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The road to Microsoft
Matt Pope's career path has landed him squarely in Microsoft's inner circle.
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Classmates and coaches at Concord High School remember Matt Pope as a quiet, hard-working athlete who was a standout player on every team he joined. He was a starting running back on the championship football team, an undefeated singles player on the championship tennis team and a point guard on the basketball team, which went to the semi-finals his senior year in 1990.

Now the Concord native is moving to Seattle, where he will join a team of Microsoft leaders charged with redefining the image of the largest computer software company in the world.

At age 34, Pope will have an office in the same building as Bill Gates and report directly to one of the most powerful people in the industry, Ray Ozzie.

Pope is humble about his soaring career.

"There are three things I try to be every day—curious, adventurous and kind," Pope said. "I figure that if I can be those things, then I will meet lots of great and interesting people and have lots of fascinating life experiences. . . . So far, it's worked out."

Pope got a degree in mechanical engineering from Worcester Polytechnic Institute, worked for a few years on small startup companies and then went to Dartmouth to get his MBA at the Tuck School of Business. His big break came in 2000, when he took a job with Groove Networks, a Beverly-based computer company started by Ozzie.

Ozzie is a household name in the computer industry because he invented Lotus Notes, a "grand slam" product used by millions of businesses to collaborate before e-mail was in vogue, says M. Eric Johnson, director of the Center for Digital Strategies at the Tuck School. Ozzie's Groove software built on the collaboration capabilities of Lotus Notes, adding more high-tech ways of sharing files and eliminating some of the hassles of trading files via e-mail, Johnson said.

'We're rooting for Matt'

For Pope, working closely with a man who invented a computer program used by millions was an exciting opportunity. Then Microsoft bought Groove Networks a year ago and promoted Ozzie to chief technology officer. Ozzie, in turn, picked Pope to follow him to Microsoft and help him lead the company in a new direction.

"The path Matt's on is exciting and unusual," said Johnson, who knew Pope when he was at Dartmouth. "It's very cool because everyone recognizes that it's important for Microsoft to figure this out. Being part of an organization the size of Microsoft and being a part of that conversation is a tremendous opportunity. We're rooting for Matt."

Microsoft has built its legacy on packaged software like Microsoft Word and Office, products that are widely considered desktop standards. But in the fast-changing internet age, companies like Google and Yahoo! are quickly moving to the forefront with cool new programs that can be accessed for free on the web. Some industry experts believe that Microsoft needs to get with the times or fall by the wayside.

The new image Microsoft is driving for will be a blend of these web-based services and its traditional packaged software. The movement is being championed by Ozzie.

Pope's role will be to build and lead a team that will interview computer users about what features they like and don't like, and what they use the different features for. Then he will work with several other teams to develop products that take advantage of the internet, software and hardware the way Apple's iPod does.

Pope's job pre-merger was figuring out who to sell the Groove software to and how to market it. In the past year, Pope has been helping to integrate the Groove technology into the Microsoft Office software, which will release a new version in 2007.

No computer geek

Although Pope has made it big in the computer industry, his background is not really in computers, and he has never fit the image of a computer geek, according to friends and family. His mom, Elaine Pope, says he didn't spend much time playing video games as a kid and wasn't that into computers.

"I'm not sure if I ever thought the computer world is where he would be," Pope's mom said. "I always knew he would be directed in some area, though. He was a very intense child; even when he was young, he was always on task."

He took an early liking to sports, but he always remained an exceptional student as well, she said.

Those who knew Pope in high school are not surprised by his success.

"He was a hard worker," said Brian Silfies, who played on the football team with Pope. "He was one of the first to get an opportunity and make the most of it."

He was small for a fullback, but he pushed himself hard in the off season to get faster and stronger, Silfies said.

"When he came to camp his senior year, he had made unbelievable muscular gains," Silfies said. "I think everyone was impressed."

Pope's coaches, like former Concord High basketball coach Bill Haubrich and tennis coach Harvey Smith, said he was the type of player a coach never forgets.

"He just had that quality about him that you knew he was going to be a leader among men when he got into the adult world," Smith said, who also coached Pope in youth basketball. "Right from the second grade, you could see his potential for leadership and greatness. He learned things so fast, but he always remained a humble and nice kid."

Pope lives in Newburyport, Mass., with his wife, Heather, and their two children—Finn, 4, and Ruby, 2. They will move to Seattle in May.

"We're sad because (Matt and his family) have always been so close," his mom said. "But having said that, he has an opportunity that he just can't pass up. We're so proud."