

# Michael (Mike) Stephens, badge #1683

From Court to Court

By Mike Stephens for Black History Month



WESMEN VOLLEYBALL 1985-86

*All Canadian Awards - 1st Team - Michael Stephens; 2nd Team - Hans Hildebrandt; Tournament All Stars - M.V.P. - Jean Pierre Perron (1st year); All Stars - Hans Hildebrandt (2nd year); Michael Stephens (1st year); C.I.A.U. Coach of the Year - David Urub.*

*All Canadian Most Valuable Player - Ruth Burchuk; 1st Team - Brenda Boroski; Tournament All Stars - M.V.P. - Brenda Boroski; All Stars - Ruth Burchuk, Suri Smith.*

Back in the 1980s, it was expected that a 6'9" black kid would gravitate to playing basketball. However, it was abundantly clear that this was not going to be a future for me, for one simple reason; I really wasn't very good. So life took me in another direction, which had an incredible impact.



In 1984, at the age of 17, I became a member of our Canadian Junior National Men's Volleyball Team. To represent our country and wear the Canadian flag was such an honor and privilege; one that I cherish to this day. To be able to travel the world and experience many different cultures was the definition of diversity.

Several post-secondary opportunities to play volleyball in both Canada and the United States were presented to me, but, in the end, I decided to stay home and attend the University of Winnipeg. Over a three-year career, our team captured two consecutive National Championships which was an extremely difficult feat. Each year brought selections as a First Team All

Canadian with both Rookie of the year and a Championship MVP award. I was honored to be asked to join the Senior Men's National Volleyball Team at the end of my university career and received opportunities to play in the pro leagues in Europe, but something was missing; I needed purpose and I wasn't sure if I had found it yet.

In September of 1989, I found that purpose and became a member of the Winnipeg Police Service. It was a career choice that was a far cry from my Economics and Administrative Studies degree, but it felt right. I was so proud to wear the uniform and immediately noticed how kids would approach me. I wasn't sure if it was because of the uniform or because I was a 6'9" black man or both, as not many men out there looked like me.

Whatever the reason, it didn't matter, the connections with our youth were strong, and again, the purpose was staring me in the face. For many years I played on the Winnipeg Police volleyball and basketball teams, attending events in our city and playing against both Educators and students. Bridging the gap between the Service and community was important to me as these connections are vital in so many ways.



My career spanned over 27 years, with early assignments in uniform operations which later lead to becoming involved in a district community services unit. At that time, nine schools ranging from elementary to high school were my responsibility. Being involved with the next generation was a natural fit and fulfilled that purpose to give back.

My next assignment was the Child Abuse Unit. Children of abuse often don't often have a voice, so I did what I could to ensure that their voices were heard. I can honestly say that this assignment was my most challenging, as the dark side of society reared its ugly head far too

often. When asked to speak of my most memorable case or event of my career, I can say that they occurred in this unit. A child abused in ways that lack comprehension is still a memory that comes and goes in my mind, some twenty years later.

A promotion to Detective Sergeant in 2004 led to my next assignment in Major Crimes, followed by a promotion to Sergeant in 2007, which took me back to uniform in charge of a platoon in Downtown Winnipeg (Division 11). Being responsible for the members of a platoon was something that I took great pride in. Taking care of our members was important to me.

As with all things, change is inevitable, and I was transferred to Human Resources as the Sergeant of Recruiting. This was a time when applications to become a police officer were down, and it was difficult to field a class of recruits. However, after overseeing the development of the Services' first recruiting website, revamping the recruiting process, and taking a more proactive approach in recruiting, our Service experienced a dramatic increase in qualified applicants. Fast forward and eighteen months later saw my final promotion in 2010 to the rank of Staff Sergeant.

As a Staff Sergeant, I remained in Human Resources and gained invaluable knowledge of the inner workings of the Service, Winnipeg Police Association and the City of Winnipeg. To say that it was complex would be an understatement, but the skills gained were life-changing. It was here that I joined the Services' Peer Assistance Program as I wanted to help members that needed someone to talk to.

I was fortunate to be granted my final three transfer requests to Divisions 40 and 42 in the Criminal Investigation Bureau and then to Division 13 in Winnipeg's North End, where I eventually retired from in 2017.

When I look back on my career, I reflect on the experiences that have shaped me into the person I am today. Successes are great, but you have to remember your failures in order to grow and become better.

As I spoke of earlier, the game of volleyball has been a major part of my life. For the majority of my career, life was often a juggling act, as I spent many hours within the community giving back to the sport; often finishing my shift and then attending my community obligations.

I served on the Board of Directors for Volleyball Manitoba for six years, with the last four in the capacity of President of the association. Volleyball Manitoba is a not-for-profit organization that has over 5000 stakeholders. Its vision of growing community, inspiring excellence and leading by serving, defines the reason for my involvement. *[In 2010 Mike was inducted in the Manitoba Volleyball Hall of Fame in the player category, and in 2015 he was named Mary Jean England Elite Coach of the Year for his outstanding leadership in guiding the WinMan Wesmen to both a National and Provincial Championship].*

I realized long ago that knowledge is wasted if not shared. My personal experiences and passion for the game itself allowed me the opportunity to teach the game from grassroots to elite levels. I have been coaching young athletes for over twenty years. Venues ranged from Junior and Senior High Schools to club settings and university. The sport had opened many doors for me and it

remains important for me to do the same for others. There have been many successes along the way, particularly in the club setting. Nine consecutive Provincial gold medals, two National gold medals and one bronze, along with several quarterfinalist placings at Volleyball Canada's National Championships.

## Stephens sets volleyball record

Michael Stephens led the Wesmen men's volleyball team in the Festival du Voyageur tournament at Laval, Que., yesterday and set a Canadian Interuniversity Athletic Union record in the process.

The Wesmen fell to Dalhousie 12-15, 14-16, 15-11, 13-15 in their tournament opener and then rebounded later in the day to drop Laval University Rouge et Or 16-14, 15-12, 12-15, 15-14.

Stephens had 33 kills in the first

match and Chico Martineau added 16 kills. In the match with Laval, Stephens registered an almost unheard of 63 kills in 108 attempts, a CIAU record. J.P. Perron added a team record 99 assists.

Dalhousie, Winnipeg and Laval were tied after yesterday's play and in a countback Dalhousie was awarded first place by three points, Laval took second by one point and Winnipeg was forced to settle for third.

The goal of so many youth athletes is to try and play the game at the next level, and I am proud to have helped many of them receive athletic scholarships to either university or college. It is common for me to speak to post-secondary coaches on behalf of the athlete. I've always stressed to my athletes that sport isn't forever and to make sure they get a quality education while playing the sport. Over the years, I've seen many of these athletes graduate and work in their chosen profession. A few have been fortunate to receive opportunities to play in the pro leagues in Europe. One, in particular, has a very good chance to be selected to the Senior National Men's Volleyball Team that is slated to compete in the 2021 Olympic Games.

It is so satisfying to watch those that I have coached achieve great things, and humbling that many still keep in touch and call me 'coach'.

Retirement still has me in the gym teaching and mentoring athletes and coaches; both in club and university settings. Prior to Covid, I travelled several times to Langley BC to take part in higher learning with one of the elite university programs and coaches in the country. You're never too old to learn, and I sure am old. Well, that's what my body feels like sometimes.

The next eighteen months will see me in the gym frequently, as I have been selected as the 2022 Canada Summer Games Head Coach for Team Manitoba. These athletes are considered the 'best of the best' our province has to offer, with the event often referred to as the 'Youth Olympics.' It is my hope that some of these Manitoba athletes will get the chance to wear a Canadian jersey and represent our country as I once did.

Being involved with my community has given me a purpose in life and I look forward to what the future has to offer. Being a black man in our community has given me the opportunity to act as a role model to show that great things are possible regardless of the color of your skin.

