

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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When the University of Hawai'i named Eran Ganot as the new head coach for the men's basketball team, many onlookers were surprised. The selection committee picked a thirty-four-year-old first-time head coach to lead the program through troubled times. Eran Ganot, next, on Long Story Short.

One-on-one engaging conversations with some of Hawai'i's most intriguing people: Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox.

Aloha mai kākou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. When you sit down and talk with Eran Ganot, you don't think investment banker. But Ganot studied economics at one of the most highly-regarded liberal arts colleges in the country, and had offers he seriously considered. But while he likes business and economics, when he talks about basketball and coaching, he uses words like passion, work ethic, perspective, and balance—values he stresses with his players, whom he refers to as his extended family, values he learned from his own strong family unit growing up in a blue collar northern New Jersey community.

Where did you grow up? Where did your earliest formative experiences take place?

Well, I mean, when you're really young. I was born in Philly, grew up in Jersey. So, Philly, really too young to remember a lot of the experience there. But moved to Bergenfield, I remember, and then to Tenafly, I think when I was six. And basically, so those were my formative years growing up.

And what's Tenafly like as a town to live in?

It's a suburb about fifteen, twenty minutes from New York City. Really kind of a low-key community, really good people. You know, one of those communities where everybody kinda knows each other and have been there for a long time. So, it was a great place to grow up. You know, an older sister, a younger sister, a twin brother, great family. Friends I got to grow up with from elementary school, to junior high, to high school. I kinda like that, and I think you can see that even in my coaching career,

not really bouncing around too much. So, it was a place with a really loving atmosphere, a blue collar town, with people who really cared about each other.

Both of your parents were immigrants; one from Romania, one from Israel.

So, my dad actually was born in Romania, and grew up in Brooklyn. And my mom was born and raised in Israel.

And I believe I've heard that three of your grandparents were holocaust survivors.

Yeah. We were born in 1981, and one of my grandfathers on my mom's side, her father, passed that year. So, I never had much interaction with him, obviously. And then, our other three grandparents were alive—not now, but for most of our upbringing, and when we were in Tenafly. And just to hear some of those stories when you're growing up, you remember those.

Any idea about why these three people in your family survived?

The grit and toughness you had to have to go through that, one, to survive, and two, you know, the constant fear of what was going on, seeing things happen to your friends and family. I can't imagine; it's unfathomable, and the atrocities that were going on at that time. But you know, whether you're hearing it from three family members, or reading about it, or studying it, it's pretty powerful.

You're growing up in this suburb. But it's not a placid place for you and your brother, because you are tough competitors, and you're always doing sports.

Well, you hear stories all the time about siblings battling each other. And think about what it's like for twins. So, same year, same teams. You know, we played every sport, and it added to the competitive spirit and handling, you know, you're gonna win or lose every other day in every other sport. And I think our parents did a great job. And you know, when you're going through just growing up and you're competing in everything. I talk about that with our team; achievers, you know, on the court, off the court, in the classroom. You know.

You would lose to your brother, you would win over your brother. But the relationship; was that paramount, or was it the competition?

Oh, no; when you're younger it's about the competition.

Winning or losing.

Yeah. As you get older, the relationship becomes more important. I mean, I think we pushed each other, obviously. But we competed in everything; not just sports. And our parents were really good about ... you know, we were, I'd like to say coachable, but we wanted to play sports, and we couldn't do that unless our grades were good. So, guess what? If you hear that and you want to go play sports, your grades are gonna be pretty good, and you're gonna get your homework done.

You mean, you didn't whine and try to get out of it?

Oh, early.

And have excuses?

But we weren't gonna win that battle.

Your parents were not buying any of that.

No; and they were good on that. And it created the habits of managing your time, having good priorities. To be honest, I mean, smart wins. Our parents were really good about understanding the big picture.

What sports did you and your twin brother play?

Everything; and then everything changed when we got to high school. And we actually went to from—shoot, I'm thinking for five years, maybe between ages ten and fifteen, or nine and fourteen, we went every summer to a sports academy sleepaway camp. So, we were sent packing, basically, and you play every sport there. So, we played everything. And then, you know, the good thing about growing up on the East Coast, you have the seasons.

It snows in New Jersey. What did you do then?

Well, we played tackle basketball and tackle football in the snow. And we shoveled a lot of snow, driveways to make some extra money. Let's see, now. In the winter it was basketball, in the spring it was baseball, in the fall it was soccer. But then when we got to high school, we started to, you know, target. And I encourage that, by the way. I think every kid should play every sport. It tackles different parts of your body, it's a different kinda team chemistry. And then you gotta find what you gravitate towards. And eventually it became clear when we got to high school, it was basketball.

What about your sisters? Did they play, too?

They did. And it's funny; we have a pretty big gap. I mean, my sister was born in 1974, we were born in '81, and my younger sister was 1990. So, there was some separation. When we left the house for college at seventeen, my younger sister was just kinda jumping into sports. So, they weren't as sports-motivated. They were just as competitive in different ways.

It sounds like it would be hard to be as motivated as you two were in sports. But they were competitive in what ways?

Well, I just think people sometimes think if you play sports, you're competitive. But I think if you're aggressive in the classroom. You know, those guys, they did a great job. One went to Boston University and one went to American University, and now you know, one's still on the East Coast, New York; Danielle. My younger sister Betty is, you know, doing a great job raising her family of three kids in Calabasas. So, I just think competitiveness is just the way they attack life. It's not just about basketball and baseball.

But you can overdo competitiveness, too; right? Or do you think you can?

No; I think you can. That's why I was talking about the balance. I mean, you have to ... you know, I said this about can you find the balance between—I do this a lot with our team—between working your tail off and and enjoying the journey. Does that make sense? And every year, you know, the great things we talk with our staff and people I'm close with, it's you're always working on your philosophy, and you can't have one without the other. Life's too short. You can't be good at anything if you're not happy, and you're not gonna be happy if you're not doing with you love, where you love, with people you love.

And finding what one loves is often a very difficult thing. Lot of people don't find it for many, many years.

Yeah; and you could see there's stress involved with that. You know, we have guys who come to us at, you know, eighteen to twenty-two, and then they leave for, you know, whatever it is next. You know, our job is to prepare them for the next step. But I think people rush into things. Look, I was fortunate, I feel like, I knew what I wanted to do. And you hear stories about people trying to find that similar passion. But it's gotta be natural, it's gotta be genuine. Like, my brother is in a different line of work than me. He's in fashion design; he's got his own clothing company. And he didn't really find that 'til maybe five or eight years, whatever, after I found I wanted to coach.

So, he went from being a jock to a fashion designer.

Yes. We're on different spectrums. We're a little different personalities. Equally competitive, and obviously, similar values.

And he says he's better than you at sports; right?

Yeah. Well, he always says, too, you gotta respect the older brother. He's nine minutes older than me.

Right? That's a little out of hand.

Even that's competitive.

No question. But I just think, you know, people shouldn't rush into finding that passion. Like, explore. Like, if you have it, great; chase it, go through with it. If you don't, find it, and take your time. But I think when people rush into doing something, that creates that unhappiness. And you're just not gonna be good anything if you don't find a passion. So, if I tell people anything, find your passion and attack it.

Eran Ganot played high school basketball for four years, and was recruited by Swarthmore, a college outside of Philadelphia. A nagging back injury suffered during his high school career continued to bother him in college. Today, he speaks from experience when he warns players about playing through the pain.

I remember walking into the training room, and my college coach and our trainer were sitting there and going: We think something's going on. And that was the first time I failed a physical 'cause of the back. And he had told me that when we met after. and that was a hard time for me. It was actually the only time I missed a practice, I think, coaching or playing, because if I couldn't practice and it was too hard for me to go and practice. I couldn't practice.

Emotionally or physically?

Emotionally, I just didn't know. You know, I was kinda lost for a stretch there, because it was something you're so passionate taken.

And you worked so hard, too. And you loved it so much.

I loved it. Not just the game; being around the team. I mean, I can talk a lot about why I play the game and why I coach the game. But when it happened, it was a difficult time for me, but something that helped me grow as a person. I remember sitting in his office, and he was talking to me as a junior. As much as I love what I do now, but my coach was great, telling me: Hey, maybe we should think about a coaching career. I'm like: Wait a minute, I got one more year. So, I spent the whole off

season just getting myself healthy enough to play in my senior year. And to be honest, I'm sure our guys will tell you, I have not played basketball since the last game of my senior year. I had to wear a back brace. I'd wear it under, so no one could see that I had to wear a back brace. Think about running around with a back brace. And in my senior year, the last game, I threw that in the trash, and that's been it for me.

And yet, when you went to college, you chose to major in economics.

Yep.

At Swarthmore. That doesn't sound like you're planning on playing or coaching.

Yeah. No; I had a background in economics. I really like business, and I think you can see some of that as I approached running our program. When Swarthmore had recruited me, and I had known a little bit about it, it wasn't far from home, and it was a really good academic school, I thought in the one percent chance I chose not to chase a path in coaching, I thought I'd be set up in that field. And there were some opportunities, you know, after I graduated and I always gravitated towards kind of an investment banking background.

And you got a job offer in investment banking.

Yeah; I had some opportunities after that. But it didn't register or resonate with me as much as what ended up being a volunteer position at St. Mary's. So, people thought I was crazy.

Yeah; I would imagine, because it wasn't just quick stint of volunteering. You volunteered for three years.

Three years.

You didn't get paid, but did you get other perks, like meals or housing, a car?

Oh, I joke with people. I was able to work camps every summer. And I had saved money in the event I was gonna get an opportunity, it might be something where I'd have to really toughen up for a couple years to make it work. But really worked hard during that stretch, I made some money in camps. Eventually, one year, I was able to teach a basketball class on the side. And the cafeteria folks who maybe they felt bad for me when we'd come in for some meals, just make it through. Remember, back then, I didn't have a family. I was just, you know, very pleased and appreciative of the opportunity, I was gonna do everything I can to hang in, hang in, hang in. And it became tougher each year, especially my third year, but some of the coaches there helped me kinda hang in there, and then eventually got a couple breaks.

Were you hoping every year they'd offer you a paying job?

You know, some places, you might have an opportunity there, some places you need some movement. You know, there was a very fixed amount of opportunities or jobs.

And was that the case with St. Mary's?

St. Mary's. So, it's funny now, looking back. 'Cause after I left, eventually there was some movement. But in the meantime, I looked at it as a great apprenticeship for me, learning from a great coach. We worked with some great coaches. I mean, couple of the coaches I worked with then are now Division 1 head coaches. And those guys started off as volunteers, as well. So, I don't know if they did it for three years, but it's just the way it played out.

And you were self-financing, too. I mean, that's gotta be hard. Working extra so that you could work for free.

Yes. And as weird as it sound, looking back, I loved every bit of it. You know, the amount I was learning, and what was going on with our program. You know, I just think at the end of the day, it satisfies the passion. One of my other passions is learning and growing, and I was doing that. So, the Bay Area was great, and just looking forward to the next break, and then I got my next one with Hawai'i.

How did it change?

Well, I got an opportunity with Riley Wallace. And so, that was my first part-time paying job. At the time, that position, which is now fulltime, was a casual hire. I think it was maybe fifteen or twenty thousand.

So now, you're living in expensive Hawaii.

Yeah.

And you're getting paid, but not much.

No; but compared to what it was, I thought I was a millionaire. So, I mean, I go from New Jersey, and Randy Bennett hires me over the phone.

St. Mary's.

At St. Mary's; so I just fly over to the Bay, he picks me up. And what's funny is, then three years later, I fly over to have a conversation with Coach Wallace, and he picks me up from the airport. So, that was 2006. I didn't know it would lead to what it would, but I

was excited about the opportunity to work for Coach Wallace, who I had a lot of respect for from afar. I knew there was potential for it to be his last year, and the guy was a huge mentor for me in my life. It's all about timing, but if it was a year later, it might not have happened with Hawai'i, and certainly not with Coach Wallace. So, I'm very appreciative. I think people should make their decisions, you know, like I told you earlier about passion, which it was satisfying my passion, but also about people. So, I got spoiled. You could get a higher paying job in a better situation maybe, with the wrong people. That's why I said, you gotta do what you love, where you love, with people you love. I got all three. Maybe it didn't satisfy things from a financial standpoint, and I was just trying to hang in there with some rough days, but I couldn't have asked for a better start, and the people I got to meet and know, and learn from. It was awesome.

Eran Ganot spent four years on Hawaii's staff under head coaches Riley Wallace and Bob Nash. Then, he got the call from his mentor at St. Mary's, Randy Bennett. Ganot would return to the Bay Area and spend the next four years as an assistant coach, before moving up to associate head coach for the St. Mary's Gaels. Twelve years of hard work, absorbing all he could learn about coaching Division 1 college basketball. But was Eran Ganot ready to take on a challenge even the most experienced would avoid? Was he willing to head up a troubled college basketball program that didn't even know yet how much trouble it was in?

But even when you got a great opportunity, which was you were offered the head coaching job of the UH basketball team, I mean, it came with a lot of darkness around it.

Yeah.

The NCAA violations, you were the third head coach in two years.

Right.

And there were looming sanctions. And I may be wrong about this, but I thought many of the players really liked the interim coach, because he'd been with them through a lot.

I called it like the perfect storm. First, you want to get a crack at getting into coaching, and then seeing, can I do this. And then, it became clear, and as I got better and better that, yeah. And then it became clear that, you know, you're in this to run your own program. And people always ask me, and I said this at the press conference, your dream job. And I just said I'm not throwing out—and it goes back to the investment in the sense of family and relationships. I'm not gonna throw out random schools. Like, I think your dream job, to me, was a place I coached or played before. And it became

more clear that Hawai'i resonated the most with me in my heart. So, when it was going through a lot of stuff, that's why I called it the perfect storm. There was on-court, off-court, NCA, everything you could say, and there was a looming cloud of uncertainty. And yeah, I'm in, because there was more of a pull for me because of what I was going through. So, a place I have so much respect for and so much love for, let's get us one, stabilize our program and get us through this and set us up for sustained success, Hawaii deserves better. And so, I was really excited to get that opportunity.

And you built relationships with the team members.

I mean, the first thing I did, which goes back to relationships, was there's so much work to do when you get a job, but we made sure we met with the players, traveled to meet with their families, their relationships, didn't skip steps, and went from there.

Fans were thrilled that Ganot, his staff, and that 2015-16 team took the State of Hawaii on an unprecedented ride. A Big West Conference championship earned the 'Bows an appearance in the post-season tournament of the National Collegiate Athletic Association or NCAA. And this fiercely determined group beat a talented Cal Berkeley squad, giving Hawaii men's basketball the first March Madness victory in the history of the program, and the country's president at the time a risky bracket win in the first round. Eran Ganot was the third-youngest head coach among the sixty-eight head coaches at the tournament. At the end of the season, he was acknowledged with three awards: Big West Conference Coach of the Year, the Red Auerbach College Coach of the Year, and the CollegiateInsider.com Joe B. Hall Award for top first-year coach.

And then, year two comes around, and that's a hard year because then, the sanctions take effect. And didn't you lose eight players because one of the sanctions was, no post-season?

Yeah. You that could be a movie. I mean, I think going through it and looking back at it, I'm so appreciative of where we're at now. We could easily not be where we're at now if we skipped some steps earlier, which we didn't do. And I'm proud of the players, the staff, the administration; everybody who was involved in this. But you know, usually, I'm a guy who likes to read and study, and meet with people. And maybe there's experience I have, or they have. So, what we went through is very unique. Usually, when someone gets a ban or NCA situation, it's for that year. Because of the timing of the decision, it was mid-December, it was for the following year. So, who am I gonna talk to on that? No one; no one's been through it. So, it became uh, a great challenge, an opportunity to see how our team sticks together. But that second year, we returned one point per game, so you see a cloud of uncertainty which is tough to deal with. But the next couple years, we dealt with the reality of the situation. So, I think a lot of people talk about that first year's group. I can't say enough or sing enough

praises for the people who've spent the last two years getting us to where we're at today.

Well, that second year, you did lose people. How did you manage?

Either you hang your head and pout, or you look at it as an opportunity to talk about what you have or what you don't, what you can do or what you can't. And that's kind of been a great lesson for all of us. Going through that experience reinforced some things, we learned some new things, but we chipped away. We talked about stabilize; that became the big deal for our program. When you get hired, I know I say this a lot, is you want to build, build, build. When you get the information of what's going on with our program, it became we gotta stabilize and build. We can't build if our program isn't stable, and our program wasn't, so it became chip away. Every year, make sure we're improving, make sure by 2018, 19, no off-court issues, no NCA issues, academics in great shape, no NCA issues. So, I'm really proud of the way those guys hung in there together to put us where we're at now. And so, how did we do it? It's all about people.

And on your side, you say that it was actually, you know, a pull, a plus.

Yeah.

There were problems here, and you wanted to get to them. It didn't faze you, and in fact, it actually drew you near.

Yeah. No; it was something that I wanted to see us through, and beyond. And I hate to use the word I, because this was a team effort, starting with the administrators. It's always about the leadership in place, from the president to the athletic director, the staff we brought in, the people we brought in, you know, our support staff. It was very much a team effort to get us where we're at today. But there was definitely a pull. Like at the end of the day, let's say basketball specifically, and team, and competing, but challenges. You gotta love a challenge. And I think a lot of people would look at that, and probably did and say, I don't want to be part of this. And we were the other way.

Well, does a team ever really get stable? I mean, you know, you never know who you're gonna have, for sure. I mean, maybe there is no time when a college basketball team is really stable.

That's what you're trying to compete with, or trying to establish; a culture. I would say the culture can get established every year, and I think ours is firmly established. Our program is in a rock-solid position now. But there are certain things that happen; you're dealing with human beings, the obstacles in our business.

You're always managing around it, and navigating around it.

Well, we're working off a rock-solid foundation now.

You know, I know you met your future wife at the UH. And I heard her quoted as saying: You know what, he never even dated; he was just too busy, he was always busy. How did that tradition break?

I mean, I think first of all, when we talked, I should have said this earlier. I have a great family. Obviously with my immediate family where I grew up, my parents and my siblings. But my wife and daughter are awesome. And the support system there, and hopefully vice versa; I got it pretty good there. Barbea likes to tell the story about she just put it on the calendar. Like, I usually follow a calendar, and she just said: Date with Barbea.

But we connected, and she's got a huge heart, and we share the similar affinity for Hawaii. We got a special young daughter in Zeza. You know, what's cool is that she gets to grow up in a place that we love, and people are watching her grow up right in front of their eyes. And I just think everything's about family, and I got a great one.

Zeza is an especially interesting story, because she didn't grow up as either your wife's daughter, or your daughter.

Yeah. It was a unique, obviously sad situation in September 2012. You know, you remember things vividly. I remember about to walk into a meeting with the team at St. Mary's before workouts, and then I got a call from Barbea's father, who shared the news with me about her daughter Chelsea, who was off-the-charts-awesome, who was killed in a car accident. She was pushed into the other side of the road by someone with road rage. And so, he shared that with me, and obviously, that's devastating news. But he also shared it with me so I can go home and see Barbea, and be there when she heard the news. And Chelsea's daughter, who was eighteen months at the time, was Zeza.

Eighteen months.

Yeah. And so, the only fortunate thing in such a tough situation, a really sad situation, is that Zeza wasn't in the car. And so, we've raised her since.

Did you have to stop and think about that?

No. I mean, you know, Chelsea would visit here and there, and Zeza was in, you know, the baby carriage, and she obviously was not as active when you're that young. But you don't expect certain things like that to happen. First it was, let's make sure Barbea

and the family are okay, and what can we do. And I remember Barbea bringing that up in that conversation, and it was: Hey, let's go. And Zeza is very much our daughter. And you know, one of the unique things, looking back, is how whether at St. Mary's or here, that people in the community stepped up. She gained obviously, Barbea and myself, but you know, usually you got fifteen or sixteen players, she gained fifteen brothers, older brothers. And if you come to watch our program now, or at a game or at a function, or whatever, and this is from my daughter, this is for our coaches' kids, from our assistants, they're immersed with the program. So, we have intelligent young men on our team that are highly caring and very much understand the family aspect. 'Cause the Hawai'i experience is very unique. And this is the credit to how special Hawaii is. If you can feel like you're at home five thousand miles from where you grew up, it's pretty special. And when I come in here—you know, I think I the first time I came here in '06, I was a twenty-four-year-old, lost and confused, and just trying to find his way. What the great people in Hawaii usually do? They lend a hand. And so, it started from there, and that's why I'm so happy to be here now. That's why I'm so happy to have our players here, and to have my daughter grow up here. It's special.

When we sat down for this conversation, it was the fall of 2018, and Eran Ganot was looking forward to his fourth season as head coach of UH men's basketball. After three seasons, his team posted fifty-nine wins and thirty-five losses, with two out of three winning seasons. UH extended his contract through the 2023 season. And that troubled program mired in controversy stabilized under the leadership of the young first-time head coach who told us one of the reasons he took the job was because the program was in trouble. We thank Eran Ganot for his time. You'll find more of this conversation in our Long Story Short archives at PBSHawaii.org. Mahalo nui for joining us. I'm Leslie Wilcox for Long Story Short and PBS Hawai'i. Aloha nui.

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I was fortunate enough to be involved with Positive Coaches Alliance. We spoke to the parents one day, and they ask me for advice, and I say this to the parents. I'll tell the player, with the parents there: Hey ... we coach you, we don't coach your parents. There's great communication with us and our parents, but not in terms of the playing time and things like that. For the parents, I advised the group I was speaking to: Sit back, relax, and enjoy the game; we have enough coaches. You know, and I think there's a balance there, because I think they're awesome parents, they want their kids to do so well. We do, too. But what's happening is, it's a little bit more pressure on the kids, and we gotta remind them that we're playing for the love of the game. And that's a critical age, where let them struggle through some things, let them be accountable, let them fight through moments, fight through adversity, let them have fun. And that doesn't change, whether you're at that age or for us, 'cause that's

something you gotta remind yourself of. You've gotta, like I said, work your tail off and enjoy the journey; have fun. And I think we've gotta have that and better balance.