Hartford’s new men’s basketball coach proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that honesty is indeed the best policy.

By Jonathan Easterbrook ’87,’90
It is a special day when years of hard work culminate in being named head basketball coach at a Division I college. It is extra special when that job takes you back to family, friends, and fond memories. For Larry Harrison, who grew up in Connecticut, being named the eighth head coach in Hawks’ basketball history last April was a professional and personal dream come true.

“It’s a bit unbelievable,” Harrison says of his return to the state where he earned All-State basketball honors as a senior at Henry Abbott Technical School in Danbury. “Being named a head coach is the culmination of everything I’ve worked for, both as a player and as an assistant coach.”

The return home from a two-decade side trip with stops in Washington, D.C., Cincinnati, and Chicago, has been a big boost to Harrison. Letters of support are arriving regularly from players against whom Harrison competed back in his school days. What was a once-every-year-or-two trip to see Mom has become a 15-minute drive. And what is the dream of every assistant coach has come true. But do not expect a change in title or location to alter the style or beliefs that have helped Harrison gain a reputation as one of America’s top recruiters.

“You must have your own personality and be yourself,” Harrison says. “One of my goals with potential recruits is that they see me as honest, sincere, and caring. I feel that the greatest gift that I can give them is to make sure that when they finish their playing days, they can walk out with choices and opportunities.

I think young people—anyone—can see through someone who is not sincere about what they are saying. I am only going to tell them what I believe in. They may not like or agree with everything I have to say, but I tell them that’s okay, because the final outcome is that I want them to be successful young men.”

Among those believing in Harrison over the past few years have been some of the nation’s top incoming college players. His 1996 recruiting class at the University of Cincinnati was regarded as the best in the nation. Two years later, different setting, same result: DePaul University’s recruiting class was ranked number one in America by the Sporting News.

At Cincinnati, working under Bob Huggins, Harrison recruited and coached future NBA players Nick Van Exel, Corie Blount, Dontonio Wingfield, Danny Fortson, and Kenyon Martin, the number one pick in the 2000 NBA draft. During his eight years with the program, the Bearcats posted a 192-71 record and won six conference championships. Within two years of arriving at DePaul, Harrison and head coach Pat Kennedy turned a program that had recorded only three victories the season prior to their arrival into 18 wins and an NIT bid. Since 1989, Harrison’s teams have earned seven bids to the NCAA Tournament and three invitations to the NIT. It is the Final Four trip in 1992 with Cincinnati that will remain forever in his memory.

“Walking out onto that floor in Minneapolis and seeing 40,000 people there to watch you practice—that was quite a rush,” Harrison says. Scoring 1,000 points in high school was another basketball milestone for Harrison, who expects to add to his list of memorable moments in the years to come.

“I am very happy to be part of a university that has such great support from its president [Walter Harrison, no relation],” Harrison says. “As a coach of any sport, it is great to know that the president of your university is not only an avid sports fan but also an advocate for athletics who feels that sports should be part of the mainstream of the institution.

“There’s no timetable on when we’re going to get it done, but we will get it done,” Harrison says. “The University of Hartford has never been to the NCAA Tournament, and my goal is to get us there. I want to develop this program to the point where major Division I schools see the University of Hartford and say, we don’t want to play them.”

Larry Harrison won’t take it personally. He’ll just see it as a sure sign that the Hawks have progressed to the next level—that his honesty, sincerity, and hard work have helped jumpstart another college basketball program.

This time, as head coach. This time, in his own backyard.