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Wilkins holds court in Olympia

BY GAIL WOOD, The Olympian

OLYMPIA — Lenny Wilkins wanted to be a teacher, not a coach.

But when the St. Louis Hawks drafted Wilkins in the first round of the NBA draft in 1960, Wilkins' life took a different direction. On Wednesday, Wilkins, the NBA's all-time winningest coach and the coach of the Seattle SuperSonics 1979 championship team, paid a visit to South Sound, talking with fans and admirers about his life in basketball.

"I always thought I was going to be a teacher," Wilkins told a roomful of people at Indian Summer Golf and Country Club. "I never thought of the NBA."

Wilkins, who was a 6-foot-1 guard when he played at Providence College in Rhode Island, didn't take St. Louis' interest seriously until he watched the Hawks play the Boston Celtics shortly after he was drafted. He went to the game with a friend, not a representative of the Hawks.

"I saw those guards, and I said, 'I could do better than that.' That's what convinced me," Wilkins said.

Wilkins signed for \$8,500, with a signing bonus of \$1,500. Back then, CPAs were making \$6,000 and teachers \$5,000.

That launched a career that ended with Wilkins being inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame as a player and as a coach.

Now, Wilkins, a Seattle icon, is willing to help bring an NBA team back to Seattle. The Super Sonics were moved to Oklahoma City on July 1 by owner Clay Bennett when Seattle mayor Greg Nickels surprisingly agreed to a \$45 million buyout, allowing Bennett to void the remaining two years of the team's lease at KeyArena.

Wilkins said the NBA wouldn't return to Seattle until after a new arena is built.

"What has to happen first is, you have to have plans on the table to build a building," Wilkins said. "The sooner you have that, the quicker you will have a team."

Despite Sonics fans' perceptions, Wilkins said NBA commissioner David Stern isn't against a team returning to Seattle.

"David Stern does not have something out of Seattle, he has to run a huge corporation," Wilkins said. "KeyArena won't do it anymore. It's had its day. Go around to any NBA facility, and we are the most outdated building. We need a new building.

"The locker room at KeyArena is smaller than when I played."

Wilkins said he's willing to offer advice to any business group interested in bringing an NBA team back to Seattle.

"I can help," Wilkins said. "I have a great rapport with the NBA."

After Bennett and his 15-member group from Oklahoma City bought the Sonics for \$350 million, Bennett asked for a state-of-the-art, \$500 million facility. The state legislature and Seattle city officials never finalized a plan to keep the Sonics in Seattle.

About Bennett, Wilkins said there were a few things he disagreed with him about, mainly regarding forward Rashard Lewis and guard Ray Allen.

Lewis was sent to the Orlando Magic in a sign-and-trade deal, and Allen was traded to the Boston Celtics.

"Clay thought Rashard was getting paid too much," Wilkins said. "Then when they traded Ray, I said, 'Hey, you're not listening to me.'"

So, Wilkins resigned as the Sonics' vice chairman.

"We never had a cross word. Just disagreements," Wilkins said.

Wilkins said he thought all along that Bennett had intentions of moving the team to Oklahoma City.

"Why else would try to get rid of your overhead?" Wilkins said.

Along with the possible return of the NBA to Seattle, Wilkins also talked about his failed dream of playing for the United States in the 1960 Olympics.

He later realized his Olympic dream when he was an assistant coach for the 1992 U.S. team and head coach for the 1996 team.

"The Olympics were huge when I was growing up," Wilkins said. "I felt I was going to have a chance to be on the Olympic team. It was disappointing when I didn't make it. But years later, I did get that opportunity. There's nothing like representing your country."

When Wilkins, who is 71, was asked if he'd consider coaching again, he said, "Well, never say never."

Wilkins was in Olympia for a fundraiser to benefit The Community Foundation of South Puget Sound and The Lenny Wilkins Foundation.

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