

Here's what Hornets coach Steve Clifford did when his body screamed 'Enough!'

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Charlotte Hornets coach Steve Clifford has never been much of a sleeper: Maybe five hours a night tops. With a job such as his, you have too much to do, too much to plan, to worry about getting eight hours in bed.

This was different in a terrifying manner. During the Hornets' trip to Toronto, in late November, Clifford's head was pounding in such excruciating a manner that sleep -- even for 15 minutes -- was impossible. He had experienced severe headaches before, particularly as he was going to bed or sometimes in the afternoon before a game. But never like this, with pain so great and medication providing no relief.

"The medication I had had always taken care of it enough that I could sleep (previously), and I couldn't," Clifford said. "Two, three hours (a night) at the most" on a four-night trip to Toronto and Miami.

The following Monday, Clifford was in his Spectrum Center office early morning (customary over his 18 NBA seasons) reviewing preparations for that night's home game against the Orlando Magic.



Charlotte-area media surround Charlotte Hornets coach Steve Clifford on Friday at Spectrum Center, where he returned after a five-week medical leave because of debilitating headaches.

Chuck Burton - AP



“It was really difficult (focusing with so much head pain). That’s when I knew I had a problem,” said Clifford, so ailing that morning he didn’t dare drive his car home just the handful of blocks from the arena to his uptown condominium.

Two days later, the Hornets announced Clifford, in his fifth season as coach, would take a medical leave of unspecified length, with associate head coach Stephen Silas taking charge. The fact that this was headache-related didn’t become public until the Observer reported that Thursday night.

The Huntersville-based neurologist treating Clifford, Dr. Ki Jung, rattled Clifford with the following appraisal:

“He said that over 18 years of this, your body was just saying, ‘Enough!’ ” Clifford recalled in an interview with the Observer Friday morning.

What happened over the next 5 1/2 weeks had little to do with basketball, everything to do with self-preservation. It registered on Clifford, who turned 56 in September, that this could potentially end his season, if not his career. Clifford’s condition doesn’t necessarily fit the description of migraines, which his brother has suffered from for years. Jung told Clifford what he was feeling was a pattern among highly stressed Charlotte executives.



“The biggest thing for me is a lack of sleep. Stress-related,” Clifford said. “(Jung’s) biggest concern with me is (most executives) don’t travel as much as I do. That’s why they have been a little more careful -- and rightfully so -- about me coming back.”





Charlotte Hornets associate head coach Stephen Silas has been in charge of the team since coach Steve Clifford took a five-week medical leave because of debilitating headaches. Clifford, who spoke to the media on Friday, will be back on Tuesday to run practice.

Chuck Burton - AP

Clifford will run practice Tuesday, after Silas coaches these last three games Friday (Utah Jazz), Saturday (Oklahoma City Thunder) and Monday (at Detroit Pistons). Clifford's personal challenge: Be the same grinder of a coach without grinding away his health. Like so many Baby Boomers, Clifford has had to stop dismissing the importance of exercise, hydration and rest. Otherwise, he might eliminate himself from the choice to continue coaching.

"I have to change not just about my job, but how I live," Clifford said in his first public comments following his leave from the Hornets.



“When this thing happened, for the first 7-10 days, coaching was the last thing on my mind. This was much more severe (than heart-related chest pains four years earlier) and it scared me. So that is a place I’m not going to go back to.”

To know Clifford, divorced and driven about his job, is to appreciate what a tough concession that must be. This is a man who laughs with pride at the coffee stains frequently splattered on his dress shirt before games. He’s tried in the past to back off. After his heart scare early in his first season in Charlotte (he received two stents), Clifford tried going to sleep on charter flights, rather than immediately reviewing that night’s game on his laptop. It didn’t stick.

This preseason, he experimented with going to a road game on the second of two team buses, thus leaving the hotel about 45 minutes later. He admitted Friday that lasted two games before he was back on the first bus.

Jung told him they could keep increasing the dosage on his headache medicine, or attack the real problem: striking a better work-life balance.



Nothing dire

The first week of his leave was all about testing -- a Magnetic Resonance Imaging on his body, and then a Magnetic Resonance Angiogram for his circulatory system, plus a sleep test, an eye test and other procedures to eliminate the most dire possibilities -- a brain tumor, an aneurysm, a previously undetected stroke. Once those were eliminated, Jung and Dr. Joe Garcia, the Hornets' team physician, started looking at external factors.





Charlotte Hornets coach Steve Clifford speaks to local media on Friday at Spectrum Center. The 56-year-old spent the past five weeks on medical leave because of debilitating headaches.

Chuck Burton - AP

“Dr. Jung told me, ‘You don’t have internal issues. That’s good; those would be tougher.’” Clifford recalled.

“Most people with headache issues have external issues, like their job. You find out sleep is everything. People say you are what you eat or you’ve got to drink more water. Those things are important, but not nearly as important as regular sleep.”

Old message finally received

This wasn’t the first time Clifford heard that. His sister, a nurse, warned him after the heart scare that it was essential he carve out time to be better rested.



This time, Clifford was prescribed a sleep aid. He was also advised to consider ways to make his body more receptive to rest: Exercise, meditation and yoga all came up. Clifford has worked out on a more regular basis than he previously did and sounded receptive to the meditation and yoga suggestions as well. That new-age thinking doesn't come naturally to a working-class grinder from New England.

The other thing Jung suggested: Basketball shouldn't fill Clifford's every waking thought, particularly before turning in each night.

"Shut it off. Don't watch Bucks-Cavaliers. Watch a movie instead," Clifford recalled of what he was advised. "Don't sit at night and say, 'How can we get Jeremy Lamb more shots?'"

Lesson to pass on

I asked Clifford Friday what he'd tell a stranger about what he's learned these past five weeks. In essence, he replied listen and heed when your body screams at you, "Enough!"

"Even if it's a little bit you don't feel well, go get checked out," Clifford said. "Because modern medicine being what it is today, often they'll tell you it's no big deal and that means you've only wasted a little bit of time. Or they're going to tell you, 'This is what you've got to do!'"