

Former Penn great Zoller now just a "normal Joe"

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By Eugene Rapay

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It has been over ten years since **Mark Zoller** first set foot on Penn's campus, where he would embark on an illustrious four-year career on the basketball court.

Zoller, a St. Joseph's Prep grad, established himself to be a tough, versatile forward that could score in the post and grab rebounds. In his later years as a college upperclassman, he showed that he could stretch the floor, thanks to his reliable jump shot. With his ability to drain his shots from the perimeter and in the paint, he became a scoring threat whenever the ball was in his hands.

During his time at Penn, Zoller amassed 1,429 points (12.4 ppg) and 750 rebounds (6.5 rpg). He saved his best for last, averaging a conference-high 18.2 points per game in his final year as a Quaker. He was named first-team All-Ivy League his junior and senior years.

On Monday night, at the Delco Pro-Am in Haverford College's gymnasium, Mark Zoller proved that he still could compete on the court. While he wasn't sacrificing his body for loose balls or sporting the same quickness that he had in his college days, he flashed glimpses of the same smooth jump shot.

"I definitely miss it sometimes, that's the reason why I'm still playing here," Zoller said. "I miss the camaraderie. I miss it sometimes, but not the practice and the grueling preparation beforehand."

While Zoller was at Penn from 2003-2007, the basketball team experienced one of its finest runs in recent history. The tandem of Zoller and **Ibrahim Jaaber** served as a formidable one-two punch on the basketball court, leading the team to three Ivy League championships and three NCAA Tournaments.

Despite his success in the Ivy League, he went undrafted in the 2007 NBA Draft. After flirting with a few NBA practice camps and workouts, Zoller decided to go across the pond and attend a camp in Italy. From there, he was offered a contract to play in Spain and boarded a plane headed for Europe a few days later.

"It was fantastic. I loved it, it one of those things – do it, say I did it, and then bow out gracefully," Zoller said. "Experience-wise it was fantastic, some of the best memories of my life."

His first stop was in Spain, where he played for Plasencia Galco. Playing overseas comes with its own unique advantages, like the opportunity to immerse oneself in a completely foreign culture and travel to different countries.

While the game of basketball is universal and the rules are about the same everywhere you go, the experience of playing in Spain is something that couldn't be replicated in any NBA arena.

The arenas were filled with fans that looked like they were there to attend El Clasico, the famed soccer match between FC Barcelona and Real Madrid. Fans came in numbers, with vuvuzelas and spirited chanting.

"In the countries I played, it's very passionate," Zoller said. "One game they had to stop because there were fireworks being lit off in the arena. It was against one of our rival teams, so people just went extra crazy."

After one year in Spain, Zoller played for one more year in Europe. This time around, he was now a part of UU-Korihait Uusikaupunki in Finland. At the end of the season, Zoller decided to go back to the United States and end his professional career.

"I knew going in it wasn't going to be the end goal," Zoller said, reflecting on his time in Europe. "It was an extension of my basketball career, I used it as a passport to see the world."

Today, Mark Zoller is just your everyday, working man. He got married this past October and hasn't gone too far away from Philadelphia. He now works in sales at Lincoln Financial in Radnor, Pa., where he has been for the last five years. He remains in close contact with the Penn basketball program and goes to a handful of games each season.

"It's tough to see," said Zoller, in regards to Penn's recent struggles. "I hate going to the games with an empty Palestra, it's sacrilegious."

However, he remains optimistic for Penn's future. He places his faith in new head coach **Steve Donahue**, formerly of Boston College and Cornell, and the youth that comes with the crowded incoming freshman class. Zoller believes that Penn is trending in the right direction and will be competitive in the Ivy League in a few years.

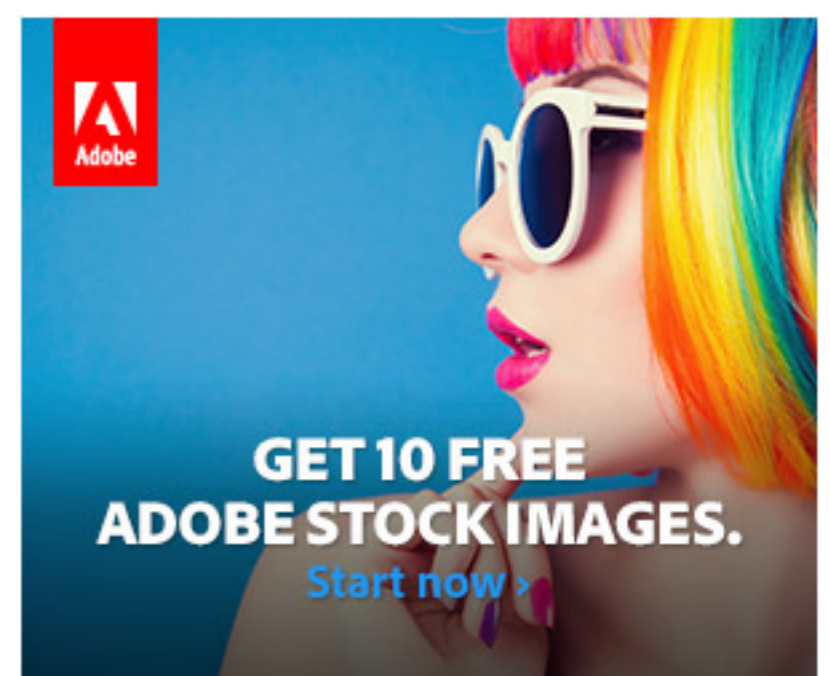
As for Zoller, his life has much quieted down from the jetsetter lifestyle that came with European basketball. He's looking forward to the same things that most hardworking Americans anxiously wait for.

"I look forward to vacations, hanging out with friends, and that kind of stuff," Zoller said, laughing. "I'm kind of just a normal working Joe now."

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