

Former NBA All-Star inspires ASU students in fireside chat

Grant Hill shares highlights of his career on and off the court during Tempe campus visit

By Marshall Terrill , ASU News
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A Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Famer and celebrated former Phoenix Sun said Monday that professional sports bring many benefits.

They foster camaraderie and lifelong friendships, fuel a competitive spirit that can lead to success and even provide opportunities outside of the world of sports.

However, he said the most powerful outcome of his craft is its unique ability to unite people.

“The real power of sports is bringing people together from all walks of life, from different sides of the aisles, different ethnicities, all cheering their team on,” said Grant Hill, a former seven-time NBA All-Star, Olympian, broadcaster, filmmaker and co-owner of four professional sports franchises. “For two hours, people can forget their differences and come together, have passion and joy and excitement — and sometimes disappointment — for their team, and that’s real powerful.”

Hosted by the [sports business program](#) in the W. P. Carey School of Business, Hill’s Jan. 27 appearance at the Tempe campus Memorial Union came at the invitation of an ASU employee and sports enthusiast.

“Grant Hill has achieved incredible success both on and off the court. I knew he would be an inspiring speaker for our students,” said [Elana Kutz](#), managing director of student and external affairs for the sports business degree program. “He seamlessly transitioned from professional athlete to sports analyst and team owner, which is truly impressive. Throughout his career, Grant has overcome injuries, showcased strong leadership and demonstrated a deep passion for community involvement, all while remaining humble.”

Kutz had a chance encounter with Hill at Las Vegas' Harry Reid International Airport approximately three weeks ago and the two struck up a conversation. She extended an invitation to speak to ASU students the next time Hill was in Phoenix. Kutz said Hill reached out to her last Thursday, letting her know that he'd be in town to honor Olympic and Suns players Devin Booker and Kevin Durant before the start of the Suns' Jan. 27 game, and would be available to meet with students earlier in the day.

With only a few days to arrange the event, Kutz organized a wide-ranging fireside chat before approximately 125 ASU students studying law, journalism, business and sports degrees.

They discussed Hill's upbringing in Northern Virginia, back-to-back college championships with Duke University, his 19-year NBA career, serious injuries, life after sports and advice to students embarking on a career working for professional sports franchises.

"I've always dreamed of being a professional athlete," said Hill, whose father was Calvin Hill, a celebrated National Football League running back who played for 13 seasons and was the 1969 Rookie of the Year. "I have great memories of being on the sidelines and in the locker room, so I always wanted to play."

Hill said his father wouldn't allow him to play football until high school, but he did play soccer and basketball. He was gifted at both but "fell in love with basketball" in middle school.

"College basketball was on the rise and there was this new thing called ESPN that gave 24-hour coverage to sports and games," Hill said. "The NBA was also really starting to take off in the 80s, so my love affair with basketball started then."

The 17-year-old high school All-American had multiple college scholarship offers his senior year, including at Georgetown and the University of North Carolina. He chose Duke University in 1990 because of its heralded coach, Mike Krzyzewski.

"'Coach K' was an incredible leader and went to West Point, ended up coaching at West Point, which bred leaders," Hill said. "I've always said that whatever industry he would've pursued, he would have been a dominant leader."

The same could be said for Hill, who started in 31 games his first year, earned freshman All-American honors and developed a game reputation with a solid performance in the NCAA Tournament. In the following two years (1991 and 1992), his Duke teams — who included key players such as Christian Laettner, Bobby Hurley, Antonio Lang and Brian Davis — won back-to-back college championships.

Hill said while those teams had talent, they also had cohesion, courtesy of Krzyzewski's leadership.

“He (Kryzewski) would talk about how a hand has five fingers, much like five players on a basketball court,” said Hill, who became the first player in Atlantic Coast Conference history to collect more than 1,900 points, 700 rebounds, 400 assists, 200 steals and 100 blocked shots. “And when those fingers are open, they don’t have any force. But when you bring those fingers together to form a fist, now you have force and can strike.

“When we were in a close game and it was down the stretch, Coach K would talk about the fist in the huddles. It was a trigger word to remind us of who we are, remind us of our values and remind us of how we’re gonna figure out how to win together.”

After graduating from Duke in 1994 as a history major, Hill was drafted by the Detroit Pistons with the third overall pick in the NBA draft. The following year he was co-winner of the 1995 NBA Rookie of the Year with Jason Kidd and went on to become a member of the 1996 USA Olympic Team, which won a gold medal in Atlanta.

In his first six seasons in the NBA, Hill averaged 21.6 points, 7.9 rebounds and 6.3 assists per game, and made the Eastern Conference All-Star Team five times.

But by 2000, a severe ankle injury not only changed the trajectory of his career but almost led to amputation because of a staph infection.

“It was really just a dark time,” Hill said. “Then I got healthy and was able to come out here to the desert in Phoenix and play with Steve Nash and Amar’e Stoudemire. I was a different player in a different role but had great fulfillment just enjoying basketball again.”

That transition from star to role player not only extended Hill’s career but taught him that adaptation was also critical after a life in sports. Hill’s professional basketball career ended in 2013 at the age of 40. He said it took him a few years to transition to the next phase of his life.

“I was always a bit paranoid knowing it was going to end at some point,” Hill said. “And then what do you do when it’s over?”

Hill said he reconnected with his alma mater, the Duke University Alumni Association, meeting with old and new associates alike, using those opportunities to make connections and cultivate relationships.

“I really had no agenda,” Hill said. “I just wanted to learn from high achievers, people in different industries that might inspire or educate me, or whatever. In the process, I expanded my network.”

That network Hill assembled became the ownership group that purchased the NBA’s Atlanta Hawks in 2015, and in which he was vice chairman. Hill is also a part owner of the Orlando SC of Major League Soccer (MLS) and Orlando Pride of the National Women’s Soccer League (NWSL)

and part of an ownership group that purchased the National Baseball League's Baltimore Orioles in 2024.

Many in the audience, who are planning on careers with professional sports franchises, wanted to know from Hill how to get a foot in the door.

"If you are interested in a career in the sports ecosystem, now is a great time because there are so many opportunities," Hill said. "Everybody is constantly looking for great talent and young energy. But you're going to have to hustle. You're going to have to get out there and work. You're going to have to show up. Roll up your sleeves and get after it.

"If you have smart people who are ambitious, who are go-getters and are willing to saw wood and grind, I'm telling you, it can be a fulfilling and rewarding career."

That message was music to Joe Ceccarelli's ears. A JD and Master of Sports Law and Business student, Ceccarelli came to hear Grant dispense some wisdom he could use.

"I came today because I thought it would be cool to listen to someone that made it as a player, made it as an owner and has forged a path in the sports industry," Ceccarelli said. "I find it most interesting when he spoke about how he was on the board of Campbell's Soup and how sports and business merge."

Togin Akinsipe, a first-year sports business major said she also wanted insights on Hill's sports and business careers.

"I often think about how athletes have to support themselves after they retire if they don't have a big sports contract," Akinsipe said. "So I thought it was cool how he was thinking about his post-career the whole time and set himself up for success."

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



Grant Hill, member of the NBA Hall of Fame, sports broadcaster and professional team owner, held a fireside chat with Elana Kutz, managing director of student and external affairs for ASU's sports business undergraduate degree program, in front of 100 students on Monday, Jan. 27, at the Memorial Union on the Tempe campus. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

Text image(s)



Grant Hill snaps a selfie with the Sports Business Scholars executive board in front of 100 students on Monday, Jan. 27, at the Memorial Union on the Tempe campus. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News



Former NBA basketball player Grant Hill speaks to more than 100 ASU students during a fireside chat on Jan. 27 at the Memorial Union on the Tempe campus. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News