

College Basketball Player Hopes to Become a Pentecostal Minister

Whether or not he's drafted by the NBA, Roger Powell Jr. says his ultimate goal is to pursue full-time Christian service

Roger Powell Jr. helped lead the University of Illinois basketball team to the top this season, but the senior forward believes he has a higher calling. In October, Powell, 22, received his minister's license at Mount Zion Full Gospel Tabernacle, a Pentecostal church in his hometown of Joliet, Ill. The license allows him to preach.

"I want to show myself approved and study the Bible," Powell told Charisma in December, shortly after the Fighting Illini was named the No. 1 college basketball team in the nation.

"Once I get ordained, I want to let the Lord lead me—be it as a pastor, evangelist, youth minister or something else," added Powell, who preached his first sermon on being a "living sacrifice" from Romans 12. "I don't know exactly what that calling is yet, but it'll be in the ministry."

For now though, his focus is basketball. For just the third time in school history, and the first time since 1989, Illinois reached the top of national rankings this season. The last two times Illinois went to No. 1, the Fighting Illini ended the season in the NCAA tournament's Final Four.

Powell, who is 6 feet 6 inches tall and a leading scorer for the team, believes Illinois has what it takes to qualify and win the Final Four, which will be held this month.

"I don't have a speech planned [if we were to win]," admitted Powell, who is a four-year starter at the university, which is located in Champaign. "I'm just going to glorify God. I would probably say, 'Thank you, Jesus.' I'd be too excited."

He is excited about his future, including the prospects of playing in the NBA. Although he withdrew his name from last year's NBA draft to return for his final college season, Powell sees playing professional basketball as part of his destiny.

"I believe God's going to open a door for me to play in the NBA because He's given me the talent," he said. "It's a great way to get the gospel out and reach kids."

Powell said that out of respect for Reggie White, he did not want to comment on the late football star's concerns that Christian athletes entertain believers, rather than teach them biblical truth.

Besides being heavily involved in the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, Powell proclaims his faith every time he steps on the court. It's not surprising that he is considered the team's spiritual leader.

"We call him 'The Rev' now," teammate Dee Brown told The (Champaign) News-Gazette. "He's giving himself over to God. That's a positive thing. It's not easy. I wish I could do it."

Last spring, Powell told Illinois coach Bruce Weber that he had found his calling, and Weber wasn't surprised. Weber said Powell "hasn't gone overboard," concerning his faith. "I think

he's always had a strong faith, and now it's just that he's going to make that his future," Weber told the newspaper.

Powell, who attended Mount Zion as a youngster but didn't surrender his life to Christ until his sophomore year in college, began courses in religious studies at Urbana Theological Seminary in January. He received a bachelor's degree in speech communication from Illinois in December and plans to pursue a master's degree in theology.

"He's got a long journey to go, but he'll get there," Mount Zion pastor Craig Purchase told The News-Gazette. "He's not T.D. Jakes, now, but he could be some day. Or better yet, maybe he'll just be Roger Powell Jr."

Speaking of Jakes, Powell is a fan of the well-known Dallas pastor, as well as other prominent charismatic ministers, such as Creflo Dollar and Rod Parsley. While watching the Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN) last year, Powell said he received a revelation regarding the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Friends from a campus group called Get Free Ministry had offered to help him "get baptized in the Holy Spirit."

"I've never spoken in tongues, so when they offered I said I really didn't know much about it and that I would pray about it," Powell recalled. "I prayed and asked God to show me the answer. The next day I turned on TBN, and Marilyn Hickey was on.

"The first thing she said was: 'Have you been baptized in the Holy Spirit? If you haven't, then you should be baptized.' I was sitting in my bed and I raised my hand. I said, 'Thank

you, Lord, for that revelation.' That was my answer to prayer."

Eric Tiansay