourself: are you okay with failure? Do you strive to improve or become upset?”

These questions were at the forefront of Nolan’s mind as he was turned away from several other criminal justice positions. In 2007, thanks to a bit of grit, he became Chief of Police of Raleigh. Though he has since retired, he continues to reflect on the “unique lessons” he learned as an athlete.

“I’d rather have grit than anything else—that’s what happens out there on that court,” said Nolan. “Nothing will serve you better than being able to persevere.”

While Chief of Police in Lumberton, Nolan remembers being asked to present a full academic scholarship to a high school senior planning to attend WCU. During the awards ceremony, many athletes were being celebrated for their commitment to the sport. As the

scholarship recipient mounted the stage, he turned to the crowd, hoping to explain that grit comes in many different forms.

“We see athletes out on the court and field; we see them improve each year,” said Nolan. “Though you can’t see or watch academic grit in the making, nothing replaces all of those weekends and summers of preparation.”

He expects that current WCU students come to understand the concept of grit.

“It’s just like the guy who stays late to shoot three-pointers,” said Nolan. “Nothing replaces you staying late in the laboratory when everyone else goes home.”