

The One Opponent Mike Banks Couldn't Beat

If you've spent much time around our Branson campus, you've probably met Mike Banks. As CORE's Director of Transportation, a 4D Recovery instructor, and manager of one of our men's recovery houses, Mike is one of those steady, dependable people who quietly keep CORE running.

What many people don't realize is that long before Mike came to CORE, he had already become one of the best pool players in America.

By the time he was ten years old, no one in his father's pool hall could beat him. Before long, he and his father were playing for money. As a teenager, Mike was traveling throughout the Midwest competing in tournaments and matching up against the best players he could find. He eventually played in the U.S. Open, won major professional events, and built a reputation as one of the country's most respected money players. In the world of high-stakes pool, his name became known far beyond Missouri.

Pool was more than a hobby. "I ate, breathed, and lived playing pool," Mike says. Growing up in his father's pool hall, he spent countless hours at the table while other children were playing Little League or attending football games. They say mastery requires 10,000 hours. Mike had blown through that milestone before he was a teenager.

His remarkable talent brought opportunity, but it also introduced him to a world few teenagers ever experience. Older players became his friends. Tournament weekends became normal life. Gambling, travel, late nights, alcohol, and eventually drugs all became part of the culture surrounding the game. What began as marijuana progressed to cocaine, methamphetamine, prescription painkillers, and eventually heroin.

From the outside, Mike seemed to have it all. By the age of eighteen he was traveling the country, winning tournaments, and walking into almost any pool room confident he could make money. Sometimes he carried thousands of dollars in his pocket. By twenty-three, he had hustled pool in forty-eight states.

Yet there was one opponent Mike could never defeat: addiction.

By the time Mike reached CORE at age twenty-four, he'd already spent years trying to quit. He'd completed detoxes, 28- and 60-day treatment programs, attended AA meetings, and even finished "90 meetings in 90 days" more than once. Every time he sincerely wanted to stop. Every time he found himself using again.

"I really wanted to stop," Mike says, "I just didn't know why I couldn't."

Mike first arrived at CORE in the summer of 2012. His daughter had recently been born, and his mother had taken temporary custody while Mike desperately searched for a way out of addiction. At first, all the talk about God held little interest for him. He nearly left, but everything changed during his first recovery class.

In that class Mike was introduced to a simple diagram many of our graduates know well – the cycle of addiction. In one illustration he saw his entire life: obsession, use, spree, remorse, and the relentless dissatisfaction that inevitably drove him back to the next drink or drug. For the first time, someone wasn't simply telling him to stop. Someone was explaining why he couldn't, and that understanding kept him at CORE.





Mike immersed himself in the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous and discovered that recovery is far deeper than staying sober. It wasn't about becoming stronger than addiction, but surrendering the illusion that he could manage life on his own. Along the way, Mike also came to believe in God.

We've had professional athletes come through CORE over the years. What distinguished Mike wasn't his success on the pool table. It was his willingness to invest himself in helping others and advance CORE's mission.

He stayed with us for several years, leaving only after winning custody of his daughter. He returned to the Kansas City area, built a successful career outside of pool, found a church home, and remained sober for nearly a decade – until he stopped doing the things that had brought him recovery.

"I took back the reins on my life from God," he says simply.

The relapse that followed became even darker than his first addiction. He found himself living in abandoned houses and trap houses, alternating between winning major pool tournaments and losing everything he had earned. The cycle he first encountered at CORE had returned with devastating force.

Finally, exhausted and broken, Mike called CORE and returned to us in January 2025. He wasn't simply coming back to the program. Mike came back with a deeper understanding of recovery and a renewed commitment to helping others find it.

Just ask Mike what it means to manage one of our men's recovery houses. He won't talk about enforcing rules. "You've got to put people's needs before your own," he says, "being a good role model, because what my guys see is how they'll want to be."

Or ask why he teaches recovery classes and drives our clients all over southwest Missouri. Years ago, he served because that's what the Big Book and others told him to do. Today, he sees the bigger picture. Helping others isn't simply good for them. It's essential to his own recovery.

"Providing for others' needs not only helps them," Mike says, "but I get a blessing too."

Mike still competes at the highest levels of professional pool. He still travels. He still plays under pressure with thousands of dollars on the line. But today those tournaments are no longer his whole life. They're part of a life grounded in faith, recovery, family, and service to others. That's the balance Mike lost, and the balance he has found again.

Every week, whether he's driving for CORE, teaching a recovery class, managing a house full of men, or heading off to another tournament, Mike carries this balance with him. The same man who once lived from tournament to tournament now spends his days helping others find the recovery he nearly lost.

It turns out the greatest victory of Mike Banks' life wasn't over an opponent across a pool table. It was the one opponent he could never defeat alone.

More Than We Ever Imagined

One day it happens.

It doesn't announce itself with trumpets or fireworks. There isn't a ceremony or a certificate declaring that you've finally arrived. It comes unexpectedly, even though people have been telling you all along that one day it would. Then, somewhere in the middle of an ordinary day, you realize something remarkable.

You haven't thought about alcohol or drugs all day.

Not because you've been fighting the thought.

Not because you've been distracting yourself.

The obsession simply isn't there.



For those who have never experienced addiction, this realization may not seem extraordinary. It isn't supposed to. Most people don't spend their days wondering where their next drink or drug will come from. But for those of us who once measured time by the next opportunity to use, the silence where the obsession once lived feels nothing short of miraculous.

There was a time when we couldn't imagine making it through a single day without something. Every plan, every relationship, and every decision was eventually pulled into the gravity of our addiction. Even on our best days, somewhere in the back of our minds, we knew the time was coming when we'd need relief. That nagging voice never completely went away.

Then, one day, it did.

For some of us, the realization came when the opportunity to use was staring us squarely in the face. For others, it arrived more quietly. But however it happened, many of us at CORE remembered a promise from the Big Book:

"We will suddenly realize that God is doing for us what we could not do for ourselves."

That's when we begin discovering that recovery offers far more than sobriety.

It gives us freedom. Freedom to wake up without wondering how we're going to make it through the day. Freedom to enjoy a meal, a conversation, a walk outside, or a quiet evening without needing to escape from it. Freedom from the exhausting cycle of obsession, use, remorse, and starting all over again.

Then comes gratitude. Not the kind we express because we know we're supposed to, but the kind that quietly transforms ordinary life. We become grateful for mornings that once seemed routine, for honest friendships, for work that matters, for laughter that isn't chemically manufactured, and for the simple privilege of laying our heads on the pillow each night with a clear conscience.

Ordinary life becomes extraordinary, too. The things we once overlooked suddenly matter. We discover that purpose isn't usually found in dramatic moments but in ordinary acts of kindness. Sometimes it is as simple as a ride to an appointment, a conversation with a newcomer, a phone call, a listening ear, or an opportunity to encourage someone who wonders if recovery is possible.

Something else changes, too. Our attention is no longer fixed on ourselves. Instead of asking, “*What do I need today?*” we begin asking, “*Who needs me today?*”

This may be one of the greatest miracles of recovery. Once our lives stop revolving around our own discomfort, we become free to notice the needs of others. We discover that helping people doesn’t diminish us. It enriches us.

People often measure recovery by visible milestones: holding a job, staying out of jail, paying bills on time, or avoiding another overdose. Those accomplishments are important, and we celebrate every one of them. But they are only the beginning. Recovery makes possible something much deeper – a changed heart.

If you’re just beginning your journey at CORE, your dream today may simply be to keep a steady job, stay out of trouble, or reconnect with your family. Those are worthy goals, and we fully expect you to achieve every one of them.

But don’t stop there. Recovery has far more to offer than you can presently imagine.

There was a time when we couldn’t imagine living without alcohol or drugs. Today, we can’t imagine going back.

That’s a miracle, one which we hope every person who walks through our doors will one day experience.

Perhaps the Big Book says it best:

“We are going to know a new freedom and a new happiness. We will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it. We will comprehend the word serenity and we will know peace. No matter how far down the scale we have gone, we will see how our experience can benefit others. That feeling of uselessness and self-pity will disappear. We will lose interest in selfish things and gain interest in our fellows. Self-seeking will slip away. Our whole attitude and outlook upon life will change. Fear of people and of economic insecurity will leave us. We will intuitively know how to handle situations which used to baffle us. We will suddenly realize that God is doing for us what we could not do for ourselves.”

May these promises become your daily experience.