



Doctor Encouraged in New-Found Faith, Competes in AIA Puerto Rico Basketball Tour

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As a 32-year-old physician, Dr. Nitin Paul Dhiman might have felt odd playing basketball on an AIA team of college players, but that is not the case.

Dhiman has had a lot of different experiences in the sport of basketball, previously playing professionally in the Dominican Republic and playing with the BTG Express, a team in the 2012 Southern California Summer Pro League.



It was while playing for the BTG Express in the summer of 2012 that he met Steffond Johnson, a former NBA player and the owner of the BTG Express. He became a friend to Dhiman and began to have spiritual conversations with him.

"I grew up in Kansas City, Mo., with East Indian parents who embraced the East Indian culture," says Dhiman. "I did not grow up as a Christian."

"Nitin had questions [about the Christian faith], and at times it was hard for him to comprehend that Jesus paid it all [by dying on the cross for our mistakes]," says Johnson. "Christians are not perfect ... Christians too often try to force the issue, but it's a process. I let him make his own decision."

When the Summer Pro League came to its conclusion, Dhiman returned to Puerto Rico where he was living and working as an emergency medicine doctor. It was his new-found faith in Jesus Christ

that inspired him to pursue being a part of the Athletes in Action basketball tour to Puerto Rico during the summer of 2013.

"It wasn't just me doing all of the work; I had people pushing me in the right direction"



“Looking into the AIA tour, I knew I wanted to play competitively and wanted to get to know some of the guys who had accepted Christ. When I started to embrace Christ, opportunities with AIA seemed natural for me to look into, with both basketball and Christ being concentrated on,” says Dhiman. In December 2012, he contacted Craig Sladek, an AIA staff member and director of the tour.

“Paul called me to express interest in being a member of the tour to Puerto Rico. I was a bit skeptical at first, about how Paul [at the age of 32] would connect with the [younger, college] guys on the team, if he were to join our tour,” says Sladek. “But I called Dr. Bobby Axtmayer, the AIA director for Puerto Rico, and encouraged him to get in contact with Paul.”

No one could have expected what happened the very next day.

“I had just checked into my hotel room for the annual physician’s convention that takes place every

December in Puerto Rico, and after talking to Craig, I had a phone conversation with Dr. Axtmayer ... I don’t think he initially knew I was a doctor, but we were both in attendance at the convention,” says Dhiman. “We got together for breakfast the next day. It was an unreal experience, and it seemed so effortless to get this set up.”

By January, Dhiman was told he would be included as a member of the basketball tour.

In preparation

“Dr. Axtmayer got me in touch with a local pastor in Puerto Rico and I started attending his church. I wanted to know more about the Bible, and I needed someone to teach me,” says Dhiman.

The pastor provided Dhiman with various books to begin reading and discussing.

“He was teaching me in a very methodical way, he didn’t want to force-feed me,” says Dhiman. “I remain in contact with him today, and I am thankful for his continued support.”

In mid-February, Johnson invited Dhiman to visit him and his family in Houston to attend the NBA All-Star Weekend festivities.

“My family just showed him love and showed him that we cared for him,” says Johnson. “I shared my faith with him and let him see the realness of my family.”

“I’ve had great conversations with Steffond,” says Dhiman. “I’ve seen how Christ has

strengthened him and given his family a peaceful and stable life, enduring different trials and tribulations. It's been a great example for me."

The tour

"The first couple of days were tough for me. Everyone initially seemed to want to show the coach what they have on the court," says Dhiman. "I'm the opposite, I tend to ease my way into my role on the team, and I had to take on a different role as the elder statesman."

Things got better for him as the tour progressed.

"People gave me insight on the Bible and on my relationship with Christ, and I was able to 'pass the torch' to the younger guys who were interested in pursuing basketball professionally, based on my experiences," says Dhiman.

"He fit in, and beyond," says Sladek. "He was fun, engaging, and he knew the Puerto Rican culture. There was never a sense of, 'Why is this guy on the team?' He could hold his own on the court too."

"He's a great player, great shooter," says Johnson. "He has a high basketball IQ, and his work ethic and attitude are superb."

The tour also gave Dhiman an opportunity to share his faith story with a larger audience.

"I shared my [story] in Puerto Rico in a town where I had previously practiced medicine, and I had treated some of the members of the crowd," says Dhiman. "I felt like I was in a familiar crowd and was not nervous."

"It was the next to last game, and the guys had been sharing their [faith stories] at clinics and games," says Sladek. "I think the guys on the team set an example for him. It was really refreshing to hear, and he was very open and honest about where he was at spiritually."

"Hopefully my story can benefit others"

"God [had Dhiman] in the right place at the right time, and AIA has helped him in his faith," says Johnson.

Dhiman has recently made the move to Brooklyn, N.Y., where he is receiving internal medicine training from the staff at a community hospital. In his words, he is "taking a step back to benefit his career in the long run." He had been an emergency medicine doctor in Puerto Rico before coming to Brooklyn for training in internal medicine.

"Paul recently gave me a call to see if I knew of anyone who would be good to get in touch with in Brooklyn," says Sladek. "We're trying to connect him with a community of believers that can continue to provide him encouragement. I gave him a name, and two days later Dr. Paul is having dinner with him."

"People were asking me why I'd want to be in Brooklyn, because I was pretty well established in Puerto Rico," says Dhiman. "I see a lot of negative energy here, but in despair there is still hope. Hopefully my story can benefit others."

By Jon Erny, AIA Communications Intern

Photo: Dr. Nitin Paul Dhiman (left) poses with Tory Fernandez, a basketball player at West Texas A&M who was part of the tour to Puerto Rico.

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