

KENNY ALMOND

*Note: This is the **third** in a series of three feature stories on this year's inductees into the Louisiana Basketball Hall of Fame and this year's recipient of the LABC's Mr. Louisiana Basketball award. The 2014 inductees will be former University of Louisiana at Lafayette player Roy Ebron (1970-73) and former University of New Orleans coach Tim Floyd. Mr. Louisiana Basketball for 2014 is long-time Baton Rouge area high school coach Kenny Almond.*

ALMOND WINS DOING IT HIS WAY

By Robin Fambrough
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Written for LABC

BATON ROUGE, LA – Kenny Almond is known for being a bottom-line kind of guy who seldom hesitates to tell you what he thinks.

When asked about his legacy after 38 years as a high school basketball coach, Almond pauses for just a few seconds.

“I don’t know if there’s anything about me people should remember,” the 64-year-old Almond said. “I hope they remember the players who got it done and what they did and overcame to do it.”

Almond’s former players and colleagues beg to differ with Almond’s point of view. And for good reason – Almond has been selected as Mr. Louisiana Basketball for 2014 by the Louisiana Association of Basketball Coaches.



The award is presented annually to someone who has made a significant, long-term contribution to the game of basketball at any level in Louisiana. It will be presented to Almond during the LABC’s 40th Annual Awards Banquet on Saturday, May 3, at the Embassy Suites Hotel in Baton Rouge. The banquet is sponsored by SportsCare, the Baton Rouge Orthopaedic Clinic, and Universal Coin & Bullion, Ltd.

“I don’t think you could pick a better person to win this award because I think he’s stayed the course of time,” said former colleague Gary Duhe, now director of the Louisiana High School Coaches Association. “He’s done it at different schools; he’s done it his way, he’s done it the right way and you always know where you stand with Kenny.”

“He stands for his principles. His players, school administrators, sportswriters and the other coaches, along with the officials, all know what they’re going to get from him.”

Almond has carved an indelible mark on high school basketball while doing it his way.

It starts with a career record of 876-388, which ranks 7th nationally among all active high school basketball coaches. He won three state titles at Baton Rouge's Woodlawn High School, the Class 4A title in 1999, along with 5A titles in 2002 and 2003. His 2003 squad finished the season 39-0 and ranked sixth in the nation. His last two Woodlawn teams won 56 consecutive games to set a record in the state's largest classification.

Almond also had state runner-up finishes at Lee High in 1982 and at Woodlawn in 1993, 1998 and 2001. He is a three-time state high school coach of the year.

Along the way Almond also became the only coach to lead three schools to berths in the Louisiana High School Athletic Association's Top 28 tournament. He coached his current school, East Ascension High, to semifinal berths in 2008 and 2013. The Spartans finished 24-10 in 2013-14, losing to eventual state champion Natchitoches Central in the quarterfinals in March.

"When I got the call telling me about this (award), I didn't know what to think," Almond said. "Then they sent me the list of who has won it (previously). There's Joe Dean and Bob Pettit and Dale Brown ... people that I have met and worked with. Then there's Benny Hollis and Coach (Lenny) Fant."

"And then I saw Coach (Hurshel) Meares on there. He was my ninth-grade football coach at Istrouma and he got it as an official. That was very humbling for me. A lot of people might ask, 'What have you done?' Well, I know what basketball has done for me. I've met some pretty doggone, good people."

Almond has sent numerous players to the college ranks. Yet it's the other lessons Almond conveys that his former players remember.

"I have a 13-year-old son now and I find myself saying some of the same things Coach Almond said to me when I talk to him," said former Woodlawn player Lakeo Keller, a star at Woodlawn in the early 1990s. "Of course, I don't use language that's as colorful."

"He didn't just teach us about basketball; he taught us about life, the importance of working hard and being part of a team."

Keller said he uses lessons Almond instilled in him daily while becoming a successful businessman.

"My older brother played for Coach Almond at Woodlawn and I wanted to play for him," Keller said. "That was a real turning point in my life. He stayed on me, but I always knew he believed in me."

Almond calls himself the ultimate copycat, saying he has taken lessons learned from college coaches and colleagues to boost his own programs. His philosophy of teaching the game, life lessons and teamwork is the common thread.

“I’ve heard (Bobby) Knight (ex-Indiana and Texas Tech coach) speak at clinics several times,” Almond said. “At one clinic he made the comment that basketball is the most over-coached, under-taught game that there is.”

“I thought there was something to that statement. I think maybe sometimes we do X and O too much and we don’t get into the fundamentals. I’d like to think we work on a lot of little things and talk about others that help make a team come together.”

While he has been front and center, channeling a fiery persona on the court, Almond quickly points out no successful head coach does it alone.

“They say it takes a village to raise a child,” Almond said. “It takes the whole school to make a program. I’ve been fortunate enough to have that. You’ve got to have teachers who care, great assistant coaches and an administration that works with you.”

“When I was at Woodlawn, there were guys who were convinced I was everywhere because I knew everything. We had faculty who cared about the kids who told me things. As soon as the kids realize it’s a school thing it becomes a special thing.”

Almond is reluctant to pick a favorite moment from his career. But he knows what he’ll remember.

“I’ve been fortunate enough to win it three times,” Almond said. “When it’s said and done I enjoy seeing the smiles and happiness of the kids, their parents, teachers and the fans. That’s meant more to me than anything.”

In addition to honoring Almond, the LABC’s awards banquet will include the induction of two new members into the Louisiana Basketball Hall of Fame. There will also be recognition of Louisiana’s major college, small college, junior college and high school players and coaches of the year, along with the top pro player from the state.

A very limited number of tickets for the banquet are available for \$25 and can only be reserved by contacting the LABC in advance at labball@gmail.com. More information about the LABC can be obtained by visiting their website at www.labball.com.

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