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## Flashback

Jim Stewart '76  
*Furman University*

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# Furman athletics

## Flashback

*Paladin great rates high in Pat Conroy's book*

The star of the Furman chapter in Pat Conroy's latest best-seller, *My Losing Season*, is a 55-year-old real estate appraiser and consultant in Suffolk, Va.

That's Dick Esleeck today. Thirty-six years ago, Esleeck was a sophomore at Furman and a guard on the basketball team. And it was on the hardwood that he twice encountered Conroy, then a senior guard at The Citadel.

*My Losing Season* is Conroy's memoir of his final collegiate year, 1966-67, replete with remarkably thorough accounts of the Bulldogs' games during their 8-17 season. When it comes to playing Furman, his most vivid and detailed recollections are of his struggle to stop Esleeck, of whom he writes, "I [made] my own small contribution to a star being born."

With his dashing court style, Esleeck was indeed a standout performer on three Paladin squads. Whether slicing through the lane on one of his patented drives to the hoop, pulling up for a last-second jumper to beat Clemson, scoring 50 against Newberry or provoking Davidson coach Lefty Driesell into a technical foul with his irritatingly effective play, Esleeck wrote his name into Furman's record books, averaging 19.3 points per outing in his 77-game career. Twice an all-Southern Conference performer, he was named the South Carolina Player of the Year after his senior year in 1969 and made the Helms Foundation All-America team, where he kept company with the likes of Lew Alcindor (Kareem Abdul-Jabbar) and Pete Maravich.

Esleeck didn't know he was in the book until a friend insisted that he buy it — without explaining why. But in the months since its October release, he says, old friends and teammates have been "calling out of nowhere."

Naturally, he appreciates Conroy's tip of the cap. "It's really a compliment that the only names he mentions in the chapter are Frank Selvy, Darrell Floyd and mine," he says, invoking the most legendary stars in Furman basketball annals.

His sudden status as a semi-celebrity has also earned him some good-natured ribbing. One friend, borrowing from Conroy's

colorful descriptions, introduced him to an acquaintance as "the snake-like and otherworldly Dick Esleeck." Conroy's praise of Esleeck's defensive skill prompted this comment from Dan Owens '71, a former teammate: "Since when did you play defense?"

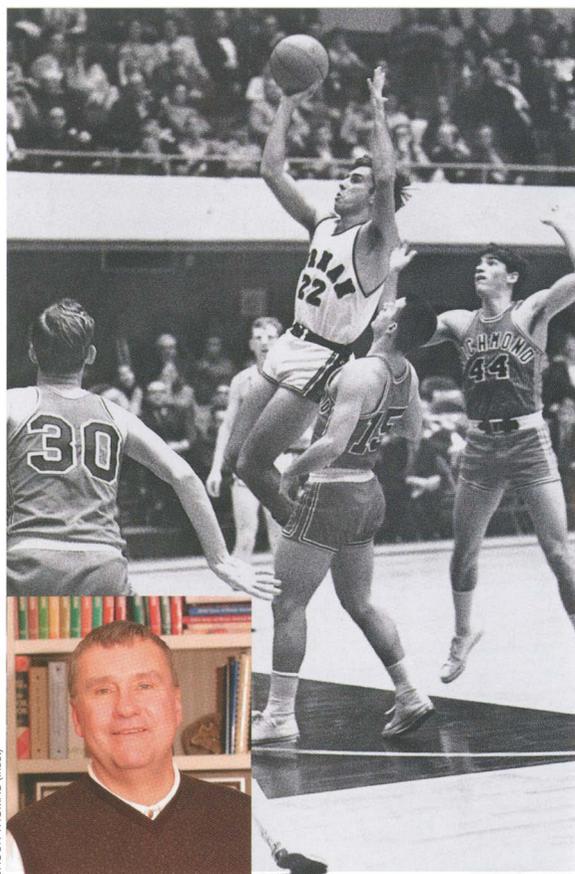
Although he was drafted in a supplemental round by the New York Knicks and by the Denver Nuggets of the now defunct American Basketball Association, a pro career wasn't in the cards for Esleeck. So after graduating he returned to his home area near the Virginia coast, married Mickie Cona '70, his college sweetheart, and put his physical education degree to work as a teacher and coach. Four years later he entered the banking business, and in 1980 he moved on to real estate. Basketball quickly took a back seat to other interests; in fact, he says, some of his friends didn't know about his basketball prowess until they read the book.

Of his Furman days, he has nothing but good things to say. In particular, he points out that he was fortunate to play under Selvy, who was head coach from 1966-70. "You see a lot of players who come in with a big reputation and never get better," he says. "I got better, and Coach Selvy had a lot to do with that."

"But the beautiful thing about my Furman memories," he adds, "is that I have to stretch to recall much about basketball, but I remember plenty of other things at the drop of a pin. I was very involved in student life and in a fraternity [Centaur], and those are the kinds of memories that stand out so much."

As for *My Losing Season*, Esleeck, a fan of Conroy's novels, says it proved to be a "soul-searching" read because of the similarities he shared with Conroy. Besides wearing the same uniform number (22), both endured disappointing senior seasons (Furman finished 9-17 in 1968-69).

More telling, though, was how Esleeck could relate to Conroy's struggle to please his father, a theme that pervades the book. Esleeck's father, Karl A. "Dick" Esleeck, was a legendary sports figure in Virginia, a star athlete at Virginia Tech who went on to an



CHUCK THOMAS (inset)

**In recalling his days on the court, Dick Esleeck says, "I never really looked like a basketball player."**

outstanding career as a high school football coach, winning state championships at three schools. His father died when Esleeck was only 5, but they shared the same name, and he grew up as "Dick Esleeck, son of the late coaching legend."

While Esleeck did not suffer the physical and emotional abuse Conroy endured at the hands of his father, he says, "I think every young boy, deep down inside, wants to please and impress his Dad. Mine wasn't alive, but I had his name. I was proud of him and knew a lot about him, but I always felt an urge to prove myself, to do something on my own."

"We didn't have the conflicts the Conroys had, but there are some parallels there, so I think it was human nature for me to personalize those aspects of the book."

Dick Esleeck went on to make his own name at Furman. Little did he know that in doing so, he would earn the following tribute from one of the most celebrated authors of the last 25 years: "Dick Esleeck, wherever you are, it was an honor to take the court with you."

Well, Mr. Conroy, we found him. And we suspect his sentiments are the same.

— Jim Stewart