

LEDELL EACKLES

*Note: This is the **first** in a series of four 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 2025 inductees will be former University of New Orleans stars Ledell Eackles and Bo McCalebb, along with former University of Louisiana at Lafayette star Elfrid Payton. Mr. Louisiana Basketball for 2025 is long-time Peabody Magnet High School coach Charles Smith.*

LEDELL EACKLES' LOVE OF BASKETBALL PUT UNO ON THE NATIONAL MAP

By: Les East
Written for the LABC

NEW ORLEANS -- Ledell Eackles made the difference.

It was the middle of the 1980s and the University of New Orleans was trying to elevate the status of its men's basketball program.

The Privateers started by hiring Alabama assistant Benny Dees to be head coach before the 1985-86 season. He quickly infused the roster with a group of talented transfers and his first team finished 16-12 a year after going 11-19.

It was nice start.

But UNO aspired to be more than that.

Then Eackles arrived. And everything changed.

The Baton Rouge native, graduate of Broadmoor High School and junior college transfer from San Jacinto College, gave the good UNO roster an elite addition.

Eackles was one of the most sought-after recruits in the country and the most significant recruit to ever choose UNO.

And the 1986-87 season was different than any other season in Privateers history. UNO finished the regular season 25-3, played in the NCAA Division I Tournament for the first time and advanced to the second round.



The 83-79 victory against BYU in 1987 remains the only NCAA Division I Tournament victory in school history, though the Privateers have made four subsequent trips to the tournament.

“I brought that extra push,” Eackles said recently.

Eackles put UNO on the Division I map nationally and he will be inducted into the Louisiana Basketball Hall of Fame during the Louisiana Association of Basketball Coaches’ 51st Annual Awards Banquet on May 3, at the Baton Rouge Marriott.

Dees and assistant Art Tolis, who had recruited Eackles, opened eyes around the country by luring him to a program that had been a Division II powerhouse in the early 1970s, but had just one trip to the NIT on its post-season resume in the eleven seasons as a Division I program before Eackles’ arrival.

After Dees’ first season ended, he and Tolis showed point guard Gabe Corchiani video of the prized recruit he’d be feeding the basketball to during his upcoming sophomore season.

“Look at who you’re going to be playing with next season,” Dees said to a “really excited” Corchiani.

“When I heard that he was coming,” Corchiani said, “I was like, ‘this is going to be something pretty special.’”

It was.

Corchiani’s eyes opened even wider when he got a first-hand look at Eackles after his new backcourt mate arrived on campus a few months later. A modestly large girth on Eackles’ 6-foot-5 frame belied his athleticism.

“I was around a lot of great basketball players,” Corchiani said, “but I had never seen somebody jump as high as he could.”

Eackles arrived at UNO at the same time that the 3-pointer arrived in college basketball. That became yet another asset for a player who could just as easily beat a defender off the dribble to get to the basket or post up down low and muscle his way to points.

“The game’s changed a lot,” Corchiani said. “You have great athletes now, but back then, he was one of the best athletes in basketball, just with his vertical jump and how quick he got off the ground. It was crazy. And he had just a phenomenal range on his three-point shot.”

No one benefited more from Eackles’ scoring ability than Corchiani, who found assists “easy” to come by whenever the pair was on the floor together.

“He made me look good,” Corchiani said. “I could throw the ball anywhere around the goal, and he’d go get it. He was able to maneuver his shot when he’d get inside the lane.”

Corchiani said it wasn’t just Eackles’ immense talent that made him “so fun to play with.”

“It was his personality,” Corchiani added. “He was just a happy-go-lucky guy. He was always smiling, always having a good time.”

Former long-time John Curtis Christian coach Mike Krajcer, who was a UNO assistant throughout Eackles’ tenure, noted that this star player’s “personality was beyond what a typical superstar of that era was like.”

“He was always joking and having fun with his teammates,” Krajcer said. “He wasn’t a person that was secluded, off to the side with that personality: ‘Look at me. I’m a superstar coming to a place like UNO.’”

Eackles’ down-to-earth personality was important because he was the player getting most of the attention before he ever played a game and was joining a team that featured the key players from the winning group of the previous season.

Forward Ronnie Grandison, the leading scorer and rebounder from the previous team, was a quiet leader and the soul of Dees’ fledgling program.

“Ledell being unselfish, being the type of person that he was,” Krajcer said, “he was willing to accept the fact that, in Benny’s mind and in most of the other players’ minds, Ronnie Grandison was the star of the team, even though Ledell got more accolades.”

“I think as a team, we all knew we weren’t going anywhere without Ronnie Grandison, and I think Ledell’s ability to accept that really helped us move forward to having a great season.”

It was Eackles’ all-around ability that turned a winning -- but not good enough for the post-season -- team into one that would be ranked as high as No. 16 in the final regular season AP national poll.

“I was like, ‘give me the ball and I’m going to make it happen,” Eackles said. “That’s the way I thought about it when I was playing because when I was in high school, I played center, I played power forward, I played both guard positions. I took the ball off the goal and pushed it. I just did whatever they needed me to do.”

“Everybody looked at him as the scorer,” Krajcer said, “but (observing him) as a coach, he was the complete player. He could do it all. He could score, he could rebound, he could defend.”

Forward Sam Jones generally would guard the best big man on the opposing team, but Eackles would often be assigned the best wing player.

“Benny would say, ‘I need you to guard the shooter on the other team or the best player on the team,’” Krajcer recalled. “And he would do that.”

Eackles was named an honorable mention All-American, as well as the Louisiana Player of the Year and Newcomer of the Year and a USBWA District Player of the Year in his first season. He averaged 22.6 points, 4.1 rebounds and 2.5 three-point field goals made and had a 40.7% three-point field goal percentage.

A year later – after Grandison graduated and Dees left to become head coach at Wyoming, his alma mater – Eackles was again named an honorable mention All-American and first team All-Louisiana, NABC All-District and USBWA All-District selection, as well as the American South Conference Player of the Year after leading the Privateers to the ASC championship and the NIT. He led the conference with an average of 23.4 points, shooting 50.8% from the floor and 80.2% on free throws.

Throughout his career off the beaten path at UNO, Eackles’ performance could have evoked memories of Billy Joel’s Piano Man – the anonymous musician whose talent exceeded the norm in his surroundings and inspired wowed bar patrons to ask, as they stuffed cash into his tip jar, “Man, what are you doing here?”

But for Eackles choosing to take a road less traveled by players of his stature was an easy one. His parents had been making a four-hour drive each way to see him play at San Jacinto, but UNO’s campus was barely an hour from home.

“I just wanted to make it easy for them to go right there to New Orleans,” Eackles said. “They were enjoying me, watching me play all the way from growing up, so I pretty much did it because of them, so they could see the games.”

Eackles wasn’t concerned about the limelight finding him.

“I knew I was going to play in the pros,” he said matter-of-factly. “If you can play, people are going to come see you, right?”

Right.

By the time the Privateers reached the NCAA Tournament in 1987, all sorts of people were keeping an eye on them.

“We had a bunch of hype leading up to it,” Corchiani said. “We got interviewed by everybody from national TV stations to ESPN. CBS came in and did a real big special down in

the French Quarter. They had the whole team walking around and talking about everything. Sports Illustrated did a big article.”

And UNO validated the hype by performing on the biggest stage in college basketball just as it had performed off of most people’s radar for most of the season.

In the first-round win against BYU, Grandison was solid as a rock with 15 points and 11 rebounds, Corchiani was steady with nine points, seven assists and three clutch late free throws and the supporting cast led by Jones, Mike Smith and Terrance Bellock provided important complementary contributions.

And Eackles was Eackles, supplying most of the highlights, scoring a game-high 25 points, making four of six 3-pointers and adding an emphatic dunk in the final seconds.

Corchiani called the game “nail biting.” Eackles acknowledged that the Privateers were in “uncharted waters,” but said he didn’t treat the game any differently than any other.

“I always went on the floor to win,” he said. “I didn’t care if it was a playground game or an NCAA game.”

Eackles was selected by the Washington Bullets in the second round of the 1988 NBA Draft and played professionally for seven seasons. He said he “still could have played” when he retired, but he “got tired of playing” and “didn’t have the love for it anymore.”

“I didn’t do it for the money,” Eackles said. “I didn’t want to sit on the bench to drag down a long career. I was well liked in the program.”

So he stayed with the Wizards as a scout and joined the sister franchise Mystics of the WNBA as an assistant coach.

Eackles “stepped away from the organization” after owner Abe Pollin died in 2009.

“I’m living my best life,” Eackles said of his retirement.

Eackles said he certainly “appreciates” his selection for the Hall of Fame, though he wasn’t one of “a lot of athletes that play for the Hall of Fame.”

“I just love the sport of basketball,” he said.

Eackles finished his two-year UNO career as the third-leading scorer in school history with 1,358 points, a 23.0 average, averaged 4.5 rebounds and made 35.2% of his three-point field goal attempts.

His fondest memory of being a Privateer, though, has nothing to do with statistics, but rather “building a program.”

“People say you can’t go to a mid-major school and make it,” he said. “I didn’t believe that.”

“I’m just a simple person, to be honest. I just feel I’m blessed coming from Scotlandville, where a lot of people don’t make it. I had the opportunity to get out and do something.”

In addition to the Louisiana Basketball Hall of Fame inductions, the May 3 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, as well as the presentation of the LABC’s Mr. Louisiana Basketball award to long-time Peabody Magnet High School coach Charles Smith.

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.

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