

JIM CHAMPAGNE

*Note: This is the **second** in a series of two feature stories on this year's inductee into the Louisiana Basketball Hall of Fame and this year's recipient of the LABC's Mr. Louisiana Basketball award. The 2019 inductee will be former Louisiana Tech University player Lonnie Cooper. Mr. Louisiana Basketball for 2019 is long-time AAU, college and youth coach Jim Champagne of Lafayette.*

MAN OF MANY HATS, CHAMPAGNE'S FIRST LOVE WAS ALWAYS BASKETBALL

By: Kevin Foote
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Written for the LABC

LAFAYETTE, LA – Jim Champagne has been many things in his 75 years on Earth with varying degrees of success.

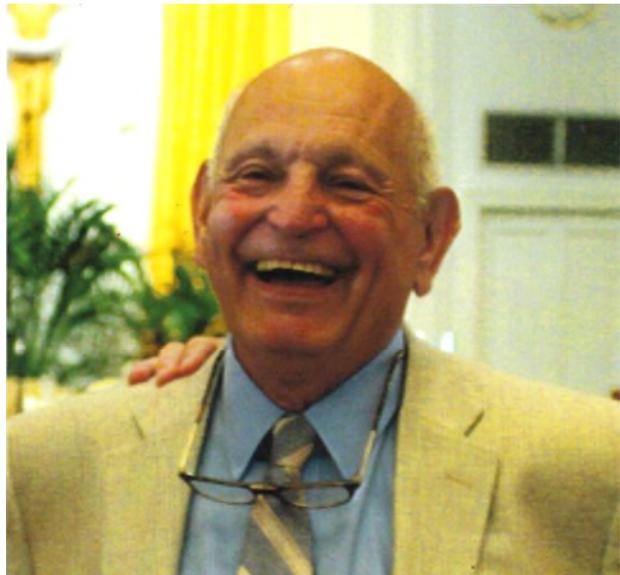
From the time he graduated high school at Cathedral-Carmel in 1961 until today, Champagne has been a college student-athlete, a tennis coach, a father, a coach, a husband, a mud engineer, a dog trainer, a horse trainer ... even a carpenter.

But no matter which role he was playing at any given time in his life, you can bet Champagne was in love with the game of basketball.

“At no point in my life was I ever out of basketball,” he said. “I might have been making money doing something else, but basketball was always there.”

In the late 1970s, his love for the game and dedication to his children led to him officially getting back into the game as an organizer and coach of youth basketball. That eventually led to Champagne to forming several AAU basketball teams in Louisiana, including the U16 national champion and U17 national runner-up Louisiana Stars in 1991.

For a lifetime of dedication and contributions to basketball in Louisiana, Champagne is the 2019 recipient of the Mr. Louisiana Basketball award, the highest honor bestowed annually by the Louisiana Association of Basketball Coaches (LABC). He will receive the award during the LABC's 45th Annual Awards Banquet this Saturday, May 4, at the Embassy Suites Hotel in



Baton Rouge. The banquet is sponsored by the Baton Rouge Orthopaedic Clinic and Universal Coin & Bullion, Ltd.

Champagne played basketball in high school, as well as tennis. He was offered a basketball-tennis scholarship to Western Kentucky out of high school and eventually settled on a similar offer in his hometown at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, then called the University of Southwestern Louisiana.

“I couldn’t jump, but I could shoot it,” Champagne laughed. “Unfortunately, a lot of people could shoot it.”

He was introduced to the game by his father, Roy, who grew up playing basketball in Franklin.

At the end of his first year of college at Southwestern Louisiana, Champagne was playing in a tennis tournament in Florida where he developed a connection with a man who got him a job as a tennis professional in Baltimore.

As much as he loved basketball and tennis, Champagne admits he wasn’t really meant to be a student-athlete.

“I hated school,” he laughed.

Before he knew it, Champagne was mentoring young tennis players who were seeded No. 1 at such collegiate programs as Wake Forest and North Carolina.

His career as a club tennis pro brought him positions in such places as Norfolk, Virginia Beach, Long Island, Baltimore and even Puerto Rico.

He even worked along with famous tennis instructor Nick Bollettieri. He was even the head tennis coach at Old Dominion.

But again, no matter where he was basketball was always there. His boss at the Baltimore Country Club was Jim Lacy, who led the nation in scoring in 1947 for Loyola of Maryland.

He was connected with former Maryland standout and then-Philadelphia 76ers head coach Gene Shue.

Those tennis days on the East Coast also brought Champagne in contact with a youth tennis standout named John Lucas, as well as Maryland basketball coach Lefty Driesell.

“Back in those days, none of us had any idea how good a basketball player John Lucas was going to be, but Lefty did,” Champagne said.

After a tennis investment faltered during an economic downfall in the 1970s, Champagne began training dogs and horses, instead of tennis players. He even won a national championship as a dog trainer.

But by 1978, circumstances brought Champagne and his family back to South Louisiana.

“One day, (children) Hope, Bobby and Roy came to me and said, ‘Daddy, we want to play basketball,’” Champagne remembered. “I looked around and there was nothing.”

With no door open, Champagne did what his strong personality typically produced. He created a door and walked through.

Before he knew it, he had put up \$100 to form his own team and literally began knocking on doors with his children to find players.

“We finished second in the league that first year,” Champagne said.

Before long, Champagne had begun an AAU team he called the North Vermilion Patriots, which soon became the name of the high school in that area after several schools consolidated to form the current North Vermilion High in Maurice.

“I knew how to coach, I knew the game and I knew how to teach as a former tennis pro,” Champagne said.

He just needed a little refining to coach basketball. Tommy LeBlanc, the nephew of former Lafayette High football coach Rayford LeBlanc, directed him to some coaching magazines.

One of the articles detailed the rise of New Jersey high school basketball coaching legend Bob Hurley, whose son later played at Duke.

Asked in the article about the secrets to his success that produced 26 state titles in 39 years as a high school coach, Hurley said, “conditioning, short, precision passes and a strong elementary school feeder system.”

That was music to Champagne’s ears.

“I said, ‘Here I am Lord,’” he said.

His days in the tennis world taught him conditioning, he was already coaching elementary school kids in Maurice and he believed in short, precise passes.

“That’s been my fundamentals in the game ever since,” Champagne said. “When you catch it, look to shoot it.”

It didn't take Champagne long to be looking beyond Vermilion Parish for players. By the late 1980s, he was coaching such future stars as Harold and Carroll Boudreaux, Tyrone Jones, Alonzo Mitchell and Aaron Mitchell on such AAU teams as Team Acadiana, Team Louisiana and the Louisiana Stars.

"I told Beryl Shipley that we had three 6-foot-8 kids within 15 miles of Lafayette," Champagne said. "Beryl said, 'You're lying to me. There's no way.'"

Shipley was the legendary former USL basketball coach who was the 1985 recipient of the LABC's Mr. Louisiana Basketball award.

To this day, Champagne believes he might have been the first person to meet Shipley when he made his visit to Lafayette in 1957 to begin his Hall of Fame coaching career in the Hub City.

A middle schooler at the time, Champagne said he just happened to be walking on campus near Earl K. Long Gym and shook hands with Shipley.

Later in life, the two became close friends.

"I would say, I love my dad, but I love Beryl Shipley," Champagne slowly said. "I miss him. I can't really put into words what Beryl Shipley meant to me in my life."

In the late 1980s, Champagne took Shipley to see it with his own eyes. His friend was indeed involved with an AAU basketball team in the middle of the football-minded Deep South, just as baseball was about to begin taking over the collegiate scene in Louisiana.

That group of players played the very first game at the Convocation Center in Jonesboro, Arkansas, losing a national semifinal game due to a controversial call late in the game.

"It was a bad call and I just went nuts," Champagne said. "I went after the official and to show you how angry I was, Big Dave (Thibodeaux) grabbed me and I lifted that 300-pound man off the floor."

In those days, Champagne's teams were playing against the likes of Alonzo Mourning and Marcus Liberty.

One of the players Champagne recruited was Lake Arthur's Jeff Moore, who has now been a college coach for the last 24 years, including the last 13 at Northwestern State in Natchitoches.

"At that time, AAU wasn't as big," Moore said. "He did a lot to get AAU going around the state. He was always someone who would go out of his way to help you. The one thing that sticks out the most about him is that he believed in his players."

“He did all the recruiting and he did some coaching as well, along with his sons Roy and Bobby. Everyone just kind of worked together.”

Moore remembers Champagne organizing a trip in the summer of 1990 to Madrid, Spain for a couple of days and then to the Virgin Islands for two weeks.

“It was awesome, just an incredible experience,” Moore said. “We played games and did basketball camps. He was always trying to help us out and he was never in it for himself. He helped so many basketball players in the state out, so many kids who could have gone in different directions, and he taught so many life lessons.”

In 1991, Champagne’s U16 roster included such names as Scotty Thurmond, Kelvin Price, Chris Manuel, Lawrence Nixon and Jerald Honeycutt.

Most of those players were also on the U17 roster that year, in addition to Kerry Kittles of New Orleans.

The U16 team won the national championship that year and the U17 team was the national runner-up.

“With about two minutes left (in the U16 national finals) when it looked like we might have a chance to win it, I just put my head down and I prayed ... not for me, but for the kids,” Champagne said.

“I know it’s not about Jim Champagne. It never was.”

Shortly after that momentous triumph, the AAU world began blowing up and it became more about big money than old-school recruiting skills.

“That’s not what I was about,” said Champagne, who even played a role in the early days of the local stuffed chicken industry. “So I told myself that it was time for a different phase of my life.”

His next challenge was coaching professional basketball in Venezuela.

Both of his sons Roy and Bobby became college coaches.

Champagne dabbled again recently in the AAU game, but not for long.

On Dec. 14, 2013 his wife, Carole, died. In May, he and his second wife Liz will celebrate their second anniversary.

“I was married to Carole for many years and she was an angel,” Champagne said. “Now I’m married to Liz Stoma and she’s an angel, so I’m thinking I’m not quite as big an ____ as some people think I am.”

As for the game he loves these days, Champagne likes the excitement the 3-point shot has added to the game, but wishes the instant replay system wouldn't play a role in officiating.

“If they don't use it all the time, I think that's being unfair to the officials,” Champagne said. “Auburn loses in the semifinals on the exact same play that Virginia won on in the finals. If Gerald Boudreaux (2008's LABC Mr. Louisiana Basketball award recipient) is officiating that Auburn game, there's no doubt in my mind that Auburn plays in the national championship game. Gerald is the best basketball official I've ever known.”

In addition to honoring Champagne, the May 4 awards banquet will include the induction of former Louisiana Tech University star Lonnie Cooper 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. More information about the LABC can be obtained by visiting their website at www.labball.com.

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