

LONNIE COOPER

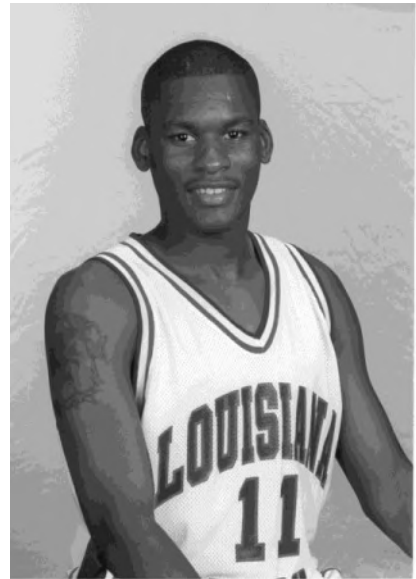
*Note: This is the **first** in a series of two feature stories on this year's inductee into the Louisiana Basketball Hall of Fame and this year's recipient of the LABC's Mr. Louisiana Basketball award. The 2019 inductee will be former Louisiana Tech University player Lonnie Cooper. Mr. Louisiana Basketball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

NO IMPOSTER, COOPER IS THE REAL (HALL OF FAME) DEAL

By: Teddy Allen
Written for the LABC

RUSTON, LA – Drew Cooper is 12 now but he was 3 when his dad Lonnie retired from competitive basketball, so he never saw his “old man,” now 42, win a state championship for McCall High in Tallulah, never saw a single game from Lonnie’s Louisiana Player of the Year season for Louisiana Tech, never saw any film of his dad’s pro career as a Harlem Globetrotter or MVP of his Des Moines team or MVP of the International Basketball Association.

So it’s been at times a confusing decade for the 12-year-old. He’ll get questions from his teammates on his travel baseball team. “Hey Drew, was your dad that good?” Or he’ll be with his dad in the mall or the barber shop or at the gym watching him coach high schoolers and someone will say something to Lonnie about how much they loved and enjoyed seeing him play, and more than once Drew has looked up at his dad after one of these conversations with a stranger and said, “Were you *that* good?”



“I’ve always told him, ‘I was OK,’” Lonnie Cooper said. “Even when other people say, ‘I remember how good you were,’ my response has always been, ‘Man, I was OK.’ But I think Drew’s starting to understand.”

The picture should be crystal clear for Drew when his dad is inducted into the Louisiana Basketball Hall of Fame during the Louisiana Association of Basketball Coaches’ 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.

“I’m so happy,” said Cooper, who’s coached in both high school and college since retirement from competitive ball as a player and, for the past 18 months, has been the head

basketball coach at Franklin Parish High in Winnsboro. “Everybody at school is congratulating me, I’ve seen it on the news, I’ve got my buddies calling me. It’s like, huge.”

“It’s funny,” he said. “Now I go to the barber shop and it’s me the guys are comparing the young guys to. They’ll say stuff like, ‘This young guy’s good, but I mean, this dude Lonnie’s in the Hall of Fame.’”

“I guess now I can’t say ‘I was just OK’ anymore,” Cooper said.

Cooper enjoyed 10 seasons as an international player in Finland, Milan, and beyond. His McCall High teams went to four straight state championship games. But it’s what he did as a Tech Bulldog that earned him a spot in the state’s Hall.

He becomes the 15th Louisiana Tech player or coach, the second most of any other program in the state, to be inducted. He joins former Bulldog greats Jackie Moreland, Cecil Crowley, Mike Green, Scotty Robertson, Billy Wiggins, Mike McConathy, Karl Malone, George Corley, Andy Russo, P.J. Brown, Randy White, Dave Simmons, Lanky Wells and Tommy Joe Eagles.

A 6-4 point guard who handled a basketball as smooth as gravity handles running water, Cooper was a consensus Top 50 national prospect out of high school. He chose Louisiana Tech to stay close to home.

“My mom saw every home game I ever played,” Cooper said. “Four straight years.”

He figured he’d play immediately for Tech. He figured right.

From 1995-99, Cooper was a three-time All-Sun Belt Conference, All-Louisiana and NABC All-District selection, and the Louisiana Player of the Year when Tech won the league title his senior season.

As a college assistant, Keith Richard recruited Cooper since his 10th grade season and was Tech’s rookie head coach during the title season of 1999, with Cooper as the Bulldogs’ leader.

“It was hard for me to believe what I saw in the McCall gym that night,” Richard said. “Best skill level for that age I’d ever seen. His ability to dribble and pass, plus his hoops IQ...you could just feel it in the stands.”

“The ball was a part of him,” Richard said. “He made it all seem easy, and he always did things at the right moment, precisely. He saw things on the floor that the normal eye didn’t see happening. I was mesmerized that a kid that young had that much talent and knew exactly how to use it. I don’t know if you can even teach that; I think it’s just something within you. He has it.”

Cooper's name is all over Tech's record book:

- 1,451 points (14.0 average), 12th all-time at the end of his career;
- Most made three-pointers (219) when he finished his career;
- Highest free throw percentage in a single season at 92.1%, which led the nation in his senior year;
- Second-most career assists (523) and third-most steals (153) at the end of his career.

"He was a good player to play with," said guard Derek Smith, hosted by Cooper, then a sophomore, when Smith came to Ruston on his recruiting trip. "He was one of the main reasons I came to Tech, to play with a player of his caliber. I remember this one in-game moment..."

The two were told Smith needed just two more points to join Tech's 1,000-point club. The game's opening jump ball ended up in Cooper's hands.

"I went streaking down the left side of the floor and he threw me a lob and I scored my 1,000th point on an assist from Lonnie," Smith said. "It couldn't have been more fitting, given the fact that he was one of the main reasons I was in Ruston and one of my closest friends on the team. Still is. It was an honor to play on the same team with him."

Cooper averaged 13.7 points and 5.44 assists in 1999, 17.0 points and 5.15 assists in 1998, 14.2 points and 5.11 assists in 1997, and 10.5 points and 4.38 assists in 1996 as a freshman. He had a single game scoring high of 33 points.

And all that started years before, on the dirt courts of Tallulah. In the 1980s and '90s, they were everywhere, "a dirt court on every street," said Chris Oney, who met Cooper when both were at McCall Junior High. After that, it was hard to keep them apart.

"I wish we had those games recorded," said Oney, one grade ahead of Cooper and a three-year teammate at McCall High. "We spent hours and hours out there. I'd pick him up in the morning or he'd get me and we'd go to a court. You were allowed only on certain courts, depending on your reputation as a basketball player. That's where things got competitive. I think that's why we were so good with shot selection through high school, which Coach (Mitchell) Riggs demanded."

Now Riggs is at Tallulah Academy, but for years he led the Class 2A McCall Dragons and built his reputation as a winner who preached hard work and smart shots.

"You take a bad shot on the dirt court, it's all over," said Oney, who coached Pearl River Community College to its first National Junior College Athletic Association Tournament appearance this winter. "It might be two hours before your team can get back on the court."

One of the dirt courts was a side yard at Cooper's house, where "the goal moved from one end of the yard to the other," Cooper said, "depending on where there was grass. First there'd be grass, then after so much playing, no grass."

Finally, the grass just gave up.

“Lonnie was the first one to invent the full court dirt court,” Oney said. “I think one of the goals might have been a tire rim with spokes; sometimes you’d have to push the rims back up if somebody dunked too hard.”

“Man,” Oney said, “it was awesome.”

That’s where they really learned to play, where the pair, Oney said, became “Batman and Robin. We complemented each other so well from playing together so much. We’re putting in 10-hour days out there.”

“I always played against older guys,” Cooper said. “Unless it was at camp where maybe they grouped you, even the neighborhood, I always played up. When I was able to score and play with them, I thought I might have a chance.”

When Cooper was a sophomore at McCall, Oney and two other upperclassmen — each averaging 20 points-plus a game — sat the bench with foul trouble the entire third quarter in a playoff game against St. Thomas More.

“Until then, Lonnie’s game was to get the ball to his scorers, but now we’re on the bench and we’re all pretty nervous,” Oney said. “Not Lonnie. He always had a calmness about him. What he did was take the game over. Scored just about every time we had the ball that quarter. Finished with 23 or 24. We don’t get to Baton Rouge and win state without that quarter from him. He won the game for us.”

Cooper won a lot of games for his teams through the years. He didn’t win any in the NBA, a hill that, due to timing or numbers or who knows what, he could never quite climb, despite his top-of-the-heap performance at every other level in which he competed.

“No doubt about it,” Richard said, “Lonnie was an NBA player.”

Now and then Cooper will talk to his wife and high school sweetheart, Andrell, Drew’s mom and an attorney for Century Link, about it.

“I wonder if I’d have gone to a bigger school and done what I did at Tech, if I’d have gotten a stronger look,” he said. “I reminisce about it. But you know what? I enjoyed Tech. I really did. I loved every minute of it. I enjoyed my four years there, made lifelong friends...if I had the chance to do it again, I’d do the same thing.”

Cooper never played the game for awards. He never talked to Andrell or his parents, James and Leotis, about the possibility of going into the Louisiana Basketball Hall of Fame. He played for the feeling he got on those dirt courts in the Tallulah neighborhoods, or at McCall High’s gym, or in Ruston’s Thomas Assembly Center.

“I don’t care about all-district or MVPs; I played because I loved to play the game, because I wanted to win championships,” Cooper said. “I played with and against a bunch of guys who didn’t get these kinds of awards but who were really, really good players and good people.

“The Hall of Fame wasn’t on my mind,” he said. “It was a big surprise to me. If you love the game and if you’re good enough to get those awards, you’ll get them. But you’ve got to love playing the game first.”

In addition to the Louisiana Basketball Hall of Fame induction, the May 4 awards banquet will include recognition of Louisiana’s major college, small college, junior college and high school players and coaches of the year, the top pro player from the state, and the presentation of the LABC’s Mr. Louisiana Basketball award to long-time AAU, college and youth coach Jim Champagne of Lafayette.

The Louisiana Basketball Hall of Fame is sponsored by the LABC. The Hall of Fame was created in 1975 to honor former great basketball players and coaches from Louisiana colleges. More information about the LABC and the Hall of Fame can be obtained by visiting their website at www.labball.com.

April 29, 2019