

## ELFRID PAYTON

*Note: This is the **third** 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.*

### DROPPING DIMES PART OF THE PLAN FOR ELFRID PAYTON

LAFAYETTE, LA -- The ability to pass instead of racking up big point totals was Elfrid Payton's ticket to basketball stardom and to a long career at the game's highest professional level, but it was also something that was carefully planned even before he hit his teens.

From John Ehret High School to the University of Louisiana at Lafayette to over 400 NBA starts with six different teams, Payton had it all thought out.

"I was always so much younger and usually smaller than everyone I was playing with," he said, "and that made me learn the game differently and faster. I wasn't as tall and as fast and as athletic as most of those guys, so I knew I needed to get them the ball."



"Plus, guys play better defense when they're scoring, and I wanted guys who would really play defense so I tried to help them score. I gotta admit, I did get a lot of fun out of that."

Long-time ULL coach Bob Marlin wasn't surprised by that reasoning.

"That's why he's going to be a great coach someday," said Marlin, the Ragin' Cajun coach during Payton's career from 2011-14. "He understands the game at so many levels and knows what has to happen for a team to be successful."

In recognition of his accomplishments as a player at ULL, Payton 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.

It wasn't that the New Orleans native couldn't score. He averaged 15.9 and 19.2 points per game in the final two of his three collegiate seasons with the Cajuns, despite still being a

teenager for all but seven games as a collegian. He didn't turn 18 years old until only three games remained in his freshman season, and by that time he'd already claimed a spot in ULL's starting lineup.

He led the Cajuns in assists and steals in that first year, something he continued in his final two years including averaging just under six assists as a senior along with his nearly 20 points a game.

"It was part of me always wanting to prove myself and prove that I belonged," Payton said. "I wanted everyone to know that they made the right decision in giving me a chance ... my high school coaches, college coaches, the teams that drafted me and that I played for in the NBA."

Those decisions were obviously correct. During his college career, Payton was Louisiana's Player of the Year, the CollegeInsider National Defensive Player of the Year, the Sun Belt Conference Defensive Player of the Year and a CollegeInsider Mid-Major All-American in 2014, as well as a two-time first team All-SBC and NABC All-District selection. He also earned a spot as starting point guard for Team USA's Under-19 world championship squad in 2013, led the Cajuns to the SBC Tournament title and an NCAA Tournament appearance in 2014, and was the 10th overall selection in the 2014 NBA Draft by the Philadelphia 76ers.

"I just wanted the chance," he said. "Maybe I was a little naïve, but I just wanted to play and have a role, be on the floor, and I worked as hard as I could to get myself in that position."

Marlin saw that first-hand on more than one occasion.

"We'd lost to a really good Little Rock team in overtime at home late in his first year," Marlin said, "and he'd missed some free throws in the last few minutes. He's crying in the locker room and I felt like crying for him, but when I left the Cajundome maybe 11 o'clock that night I walked out on the court and Elfrid's out there shooting free throws with one of our managers. When I got back the next morning around 9, he's out there shooting again."

"The next year, we played Middle Tennessee in the (Sun Belt Conference) tournament and lost, and after the game Elfrid went to the press conference with me. We were walking back down the hall to the bus and he was just sobbing. He looked up at me and said, 'I'm not going to let this happen again.' The next year, we won it. He was on a mission from that press conference on, and that summer he just took off."

Not long after that second-year tournament loss, Payton was invited to play in an eight-game, 18-day tour of the Far East and China with the Reach USA organization. He posted huge scoring, rebounding and assist numbers on that tour, enough to catch the eye of USA Basketball officials who invited him to join the prospects for Team USA's Under-19 squad for the FIBA World Championships.

Six days into those tryouts, he earned one of 12 team spots, and not long after that he was the starting point guard on a team that went 9-0 to win the world title in the Czech Republic. In the finals against Serbia, Payton had nine points, six assists and five steals in an 82-68 gold-medal win.

“I was getting texts from coaches at the tryouts that were saying Elfrid was unstoppable, they couldn’t defend him,” Marlin said. “Billy Donovan called me and said he was not only going to make the team, he was in the top eight, and he wound up starting every game in Prague.”

“That summer just changed my life,” Payton said. “I became a man. I’d been playing up my whole life because of how young I was ... I was a 17-year-old freshman playing against 21-year-olds, but I got stronger and my body caught up with my IQ for the game. With Team USA I was there with guys that were going to be top picks – even the guys that didn’t make the team were really good players – but I was finally with guys my age.”

“That’s when I kind of knew for sure that I belonged in those conversations.”

Two summers earlier, he was a rail-thin 6-foot-2, 150-pounder, only three months removed from leading an undermanned John Ehret team to the Class 5A state semifinals, where they lost to Scotlandville. Payton had 23 points in that game, his first on a Cajundome floor that would be home for the next three years, and came to ULL for summer workouts in June of 2011.

“He’d been there a week and we’d worked out a few times, and you could tell in just that one week that he was different,” Marlin said. “He was really thin, but he had it in his mind and in his heart that he was built different. You could tell he was going to be successful.”

Payton is still ULL’s all-time leader in steals and is fifth in assists despite playing only three years, along with scoring 1,425 points (a 14.3 average) and collecting 508 career rebounds (a 5.1 average). He led the Sun Belt in assists and steals in each of his final two seasons, ranking second in the league in scoring in his final season (“by necessity,” Marlin said, “he had to score a lot for us that year”) with that 19.2 average. He had a triple-double with 34 points, 11 rebounds and 11 assists against UL-Monroe that year, one of only 10 players nationally to reach that feat that season.

If anything, the numbers became more impressive when he took his talents to the NBA. He was fourth in the 2014-15 NBA Rookie of the Year voting when he averaged nine points and 6.5 assists for the Orlando Magic, and he averaged over six assists per game for each of his first six seasons. While with the New Orleans Pelicans in 2019, he became only the fifth player in NBA history to record a triple-double in five consecutive games.

And those numbers are still there. In the current NBA season at age 30, after two years out of the league, he’s had a 21-assist game while playing with his hometown New Orleans

Pelicans. As recently as late March as part of back-to-back 10-day contracts with the Pelicans, he had 14 assists in a win over Philadelphia – ironically, the team that drafted him out of college before a preseason trade to the Magic.

He's hoping his late-season performances can lead to another NBA season next year, and thinks his experience – over 500 NBA games with over 400 career starts – can be a benefit to teams and teammates.

"I know I can still play, and play at a high level," he said. "I think I can still help teams. There's a lot I can still give to the game. Maybe coaching will come later on, but right now I still have a lot to give on the player side ... someone who can mentor young guys in the league."

"Sometimes those things aren't up to us. If they say there's still time for me, I will keep going, and if they say that's it for me, I'll give to the game in other ways, because it surely gave me more than I could ever imagine."

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](http://www.labball.com).

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