

PAUL THOMPSON

*Note: This is the **first** in a series of three articles on this year's inductees into the Louisiana Basketball Hall of Fame and the LABC's Mr. Louisiana Basketball award recipient. The 2008 inductees will be former star player Paul Thompson of Tulane and former Tulane coach Perry Clark. Mr. Louisiana Basketball for 2008 is long-time referee and current Coordinator of Men's Basketball Officials for the Southeastern Conference, Gerald Boudreaux of Lafayette.*

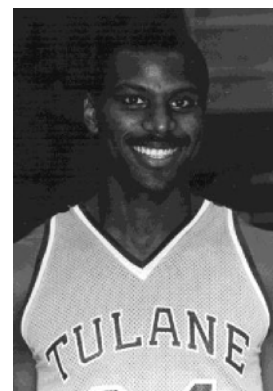
THOMPSON MADE MOST OF TULANE OPPORTUNITY

By: Les East
Written for the LABC

NEW ORLEANS -- When Paul Thompson was a budding basketball star at Peabody High School in Alexandria in the late 1970s, he looked at the Tulane basketball program and saw something that wasn't readily apparent.

To the naked eye, the Green Wave basketball program was one that had won just 13 games combined in the previous two seasons and had never been to a post-season tournament.

But Thompson saw it as a challenge and an opportunity, which, along with the attraction of a top-flight education and proximity to home, led Thompson to choose Tulane.



"It was a losing program and we were a bunch of young guys trying to do our best to build the program," Thompson said. "It was an uphill battle."

But it was one that the Green Wave won, with Thompson leading the way. He burst on to the scene as the Metro Conference Freshman of the Year for the 1979-80 season.

He was a three-time honorable mention Sporting News All-American, four-time All-Metro Conference, three-time All-Louisiana, and two-time first team NABC All-District selection.

Thompson was an All-Metro Conference Tournament selection in 1983. He finished his career as the leading scorer and second-leading rebounder in Tulane history, with 1,851 points for a 16.5 average and 903 rebounds for an 8.1 average.

He averaged 17.5 points and 7.4 rebounds in 1983, 14.7 points and 7.4 rebounds in 1982, 18.7 points and a Metro Conference leading 9.4 rebounds in 1981, and 15.0 points and 8.2 rebounds in 1980. He led Tulane to two consecutive NIT appearances, reaching the quarterfinals in 1982. He was also the MVP of the LABC North-South All-Star Game in 1983.

His stellar career has now earned him induction into the Louisiana Basketball Hall of Fame, an accomplishment that he said left him “surprised and honored.”

Thompson said he started getting “swamped” by letters from college basketball coaches that arrived at his high school when he was a sophomore.

Most of the letters were form letters, but a personalized, hand-written letter from Green Wave coach Roy Danforth caught his eye. “We had a good rapport,” Thompson said. “He’d be hard on us when he needed to be hard on us, but he would laugh and joke with us when he wanted to.”

Danforth coached Thompson for two seasons before Danforth left to become head coach at Syracuse. Ned Fowler came aboard and in Thompson’s junior season, Tulane was selected to play in the National Invitation Tournament, the program’s first post-season berth.

The Green Wave wasn’t satisfied simply to reach the post-season, going on to defeat LSU (83-72) and Nevada-Las Vegas (56-51) before losing to Bradley (77-61) in the 1982 NIT. Tulane returned to the tournament a year later, losing to Nebraska in the first round.

“Getting to the NIT my junior and senior years was probably the biggest memory,” Thompson said. “That was pretty memorable. The team came a long way.”

Thompson said he was most proud of his durability and work ethic as a player. “I missed one game in four years and that was because I had a severely sprained ankle,” he said. “I always played hard. It was the only way I knew how to play the game.”

“I was determined to play hard. When I was young, my dad told me that if I was going to play that I had to play the right way. I learned that at any early age.”

Thompson said his father, Robert, would attend his games and was willing to offer advice, but never volunteered a critique of his son’s play.

“My Dad was one of those fathers that stayed in the background,” Thompson said. “He never brought up my game or how I played. After a game he would never initiate the conversation. He waited for me to bring it up, then we would talk about it.”

Thompson also received basketball influence from his mother, Ruth.

“I got a lot of my basketball knowledge from my mother,” he said. “She played the game when she was growing up. When I was learning to play, my father was in Vietnam so she taught me how to play. When my father got back he helped refine my skills.”

“I was nine or 10 years old and she taught me how to shoot. We had a goal over the garage. The driveway wasn’t paved. It was just grass and dirt so you couldn’t dribble much. But you could shoot so I learned how to shoot.”

“Later we moved to a house with a paved driveway,” Thompson said. “I’d play for hours and hours, lots of times by myself. When it would get dark, I’d just turn on the porch light and keep playing for hours.”

When Thompson finished at Tulane he strengthened his NBA resume with impressive work at a series of pre-draft camps. Eventually the Cleveland Cavaliers picked him with the third pick in the third round of the 1983 draft.

Thompson was impressive playing for the Cavs’ Los Angeles Summer League team, earning a roster spot as Cleveland released two players from bigger college programs who had guaranteed contracts – Bobby Wilkerson (Indiana) and Rich Washington (UCLA).

Thompson went on to play three years in the NBA, also being a member of the Milwaukee Bucks and the Philadelphia 76ers. He settled in Milwaukee where he has been a detective in the city’s Sheriff’s Department for the last eight-plus years.

His father influenced him in this endeavor as well. When Thompson was in high school, his father was working as a probation officer. He took his son with him to help him grab an elusive probation violator.

The suspect had a habit of running out the back door and escaping when Officer Thompson came knocking at the front door. So Paul knocked on the front door while his father stood waiting in the back yard to nab the suspect as he fled out the back door.

As Thompson continues to make a name for himself in law enforcement, he’ll pause to reflect on his basketball career and the opportunity he took advantage of at Tulane.

“I had a good time in college,” Thompson said. “I enjoyed playing ball. I wish we could have gone to the NCAA Tournament, but I can’t complain. We had some bad times, but mostly it was good times.”

Thompson will be inducted into the Hall of Fame on May 10, along with former Green Wave coach Perry Clark.

The Hall of Fame induction ceremonies will be held in conjunction with the Louisiana Association of Basketball Coaches 34th Annual Awards Banquet at the Embassy Suites Hotel in Baton Rouge. The banquet is sponsored by SportsCare and the Baton Rouge Orthopaedic Clinic.

In addition to the induction of the new Hall of Fame members, the 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 prestigious Mr.

Louisiana Basketball award to long-time referee and current Coordinator of Men's Basketball Officials for the Southeastern Conference, Gerald Boudreaux of Lafayette.

A limited number of tickets for the banquet are available for \$25 and can be reserved by contacting the LABC at labball@gmail.com. The Embassy Suites Hotel is located at 4914 Constitution Avenue in Baton Rouge (College Drive exit off of Interstate 10).

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. You can learn more about the LABC and the Hall of Fame by visiting their website at www.labball.com.

May 5, 2008