Dell Demps ’92 and ’98 played 10 years of professional basketball in the U.S. and abroad, including brief stops with three National Basketball Association teams. All the while, he dreamed of becoming an NBA coach, general manager and team owner.

“When I was playing,” he says, “I always knew I wanted to coach and to be a general manager, and at some point I might look at ownership — maybe 10 to 15 years from now.”

After retiring as a player, Demps worked diligently for another decade in obscure positions: coach and general manager in the NBA’s Developmental League and Director of Pro Player Personnel for the New York Knicks and San Antonio Spurs.

Last July, the work paid off, and he reached a major goal. Demps, 40, was hired as general manager by the New Orleans Hornets, joining the rarified group of general managers among the NBA’s 30 teams. He’s thrilled to be running the basketball side of an NBA team, but he knows that his hardest work awaits.

“Not only do I want the job, but I want us to be successful,” he says. “That’s when you know you’re living the dream.”

Demps is definitely a hard worker. As a young coach in the NBA’s Developmental League, he was advised that general manager candidates needed to understand the league’s collective bargaining agreement. Demps spent one to two hours a day for two years mastering the complex document.

Now that he’s assumed responsibility for the Hornets, Demps will use many theories and practices he learned at Pacific while earning his BA and his MBA in the Eberhardt School of Business. His wife, Anita, is a 1998 graduate of Pacific McGeorge School of Law. Demps has chosen to give back to the school that gave him his solid business foundation by serving on the Eberhardt School of Business Advisory Board.
“One big thing I learned at Pacific was delegating responsibility,” Demps says. “I don’t want to micromanage people. I’d rather hire good people and give them an opportunity to excel. No one can do it all.”

Demps is one of only seven African-American general managers in the NBA. He appreciates the progress being made in hiring black GMs in a league where 77 percent of the players are African-American, according to a May 2010 report by the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sports at the University of Central Florida.

“Four African-Americans were hired as general managers this summer,” Demps says. “I think the NBA has been proactive in minority hiring throughout the years. People are getting opportunities. It’s great to see Rich Cho in Portland become the first Asian-American general manager, and for Masai Ujiri to become the first African-American general manager.”

Demps says the toughest thing about the job is that “there are more qualified people than there are jobs available. The hardest thing for me is to tell people I’ve known for years, or who helped me along the way, that I can’t hire them.”

The most surprising thing for him was the number of phone calls when I first took the job. This is not a joke,” he says. “I was receiving an average of 300 calls, texts or e-mails a day.” Aside from the media, people seeking employment, and calls about trading Chris Paul, most were well-wishers, including a much-appreciated call from basketball Hall of Famer Wayne Embry. “I tried to call 10 to 15 people a day to get to everyone. It’s taking a couple of months,” he says.

One of the best things about his new job, he says, is that he’s on the same page with new Hornets owner Gary Chouest, new Coach Monty Williams and the Hornets’ staff about a collaborative approach to management.

“The big thing in the NBA is working on projects together in the group environment,” Demps says. “We debate ideas and come to an agreement about what will be best for the team. If you’re honest, don’t take disagreements personally and realize that we all have one goal in mind, it makes a healthy environment.”

Demps says he joined the fraternity of general managers only with help from many others. His father held two full-time jobs for years, and his mother worked as a lab technician to support Demps and his sister.

He also recalls the leadership of Pacific Basketball Coach Bob Thomason. Thomason taught the 6-foot, 3-inch guard to “work hard and have a plan to get where you’re going.” Following Thomason’s advice, Demps earned All-Big West Conference recognition for three years at Pacific. He continues to be guided by those ideas today.