

20 questions

Interview by Angelo Pizzo Photography by Steve Raymer

for Errek Suhr

A Hometown Walk-On Who Made Good

“Err-ekk, Suh-ur, Err-ekk, Suh-ur” became a common chant this past season at Assembly Hall as fans acknowledged their favorite player. In fact, Errek Suhr, a 5’8” hometown walk-on may be among the most popular players ever to don a Hoosier uniform. His hard-nose, scrappy, take-one-for-the-team play endeared him not only to Indiana fans but basketball fans everywhere.

Errek, a classic over-achiever blessed with neither height nor great athleticism, willed himself onto the team and became an important contributor during his four-year career.

The Suhr family moved here in 1984 when Errek’s father, Buck, joined Coach Bill Mallory’s football staff as director of football operations. His mother, Jane, was pregnant with Errek at the time and he was born at Bloomington Hospital soon after they arrived.

Errek started following Indiana sports as early as he can remember. His older sister, Jenny, led the way by becoming a successful athlete in high school and a role model for Errek. In 1999, while a freshman at Indiana, Jenny died of brain cancer. Her life and death have had a profound influence on Errek ever since.

As a youth, Errek played and enjoyed all sports, but decided early on that he needed to specialize in basketball if he wanted to become an outstanding player. He found early success as one of the AAU teams he played on finished second in the nation. At Bloomington North High School, he was the starting point guard all four years and led the team to a 90-11 win-loss record. He was captain his junior and





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senior years and was voted to the Indiana All-Star Team. Offered several scholarships to smaller universities, he passed on those offers when Coach Mike Davis invited him to walk on at IU. His junior year he became a scholarship player.

At the Indiana basketball team's season-end banquet this spring, Errek was the recipient of the following awards: Leadership Award, Take Charge Award (most charges), Community Award, Tight White Award (Top Second Team Player), Mr. Hustle Award, Landon Turner Most Inspirational Award, Academic Achievement Award, and Senior Award. Not bad for a walk-on. On June 23, Errek will wed his fiancée Rebekah Ellsworth.

PIZZO You have been recognized for being an extremely hard worker and someone who has maximized his potential and then some. How did that mindset develop?

SUHR In sixth or seventh grade I was about the same height I am now and was one of the bigger guys on the court. But by the time I was a freshman in high school everyone was taller than I was. The junior and senior guards were kicking my butt every day in practice, and I just realized that this isn't something that will just come to me easily like it did earlier. I had to make a choice. I could have done what a lot of my friends did and played three sports and spread my time commitments around. And I would have really loved doing that. I played baseball and really liked it. But I knew what I needed to work on and how much time and effort was needed for me to get to where I wanted to go in basketball. I've always been someone who could look in the mirror and see the faults before I see the good things. I wanted to challenge myself to do something that a lot of people didn't think I could do.

PIZZO You were an integral part of a successful basketball program at Bloomington North High School. What did you learn from Coach Tom McKinney?

SUHR Coach McKinney was really good when it came to the structure of the team. He taught me that everyone has a role and it was up to him to let you know what that was. He said playing for him was not a democracy. When I played age group AAU basketball I used to shoot all the time and I was good at it. But my senior year playing for Coach McKinney I took about three or four shots a game and averaged less than ten points. And that

was more than my first three years. Early on, after one game, when he thought I shot too much he looked me in the eye and said, "If you're going to play on this team you need to know your role. It's not your job to shoot the ball, it's your job to make sure we win." Later that season in a game when I scored zero points and I had 10 or 15 assists, he told me that it was one of the best games I ever played.

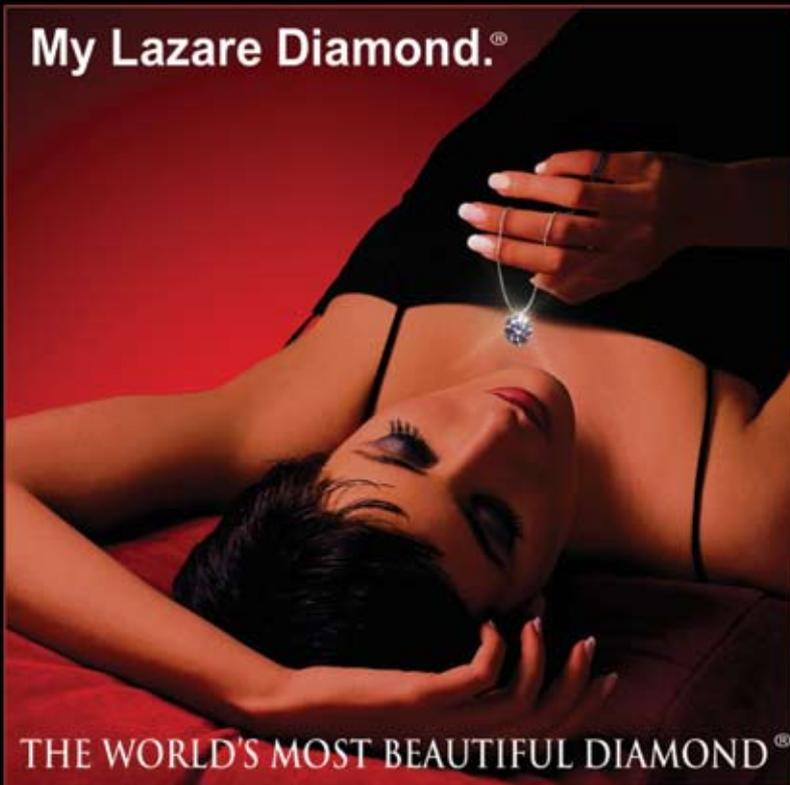
I owe Coach McKinney so much for what he taught me in terms of being a role player. Your role could be the best player, or the one who shoots or the guy who guards the other team's best player, or the one who hands out the most assists. He stressed that every role on the team is important to its success. I'm just so glad I played for him because if I was coming into college without learning that I don't think I would have survived. He taught me that it would be okay to sit the bench for four years, if my team was winning.

PIZZO You were offered scholarships from Holy Cross and Austin Peay, and the opportunity to go to other smaller schools where you could have played a lot of minutes. Why walk on at Indiana where court time would be so much harder to come by?



Errek, 14, with sister Jenny, 19. Photo courtesy of the Suhr family

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Errek, 4, on his way to an IU football game. Photo courtesy of the Suhr family

SUHR I was planning on taking a visit to Austin Peay two days before Coach (Mike) Davis said that I could walk on and play for IU. It was a no-brainer. I could never pass up the chance to play here. This is the school I grew up idolizing. I never thought about playing time. If my role for four years was to bust my butt in practice and be the hardest working guy out there, that was all right with me. When you come to Indiana, because of the tradition and talent, you know you have a chance to win the national championship every year. If I was going to sit on the bench to be part of that possibility, for me that's better than playing four years at any other school where I might have played more. I saw so many games from that seat right there, (pointing in the stands) row 16, section C. It was a dream to play here, to be part of Indiana basketball.

It was a dream to play here, to be part of Indiana basketball.

PIZZO Your father, Buck, was director of football here with Coach Mallory. What kind of influence did he have on you?

SUHR The one thing I've always been thankful for with my dad is that he wasn't like a lot of dads of kids I played with. The kind that would push and push and push and the kids would only take it because it was their parents. Too many times the parents loved sports more than the kids. There is never any reason for a parent to yell at a kid when it comes to sports. If I didn't want to play my Dad was fine with that. The only time he would give me advice was when I asked for it. That's something that I really value because I think a kid needs to make his own decisions on what he wants in life. I've seen so many guys in college basketball who don't work and underachieve because they are there only because they've been pushed to play. You'd be surprised how many players in college don't love the game or want to compete. My dad always taught me from a young age that if you're going to do something, do it to your fullest ability. I've always believed in this. I've always been grateful that my dad didn't push me, he guided me. He said whatever I decided to do, play other sports, not play at all, it was totally fine with him. He would always love me, regardless.

PIZZO Who were the players you looked up to when you were younger?

SUHR Mostly Indiana players. Starting with Damon Bailey, what he did in high school and college was special. I really liked Michael Lewis and admired all the little things he did to make the team better. Allan Henderson, Calbert Cheaney, there are so many of them. And of course, there's Dane Fife.

PIZZO Talk about your experience with Dane.

SUHR It started when I saw him on TV yelling at one of the refs and then during that same game he ended up biting a guy. I thought, "This guy is crazy." But he won Big Ten Player of the Year. You have to respect that. I first met him when I was in high school playing in open gym at IU. He used to always call me Chris. I never corrected him because I was too shy. Then one time I made a mistake and he yelled at me. I told him my name was Errek and he yelled... "I don't care what your name is, I'm kicking you off this team until you play defense." He cussed at me a little and I could see it was his way or the highway. When I got here at IU he was helping Coach Davis. During conditioning drills he would be in my ear every day screaming. I was wearing his number 11, and he

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would put tape over it, saying I wasn't worthy to wear his jersey. He never let up on me, until I started winning some sprints. Finally, he took the tape off and that was the day I knew I finally earned his respect. He started praising me, yelling at the other guys about how a 5'8" walk-on was beating them. Dane kept on telling me to work hard and he would have my back in the coaches' meetings. You always knew where you stood with him. He was always honest, whether you wanted to hear what he had to say or not.

PIZZO Compare and contrast the three coaches for whom you played.

SUHR Coach McKinney was all about playing hard and knowing your role. From Coach Davis I learned offense. He was an offensive mastermind and so fundamentally sound at every little aspect of getting an offense to work. What he did with the 2002 team that played in the national championship game was unbelievable—how he used Jared Jeffries and the other players to get open shots. Coach Sampson is more of a "I don't care how you do it, get it done," type guy. He'll tell you how to do it but if you've got some other ways to achieve the goal, he doesn't care. Run the offense, run it right, figure it out. With Coach Davis the assistants, Donnie Marsh and Kerry Rupp, were really hands-on, talking all the time in practice. But Coach Sampson runs practice and the assistants don't say much at all. They have totally different philosophies of coaching but at the same time the players respect both ways. I've learned a lot from all my coaches.

PIZZO The last two years of Coach Davis' tenure here were difficult. He was the target for a lot of negativity and criticism. How did that affect you and the other players?

SUHR There were so many things that made it tough on all of us. Coach Davis is one of the nicest guys you could ever meet and he cares a lot about what other people think. And it wasn't like the people who were unhappy and wanted him out kept their opinions to themselves. He heard it all the time. As players we could see his discomfort, we could see how it bothered him. In the locker room we could tell he was almost breaking down because of how upsetting it was to him. That's tough on a team when your leader, the guy that you look up to and are taking direction from, is so stricken by the criticism. My teammates and I, no matter where we went, parties, the dorms, grocery store anywhere, we'd have people



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Errek and his “best friend” Rebekah Ellsworth, soon to be his wife. Photo courtesy of the Suhr family

telling us we needed to fire our coach. It was really hard seeing a person we held so high being brought down so low. This was the guy who we loved, that brought us here to play basketball.

PIZZO You were a popular player on a highly visible team in a state where people are passionate about basketball. What was it like for you walking on campus? Did people feel free to come and talk to you?

SUHR All the time. It’s good when you’re winning. But when things aren’t going well, it can get real bad. You know the expression, “If you don’t have anything nice to say to someone, don’t say it at all.” Well, that rule doesn’t apply on campus. You go through the hard pre-season workouts, hard practices. It’s your life and you don’t want people who don’t know you talking about your life saying, “This is what you need to do.” When we were having some tough times or on a losing streak, as players we’re not happy with ourselves. And when you’re not happy with yourself, the last thing you need is to hear other people saying bad things about you. And I didn’t get it as bad as some of my teammates. Students would feel free to say whatever they wanted to them. And it’s one thing to say, “you guys need to do this” and it’s another thing to say, “You really sucked last week”.

PIZZO Does this kind of experience bring the players even closer together?

SUHR Yes, it does. You become closer to people when you’re going through hard times — it’s the foxhole mentality. That’s what coach Davis talked about a lot. Who do you want in the foxhole with you? When people are saying bad things about your teammates it feels terrible because those are the guys you consider your brothers.

PIZZO You have often talked about how big an influence your sister Jenny has been on your life.

SUHR Yes, Jenny was always someone I looked up to, not in the sense of her accomplishments but as a role model as to how to behave. She didn’t drink, got straight A’s, and had great relations with everyone. I only saw her cry a few times. She always had a smile on her face. I don’t think a lot of kids are as fortunate as I was in the fact that people are telling them what to do, when I actually got to see what to do. I owe almost everything to Jenny because I try to be like her all the time. If she had been a different

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person, I would be a different person. Since she died, I have lived every day thinking she is looking down on me. And that really affects my decisions and my behavior. I'm still looking up to her, striving to be like her.

PIZZO: How did you deal with your grief, in school, sports, at home?

SUHR When she died, grades and sports weren't important. The only thing that was important was that she was gone. My parents were worried about me. But after a while, sports became an outlet. I'd play to stop thinking about it. In a way that was good and in a way that was bad because I never talked about my feelings to anybody. And that caused a lot of emotional problems for me. Two years later I had to go to talk to someone about it.

I owe almost everything to Jenny because I try to be like her all the time. If she had been a different person, I would be a different person.

I was breaking down mentally because I kept everything inside. My mom and dad were in the healing process, but in a different stage than me. I was stuck in the first stage. Finally, what helped me was my Christian faith and knowing Jenny has gone to a better place. It really helped me to move on and realize that though it's something we've lost, it's something she's gained. She's been able to go to one of the best places you can be—in heaven.

PIZZO How was your faith tested with Jenny's death?

SUHR As a family we always went to church and thought we were strong Christians. But when Jenny died my faith was hit hard. The questions was: How could God do this to her? How could a God of love do this to me? I didn't go to church for three or four years. Then I went to college and started going out with my fiancée Rebekah [Ellsworth] and she sort of edged me to getting back into church. I finally realized that instead of rejecting faith, if I got closer it would help me deal with the loss better. Getting closer to God really helps me with everything. I thank God every day for Rebekah because she's helped me deal

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Coach Krzyzewski embraces Errek after his standout performance against Duke. *Photo courtesy of the Suhr family*

with things like Jenny and showed me how to look at her death in a different light.

PIZZO You knew Rebekah in high school, then started dating her in college. With 17,000 co-eds on campus, most of whom you probably could have dated, how did you decide she was the one?

SUHR During our time in high school we became best friends. That is the most important thing. At IU, we were even in the same dorm during my freshman year. We hung out every day but didn't date. She even helped me look for girls back then. I would ask for her advice about everything. That's how close we were. It's the old saying that what you're looking for is right underneath your nose. I never realized that until about the end of my freshman year.

PIZZO If you had to leave Bloomington what would you miss the most about it?

SUHR I love it here, college towns are great. But I think I would miss my mom and dad the most. In the past year, we have gotten even closer. I have always been a private person, and don't like to talk about myself and what's going



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Errek living his dream, directing the IU offense at Assembly Hall. Photo by Paul Riley, IU Athletics

on in my life. This past four years I wouldn't go home much or call. But being with Rebekah and going through so much I've been able to get closer to my parents as I've gotten older. I've started to realize how close our relationship could be and how much I've needed them and how much they need me. That's one of the reasons I want to stay in Bloomington.

PIZZO If someone was visiting Bloomington for one day and never had been here before what would you tell them to do.

SUHR They should schedule a trip around a basketball game because it doesn't get much better than that. Then after the game they should go to Nick's pub and later The Irish Lion. And the next morning the Village Deli

for breakfast. This is a great town, there are so many things Bloomington has to offer.

PIZZO Looking back on your career, what are your top basketball memories?

SUHR There are three. The first was the moment the crowd started chanting my name for the first time. We were blowing the other team out so I was allowed to shoot and I hit four threes. The chanting was something hard to believe because it wasn't too long before that I was in the crowd doing the same thing. My family just couldn't believe it. The second was the first time I got to play Purdue and we beat them. When I got home my dad and grandfather gave me a hug and I couldn't get the smile off my face. I helped kick Purdue's butt, that

was big time. The third was beating Kentucky last year. We had lost to them every year I was here until then. That was a great win.

PIZZO After the Duke game this year when you played so well and the team almost pulled off the big come-from-behind upset, Coach Mike Krzyzewski came over to you, gave you a hug and talked to you. Later in his press conference he commented on how much he admired you. That has to give you some satisfaction—to be acknowledged by one of the greatest coaches in college basketball history.

SUHR I was crying after the game and he said some real nice things to me, like I didn't need to cry, that I did a really good job helping my team. On a personal level that was a game where I can say to myself I kind of made it. I always dreamed of playing in a game like that. I guess there had always been doubts in my mind about playing against all those great athletes—like do I really belong? But that was a game where I thought I played really well, brought the team back from being way behind, and I could say to myself, all the work had paid off—that I was contributing and up to speed with everyone on the floor. That's up there with those special moments, but really when I think about it the good feelings are shattered by the loss. I go over all the things I could have done to help us win the game.

PIZZO What are your future plans?

SUHR Well, I'm going to be student teaching next year at Jackson Creek Middle School and I just got a position as assistant varsity coach at Bloomington North. The head coach was an assistant when I was there. I'm not ready to say that I'm going to be a coach. I have to try it out and see. I feel grateful to have that opportunity.

PIZZO Will you miss playing next year when you're up in the stands watching your friends on the court?

SUHR I don't think it's going to be difficult because in a way I'm going to be doing something that I've wanted to do all my life that I haven't been able to do and that is to be just a fan. I'm going to be able to sit in my old seats like I used to and sit with my best friend and cheer the guys on and appreciate what they're doing. And I won't have to worry about the things I did as a player, the stress and expectations. Playing here was great because I got to do something I love and I'm happy with what I've done over the last four years. But it's over and I'm fine with that. ✨