

JACK ORSLEY

*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 2022 inductee will be former Loyola national championship-winning coach Jack Orsley. Mr. Louisiana Basketball for 2022 is former long-time Northwestern St. sports information director Doug Ireland.*

JACK ORSLEY...ONE OF A KIND FOR NEARLY 80 YEARS

By: Ramon Antonio Vargas
Written for the LABC

NEW ORLEANS, LA – During his 91 years of life, John C. “Jack” Orsley graced some of the best institutions both in southeast Louisiana and in this country with his presence.

Orsley – born in 1905 in Pennsylvania and raised in upstate New York – graduated from the University of Illinois and attained a master's degree in education from Columbia University. He coached basketball and baseball for 45 years in New Orleans, making stops at schools like Jesuit, Isidore Newman, East Jefferson and Tulane University when his run started in 1928.

But it was midway through a 10-year stint as basketball coach at New Orleans' Loyola University where Orsley secured himself coaching immortality.

On paper, Orsley didn't have an abundance of things to feel good about in terms of the roster he was bringing into that 1944-45 season. He had just lost his best player, who had left Loyola to serve in the United State Army, then fully locked in World War II. Only two of Orsley's players were returning, with the rest being mostly freshman from the Crescent City, trying to bond and learn to trust each other after the intense high school rivalries they fostered with each other while representing schools like Jesuit, Holy Cross, Fortier and Warren Easton.

Yet Orsley was realistic about his lot in life, so to speak. The financial budget at his disposal was about \$50,000, he once estimated. It was about as much as he could expect.

Generally, Orsley knew he had four exceptional talents: players Leroy Chollet, Jim Hultberg and Tommy Whittaker, who together handled most of the scoring, passing, defending and rebounding, and his assistant Jim McCafferty, who would help craft plans to break down opponents. And Orsley knew enough to simply let them do what they did best and only intervene when he had something more than they could offer.



The approach paid the highest of dividends. Loyola won 21 of 26 regular-season contests, clashing with opponents from other universities as well as military bases from the region. The Wolf Pack's reward was an invitation to what is now known as the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics' championship tournament in Kansas City, beating three opponents to set up a faceoff with Pepperdine in the title game.



It was in the hours leading up to the game where Orsley showed off his coaching philosophy. Players worried about Pepperdine's height advantage. The Los Angeles school's players averaged a height of 6 feet, 4 inches, which was as tall as Loyola's tallest player. So one of them visited Orsley and proposed pressuring Pepperdine's ball handlers all over the court for the entire game, ostensibly to make them settle for shots as far away from the basket as possible.

Orsley's team had never tried that during the regular season. But the coach's instinct was that his player was right. And he wanted to let a desire to win, rather than the fear of defeat, guide him.

Orsley ordered up the full-court pressure for the entire final. The Wolf Pack collected steal after steal and translated them into a multitude of fast breaks and easy baskets. A four-point halftime lead for Loyola became a six-point advantage with nine minutes left in the championship game.

Then, as Pepperdine became increasingly frustrated with its inability to break Loyola's pressure, the Wolf Pack widened its advantage to 13 points. As the final seconds ticked off, Pepperdine's coach walked over to Orsley, shook his hand and confessed his shock that the Wolf Pack kept up the pressure for the entire 40 minutes of Loyola's 49-36 victory.

The first national championship in Loyola history was Orsley's and his players' to cherish.

As anyone in sports knows, sometimes winning the second one is harder than the first. Chollet, Orsley's star player, transferred in the offseason after a recruiting battle over his brother – another prized athlete – revealed that his family was of mixed race. New Orleans was still segregated at the time, and the Chollets headed north.

Orsley still coached Loyola to the NAIA semifinals in 1946. But at that stage, Pepperdine got their revenge, eliminating the Wolf Pack.

It would be another 77 years before a men's basketball team representing Loyola reached those stages of the postseason. Coach Stacy Hollowell, and his stars Myles Burns and Zach Wrightsil, went 37-1 and captured the Wolf Pack's second national title in 2021-2022 in the same building in Kansas City that Orsley's squad had made history.

Orsley, who was inducted into Loyola's athletics hall of fame in 1967, never got to see the Wolf Pack bring the Maude Naismith trophy given to the NAIA national champs back home. After spending his final years landscaping and fishing in a lake behind his property in Mississippi, he died in 1996, at age 91.

Orsley's 173 coaching victories at Loyola from 1939 to 1949 are the most in the history of the men's basketball program at the school. His career winning percentage of 70.3% is also the highest, which included seasons of 25-5, 22-11, 21-3, 21-9, 14-2 and 15-5. Hollowell was motivated to equal, if not surpass, those marks as his new generation returned Loyola men's basketball to its former glories, months after Hurricane Ida destroyed the Wolf Pack's home court and amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

"From the time I set foot on campus at Loyola, I was fascinated by the (1945) national championship banner that hung at the top of the gym," Hollowell said. "It represented everything I wanted for our program."

To Hollowell, Orsley's accomplishments that legendary year seemed unattainable – until, suddenly, they were.

"To win a national championship at any level is incredibly difficult," Hollowell added. "You need the right mix of talent, efficiency, chemistry, unselfishness, health and luck. In some years, it's tough to just get one or two of those things to line up. But Coach Orsley was able to bring it all together, and he did it during the middle of a war. I can't imagine how difficult that must have been."

"I never got to meet Coach Orsley, but I am forever grateful for the model that he and his team left for us at Loyola."

Orsley will be inducted into the Louisiana Basketball Hall of Fame during the Louisiana Association of Basketball Coaches' 48th Annual Awards Banquet this Saturday, May 7, at the Baton Rouge Marriott. The banquet is sponsored by the Baton Rouge Orthopaedic Clinic.

In addition to the Louisiana Basketball Hall of Fame induction, the 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 former long-time Northwestern State sports information director Doug Ireland.

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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