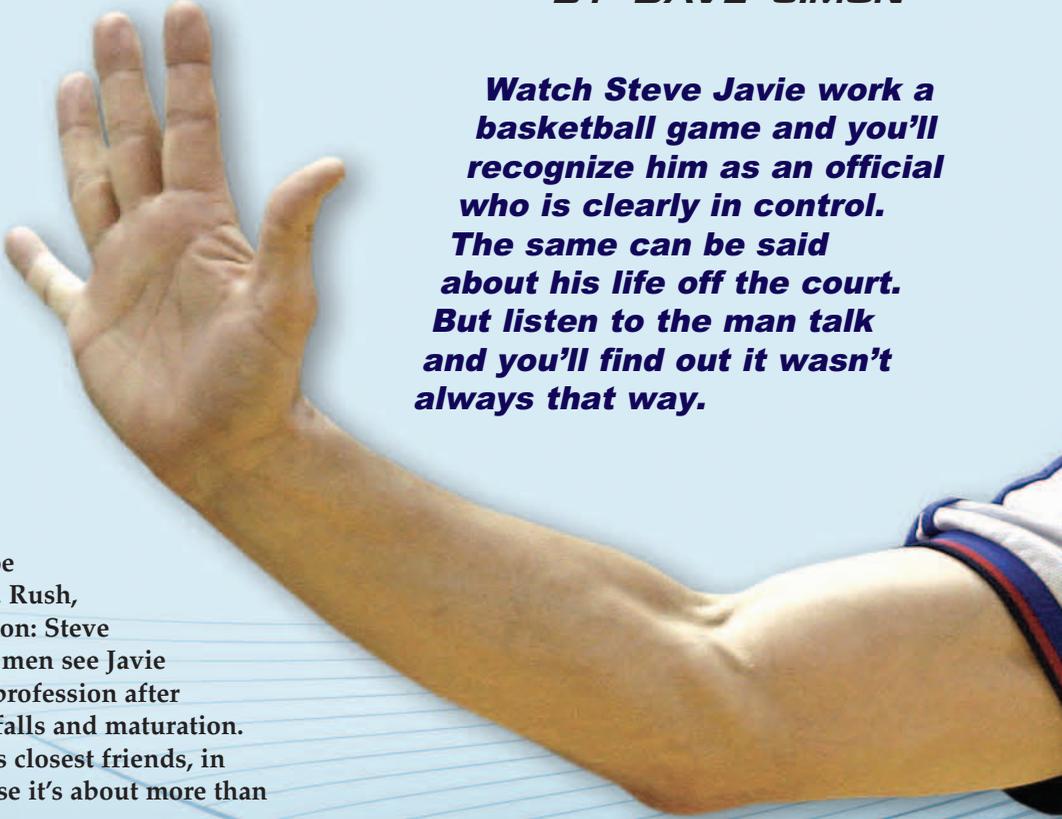


STEVE JAVIE

ONE STAND-UP GUY

BY DAVE SIMON



Watch Steve Javie work a basketball game and you'll recognize him as an official who is clearly in control. The same can be said about his life off the court. But listen to the man talk and you'll find out it wasn't always that way.

Talk to NBA officiating greats Joe Crawford and Ed T. Rush, and you come to one conclusion: Steve Javie is simply the best. Both men see Javie ascending to the top of their profession after many years of hard work, pitfalls and maturation.

For Crawford, one of Javie's closest friends, in particular, it's personal because it's about more than officiating. It's about life.

"I've learned so much from the guy," said Crawford. "Beyond being best friends, he's taught me how to live life off the court. When I tell him that, he looks at me like I'm nuts. He epitomizes what an NBA ref should be on and off the court. He has no idea how much he's helped my life off the court."

Crawford calls Javie "the best official I've ever worked with." He outlines three requirements for greatness: rules knowledge, play calling and game management. "You can be a good official with one of those qualities, great with two, and only Javie has all three. I certainly don't," Crawford adds.

Crawford is self-critical of his game management skills, citing Javie as the example for how to keep yourself under control: "We'd have a perfect staff if everyone looked at how he handles himself."

Rush echoes Crawford, saying simply, "Steve is the best official in the world right now."

No bones about it. But it hasn't happened overnight.



DREAMS OF PLAYING

Javie had no goals about officiating in the NBA after high school, nor about following his father Stan into the NFL, where he officiated for 30 years. Instead, he followed his right arm.

"I was the kind of kid that never even thought about becoming a referee. I told my mom, 'I'm going to be a baseball player, a pitcher. I'm going to sign a big contract and buy you a house,' that kind of stuff. I guess maybe I saw my dad officiating and how crazy the fans were," Steve relates.

Javie played college baseball, then spent one year in the minors with the Baltimore Orioles minor league system before being released. Like others with a major league dream, it came up against reality — an arm injury.

"Going back for spring training my second year, I had arm troubles and they said, 'See ya,' and released me," Javie recalled. "You realize as a pitcher you're a dime a dozen. It was kind of devastating because as a kid, ever since I was nine years old in Little League, I wanted to become a major league pitcher, and my dream was over."

The sports dream on hold, Javie landed a job with Johnson & Johnson, working their baby products line. Despite what he describes as a "great company with great benefits," Johnson & Johnson wasn't what Javie had in mind. Instead, he found himself focusing on his passions. His introspection led back to the diamond.

"After a year, I started thinking, 'Do I really want to be doing this?' Even as immature as young men are at 22 years old, I was mature enough to sit down and think, let's try to find something I really like to do," Javie said. "What do I like to do? What can I do in sports? I can't play anymore, obviously. Coaching, I was never into. I thought, 'Let me try umpiring.'"

AN UMPIRE'S UMPIRE

Most officials would give anything to have one shot to get to the pros. Javie almost had two. He moved toward umpiring baseball in 1978 while also officiating basketball. It might have been the NL or AL that got his services rather than the NBA if not for a few twists and turns.

At age 22, Javie had never umpired a game when he attended Bill Kinnamon's umpire school with money he had saved up.

In his first days umpiring baseball, then-major league umpires Richie Garcia and the late John McSherry were walking around the diamond when one of the scheduled umpires got hurt.



COURTESY OF STEVE JAVIE

"They said, 'Javie, ever work behind the plate?' I'm doing my calisthenics and say, 'Yes sir.' You're not going to say no," Javie said.

Assuming the home plate slot, Javie found out that ex-major league pitcher Robin Roberts, who also coached Javie in American Legion ball in Philadelphia, was one of the coaches in the game.

"We had a situation in the game. There's a guy on first and someone overthrows the bag," explained Javie. "We have a rule situation where the runner thinks he can score and I'm putting him back to third. The runner yells at me like, 'That's bull----,' or something like that. It's my second day at camp and I throw this guy. Robin Roberts is like, 'You can't do that!' I'm walking behind home plate and thinking, 'Whoops, did I just end my career before it started?'"

The career wasn't ended, but perhaps a reputation was born. The next morning during the rules session, Javie said that Kinnamon had him stand up in front of the assembled group of 100 or so aspiring umpires and "everybody gave me a round of applause, so I thought ejecting people is great now, and I'm the big guy on campus.

"That day all the major league umpires walked by me and said, 'Don't take any crap from those guys. That's the way to go.' I'm thinking, 'I'm getting off on the right foot here,' though obviously I just did it out of reaction."

Even with little experience going into umpire school, Javie was selected to work in the Single-A Florida State League.

"So I'd be umpiring baseball in the summer and go back in the winter and be in my local high school association and work basketball. And I was getting any kind of odd job," Javie said. "I worked anything from UPS to serving papers. It didn't matter."

Javie umpired in the Florida State League for two years, hoping for a shot at the Double-A Eastern League. "In my third year, I was the only one drafted by the Eastern League. It was too good to be true," Javie recalled.

It turned out to be just that. When Javie arrived, he was sent back to the Single-A Florida State League for his third season.

His godfather, John Stevens, who at that time was supervisor of umpire development for the minor leagues and a former major league umpire, was tasked with breaking the news to Javie that schedule changes would prevent Javie's move to the Eastern League.

"He (Stevens) said, 'All you saw when you were a kid is your dad and me at the top of the game. You saw us working in the big time. You saw us working in the playoffs. You saw us

Javie umpired in the Single-A Florida State League before pursuing basketball as a career. Javie says he still has an "umpire's mentality."

LIKE FATHER LIKE SON, ALMOST

working in the Super Bowl. You never saw us struggle to get where we are. You're struggling now, so hang in there," Javie recalled.

Lesson received. Javie hung in at the Single-A level, but then there was a players' strike — a "lost year," as he terms it. No umpires moved up. It made Javie think again about his career.

BASEBALL TO BASKETBALL

Javie was working games in the Florida State League with Jerry Layne, who went on to become and still is a major league umpire, and they had developed a great friendship.

"We were having a great time enjoying each other's company on and off the field," Javie said. "And then George McDonald (then president of the league) called to split us up. He said a younger crew was struggling and he needed the experience that Jerry and I had to help them out. I told Mr. McDonald, 'I know you're the president, but I'm not agreeing to this. I'm going to be a bit selfish here, but I don't want to be split up from Jerry.'"

Instead of switching crews after their series had ended as McDonald said, Javie told McDonald he was quitting after the series.

"I don't know what came over me," said Javie. "I really don't. I mean it was such a rash decision, not even thought out."

Though rash, Javie stuck with his decision. McSherry called, then-minor league supervisor Walt Peters called and a lot of others called to try to talk Javie out of leaving. But his mind was made up. His baseball umpiring career was done.

"What had been creeping into my subconscious at the time was the fact that I'd been invited to a couple of NBA camps," said Javie. He couldn't attend them at the time because he was working baseball. "Maybe if I was in the Eastern League, I never would have given basketball a shot."

Javie left baseball in June of 1981, and the week he got home he contacted NBA legend Earl Strom, whom his dad had known for years. Strom got in touch with then-CBA supervisor Cecil Watkins and told him about the young Javie. Javie received a few games in Philadelphia and, working in front of Watkins, Javie was able to get his foot in the door with the Baker League in the Philadelphia area. He was hired by the CBA in the fall of 1981. Javie worked in the CBA for five years before moving up.

Is there still an umpire's mentality that defines basketball referee Steve Javie?

"Absolutely," said Javie. "It's probably my biggest strength and also my biggest weakness. I was a red ass. Probably still am but it's taken me 17 or 18 years to get it under control so that when that moment in the game happens, I'm not lost for the next four minutes in the game. It's a delicate balance and I've worked hard at controlling it."



Steve Javie, circa 1988

Like many other officials whose fathers have donned the stripes or pulled on the blue shirt, Steve Javie had a powerful and positive example in his father Stan, an NFL official for 30 years. Stan Javie, who died in 2002, was a field judge and back judge in the NFL from 1951-80. He worked four Super Bowls, including Super Bowl XIV that marked the final game in his career.

Yet Steve didn't follow his dad into football, instead embarking on a dual-track officiating career that eventually wound its way to the NBA.

Javie loved hearing about officiating and talking to his dad's counterparts. The travel,

his dad's love of the competitiveness and the friendship with fellow officials all cast a positive eye in the sky. "When I turned 16, I took turns with my brother picking him up from his games. It was a right of passage," Javie said.

Half his heart was in the NFL because of his dad and the other NFL referees. The other half was more objective.

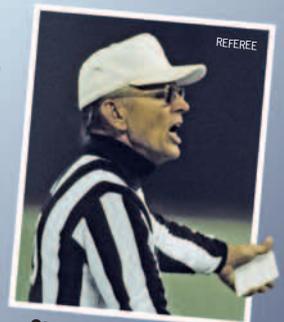
"Dad's voice would be hoarse from yelling at the coaches on the sidelines. He just loved it," Javie said. "But he always asked me, 'When are you going to do football, Steve?' I said, 'Dad, I'm not going to do football.' He asked why. 'I can't win, Dad.' He got a little pissed off at me. I said, 'Dad, you've done everything. How could I win?'"

"I'll succeed because of you or fail in spite of you. He said, 'Try it.' I said, 'Dad, I ain't trying it. You did it all in football and Uncle John (Stevens, a former major league umpire) did it all in baseball.'"

Ed Rush, a former supervisor of NBA officials, knows the respect Steve has for his father, and the influence Stan had on Steve. "Two of our best officials in the NBA had fathers who officiated in other sports — Steve and Joe Crawford. It's not a coincidence. There was a tremendous motivation from Stan for Steve to do the right thing," Rush said.

"What kind of official was my dad?" Javie asks. "He's a guy you'd go to war with. He had a passion. He was probably the official that everyone strives to be, but can't, because you have to be yourself. I can't be a Stan Javie and you can't be, but if you took all the characteristics and makeup, you'd want to be that kind of official."

"He stuck up for his partners. He taught his partners. He was humble."



Stan Javie, circa 1978



(From left) Steve's late mother Stella, Steve, his late father Stan and wife Mary-ellen.

ON THE COURT

Javie arrived in the NBA in 1986 with a self-described “quick trigger finger.” He had a game in 1991 in which he even ejected the Bullets mascot. He also had a now public run-in with Miami Heat Coach Pat Riley in which Javie was fined \$1,000 by the league in February 2003. Riley was fined \$50,000 for his comments. Yet 21 seasons and more than 1,300 regular season games later, he’s still doing what he loves. And the league has taken notice, as Javie has officiated in the NBA Finals for 13 consecutive seasons.

Fellow NBA referee Bob Delaney has worked with Javie and developed a relationship off the court. “It’s comical how announcers refer to him as tough or hard-nosed,” says Delaney. “Confrontation and handling problems is what we do, and Steve is one of the best at it. He is an all-time great partner, on and off the court. Steve is a gentleman and a class act.”

“Steve is misunderstood in the way he disciplines and takes care of his games,” says Ken Mauer, friend and fellow official who entered the NBA the same year as Javie. “Saying he holds a grudge for a player or coach mischaracterizes him. While the average fan or coach may say, ‘He’s out to get us,’ the reality is Steve’s right most of the time, and those are the types of guys working the NBA Finals.”

Mauer relates an example early in their respective NBA officiating careers that explains more deeply Javie’s complexity. “It was in our second or third year. He’d been giving out a lot of techs and ejections. We were talking on the phone and Steve was thinking he’d get fired. He goes, ‘They’re not coming at Jake (O’Donnell), Darell (Garretson) or Earl (Strom), they’re coming at us.’ Even at that early stage of Steve’s career, he was getting a head start on how to control a game,” Mauer said.

Ed Rush, currently a recruiting and development specialist for the NBA and his former boss, notices an evolution in Javie. While he agrees on Javie’s strong-willed nature,

he adds that Steve learned from his father Stan to grow from his officiating experiences.

“There’s been a tremendous maturation in Steve the past seven to eight years,” Rush said. “He picks his battles with coaches and players. He runs a game without having to address every comment directed his way.”

As for the play-calling, Rush will tell you he’s in a class all his own. He calls Javie a “phenomenal play caller. Steve sees a 97 mph fastball and he hits it. He doesn’t need to take batting practice for 45 minutes beforehand.”

Javie, on the other hand, credits his teachers: “My mentors have made me what I am today. I’m a little part of each of them. It’s their success in teaching me.”

Though the names are too numerous, Javie cites Darell Garretson (retired NBA referee and the supervisor of officials who hired Javie), Joe Crawford, Jack Madden (retired NBA referee), Wally Rooney (retired NBA referee), Rick Reed, a current major league umpire, as major influences on his career. And, of course, his dad, Stan.

“Joe Crawford was my first mentor and is still a mentor today,” Javie said. “Jack Madden and I would sit in the car and talk about the game afterwards. Wally Rooney talked about the game of life. Rick Reed taught me about how to work with the crew — the ultimate crew chief, putting the crew ahead of himself.”

OFF THE COURT

While Javie has a reputation as an intense hardheaded individual on the court, it’s clearly not the perception given by others close to Javie.

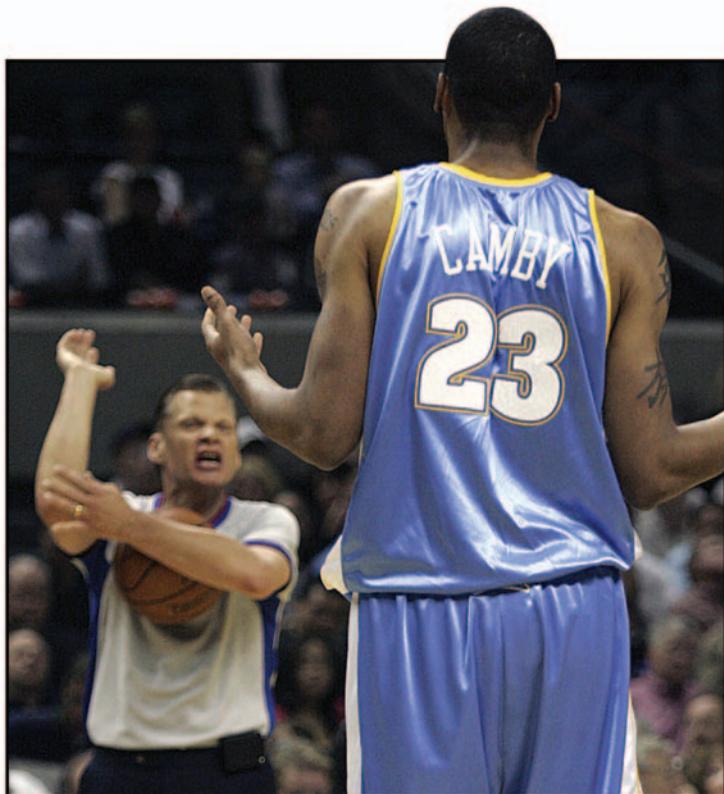
“People don’t know officials,” Mauer explains. “They think they do. Because we have to be disciplinary in what we do, there are people who don’t like us. Steve is one of the finest men I know.”

Lamell McMorris, spokesperson for the National Basketball Referees Association, sees tenacity in Javie. “Steve advocates for his colleagues,” said McMorris. “I remember an incident in which one of his colleagues was removed for a ‘bad call.’ These guys are human, they make mistakes, and Steve said, ‘We have to stand up and fight.’ He was so vehement that I had to calm him down, and let him know it was important we show unity.

“I like that about Steve — he stands up at the right time. He picks his battles, but does the right thing on and off the court.”

Mary-ellen, his wife of 16 years, heard about several sides of Steve before getting to know him.

Javie indicates which foul Denver Nuggets forward Marcus Camby committed. While he might have been known for a quick trigger in his early days in the league, Javie is highly regarded by many coaches and players.



Always the consummate professional, Javie even looks the part in a recent charity outing he participated in (left) with fellow NBA referee Bob Delaney. Shown presenting a check to Brother Bill McDonald (center), Steve and his wife Mary-ellen (right) have developed a charitable foundation to help the less fortunate. The gala event has included dinner and dancing and the funds raised have benefited numerous charities.



COURTESY OF BOB DELANEY



COURTESY OF STEVE JAVIE



COURTESY OF STEVE JAVIE

Already interested because of his personality and great looks, she was informed by a male coworker and friend at Philadelphia International Airport that Steve was the “nicest guy in the world.” “I thought, ‘Now I’m really intrigued. I have to meet the nicest guy in the world’ because men don’t say that about other men,” Mary-ellen laughs.

She flirted for awhile with no response, as Steve took flights to and from games. She heard later Steve had given himself a basketball season to ask her out.

Javie and Mary-ellen were 35 and 31 respectively when they finally had their first date in 1990, and as Mary-ellen says, “One date and I knew he was the one.” They were married in August 1991. She liked that Steve still lived at home, having morning coffee with his mother, Stella. “He worshipped his mother and I imagined that would transfer to me and I was right,” Mary-ellen said.

“But he’s so much more than that. He has a soft, sweet side. He’s so passionate about everything, he gets misty during *Extreme Home Makeover*. I have never seen the tough side of him at home and I’m quite certain the players and coaches have no idea he’s actually a very gentle man.”

TRIAL AND GROWTH

On and off the court, Javie has always had a deep respect for his family and his family’s name. So when Javie and 15 other NBA officials were accused of tax evasion in the late 1990s, Javie fought back. He was the only NBA official to fight the charges and be found not guilty. The verdict came in January 1999.

“My job is about my name. My dad taught me your name is the most important thing. I had to fight for my name.

Javie’s maturation on the court can be seen in his exchanges with players and coaches. Evident to all is his love of the game and officiating.

“I didn’t do anything wrong. I didn’t intentionally do anything wrong, and luckily the jury saw it that way.”

While Javie doesn’t dwell on the case, it has helped shape him. He and the other NBA officials were charged with failing to report as income the difference between the first-class tickets issued by the NBA and the coach tickets they decided to use. Javie argued that he didn’t owe taxes on the more than \$84,000 in income over three years because the money was value earned from frequent flyer miles, which are not taxed.

“We were all supportive of Steve during his trial,” Delaney says. “He doesn’t dwell on it, but it was tough for him. He was testifying for three to four days and that is mental exhaustion, which can also affect you physically.”

Mary-ellen helped pull Javie through the trial.

“Steve has incredible integrity and knew he needed to fight for what was right, the principle of the issue. It was awful to be accused and face possible jail time, but the charges were so wrong — they were trying to make an example of the refs,” Mary-ellen explains.

Javie calls the trial “the hardest two weeks” of his life. “I wouldn’t wish it on anyone,” Javie said. “Now I see now why people don’t go to trial because the stress and strain of that was crazy.



ALLEN FREDRICKSON

"I believe this about everything in life: When tough or bad things happen in your life, a lot of good comes out of it. And the two things that came out of it were so unbelievable to me, that had such an effect on my life, were my wife and my faith.

"My wife was with me 100 percent. She didn't care if I lost my job. She didn't care if I went to jail. She said, 'Steve, what's the worst-case scenario? I'm here for you. We lose your job, we lose our house, we'll pick up.' I had love like that.

"When the verdict came in, the place went bonkers after the first not guilty," Javie continues. A big party ensued, including a skit with friends playing the judge and attorney. The support humbled Javie. "When people go through tough times, even with crewmates now, I say maybe in a year or two you'll realize why you went through it," he said.

GIVING BACK

Javie relied on his friends, family and officiating colleagues to pick him up when the trial ended. Over the years though, it's often been Javie who lifts others.

Through his efforts of charity fundraising, Javie strives to help others. His fundraising golf tournament and dinner/dance, now in its 10th year, raises money for a number of causes in the Philadelphia area. It's a two-day event that includes a silent auction. It has netted close to \$1 million for others since its inception. The money goes to groups that help the homeless, foster care, disabled adults or orphanages.

Javie relates how after the first year, when funds were raised, he went down to North Philadelphia to present a check to Brother Bill McDonald. He was a Christian brother whom Javie had met

"MY DAD TAUGHT ME YOUR NAME IS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING. I HAD TO FIGHT FOR MY NAME."

at a young age through his uncle, a monsignor in the Catholic church.

"We gave him a check for something like \$40,000 or \$50,000," Javie said. "Here's a guy who's probably the closest person I've ever met to a saint. All this stuff he was doing for people — feeding the hungry, getting the poor clothes — and he was so humble. His humility got to me.

"You couldn't not want to help the guy. When I presented him the check, he basically started crying. He couldn't believe he had the money."

Steve and Mary-ellen plan to continue the event, shifting money to new causes, finding where the money can make a difference in the lives of the less fortunate.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF COURT

There are a host of qualities Javie embodies that have taken him to the top of the game. But what if it hadn't been in officiating?

Oddly enough, Javie sees some qualities an official would take to another court: The court of law.

"This is going to sound really weird. I've always wanted to be a lawyer, and even more so since my trial," Javie said. "I found it really, really intriguing, the law.

"It would be challenging every night trying to convince the jury that that your argument is the way." Though he wonders if he would have made it through law school, odds are with his drive, Javie would succeed.

"The adrenaline that we feel every night on the court has to translate to the adrenaline in the courtroom. You've got to be on your game — having a high level of concentration and knowing when to object or not object to the arguments," Javie said.

Javie will likely not be giving an argument in a courtroom anytime soon. But his ability to handle them on the hardwood has taken him to the top of the NBA.

A remark shared from his late father sums it up best, "At the end of your career, it's not what players, coaches or GMs think about you. It's what your peers think about you."

Dave Simon officiated high school and college basketball for 18 years in the Washington, D.C. area and Nebraska. He currently lives in Grapevine, Texas. ■

