

MIKE VINING

*Note: This is the **first** in a series of two articles on this year's inductee into the Louisiana Basketball Hall of Fame and the LABC's Mr. Louisiana Basketball award recipient. The 2012 inductee will be former UL-Monroe coach Mike Vining. Mr. Louisiana Basketball for 2012 is long-time New Orleans sportswriter Bill Bumgarner.*

HOOPS + HOME = HAPPINESS FOR VINING

By: Paul Letlow
Written for the LABC

MONROE, LA -- Mike Vining retired from coaching basketball in 2005, yet he's still using the same skill set in his current position.

For the past two years, the former University of Louisiana at Monroe men's coach has served as executive administrative officer for Monroe Mayor Jamie Mayo, his former point guard at Bastrop High School. Vining's comfort level with people from different backgrounds, his trademark sense of humor and his ability to communicate serve him well as a city ambassador.



“The two main things in anything you choose to do are loyalty and being able to get along with people,” Vining said. “If it's guys working in the trash department, I can relate to them. If they're working in the sewer department or the engineering department, I can relate to them. If they're an accountant, I can relate to them. They know my feelings about the Mayor and the loyalty I'm going to show. I try to set that example.”

Rock solid in his core values, Vining rode that same philosophy to great heights as a coach. He won 401 games (4th most in state history) at the former Northeast Louisiana University with seven NCAA Tournament bids and one NIT appearance. His basketball teams won 20 or more games six times and he claimed seven Southland Conference regular season titles and seven conference tournament championships. He ended his career as the winningest coach in ULM and Southland Conference history.

Not only was Vining was a four-time Southland Conference Coach of the Year honoree, but he was also named Louisiana Coach of the Year twice and NABC District Coach of the Year once.

Followers of his program know well though, those accomplishments are only part of Vining's story. Ultimately it was the coach's loyalty to the school, his personality and the way his teams played that made his 24-year run as head coach so special. Funny, likeable and as down-to-earth as a successful coach could be, Vining was the right man in the same job for a long time.

“When people ask me if I miss it, the one thing I miss most is the relationships,” Vining said. “I don’t miss the bus rides, all the phone calls or the study halls. I miss the time on the floor and in the dressing room. I miss the time visiting with people associated with the game.”



Vining will be inducted into the Louisiana Basketball Hall of Fame on May 5. He is already a member of the Southland Conference Hall of Honor, the ULM Hall of Fame and the Louisiana Sports Hall of Fame.

Vining carried on a ULM tradition of longevity and excellence started by his mentor and coach Lenny Fant. He surpassed Fant’s school record of 326 wins in 1999, all the while giving his old coach the credit for showing him the winning formula for career satisfaction.

“As strange as it appears today, it never appeared strange to me back then,” he said. “I had played for Coach Fant and that’s the way he had been. He was here and he was happy.”

Vining was a product of northeastern Louisiana and never wanted to stray far from his family and the people that he knew so well.

“If I had started off somewhere else, I might have returned here,” Vining said. “But this is my school, this is my program. Dr. (Dwight) Vines gave me an opportunity to coach here and I always felt like I owed it to them that they made the right decision. I never thought about trying to see how much money I could make or where I could go. Happiness was more important to me.”

A native of Goodwill in West Carroll Parish, Vining played on three district championship basketball teams at Forest High. After playing both baseball and basketball at ULM under Fant, he served in the U.S. Army for three years before beginning a successful coaching career in 1971 at Bastrop High.

He led Bastrop to a 175-47 record, six state playoff appearances and one state championship during his seven seasons. His 1975 championship team (led by future ULM and NBA star Calvin Natt) finished the season with a 35-1 record, earning Vining state Class AAAA Coach of the Year honors.

In 1978, Vining returned to ULM as an assistant coach for three seasons (under Fant and Benny Hollis), before school president Vines elevated him to head coach in 1981. He installed a trademark style that emphasized hard-nosed defense and unselfishness and led the program to its first NCAA Tournament in the 1981-82 season.

“Teamwork,” Vining said, was his prevailing message to players. “I never bought into the NBA philosophy of five guys playing one-on-one. It felt like it was five guys working together. I wanted the best shot and the best person to take that shot. The best teams I had had a point guard who believed in that.”

Former point guard Casey Jones said Vining’s man-to-man defensive gospel rang true with his top squads. “No matter if we were playing McNeese State or Duke,” Jones said. “He felt like we could go out and guard anybody. That’s something I believe in.”

Vining often relates the story of Anthony “Greyhound” Jones, a jumping-jack forward who embraced his message. One of the most talented players Vining ever coached, Jones accepted his role as sixth man for most of his career because it helped the team. Vining loved having a scorer like Jones burst off the bench and they won big because of his willingness to buy in.

“Look at Greyhound,” he said. “He came off the bench three years and made all-conference coming off the bench. His last year he did start but it made him a more complete player too. I kept telling him, I’m going to start my best five on defense. His junior year and going into his senior year, he realized it was more than just keeping up with your man. We wanted to dominate your man on defense.”

ULM never enjoyed more positive national exposure in athletics than during Vining’s golden age in the mid-1980s and early 1990s, with return trips to the NCAA Tournament in 1986, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1993 and later in 1996. Vining faced legends like Mike Krzyzewski of Duke, Lute Olson at Iowa and UNLV’s Jerry Tarkanian. His teams battled stars like Wake Forest’s Tim Duncan, Duke’s Christian Laettner, Bobby Hurley and Grant Hill and Iowa’s Acie Earl.

“I remember when we went four straight times,” Vining said. “At that time, there were only like 14 schools in the country that had ever gone four consecutive years. That puts you in pretty good company. At that time, I don’t think most people appreciated what was happening. Now looking back, if we went one time it would be quite an accomplishment. But the four straight times was unbelievable.”

Though Vining was 0-for-7 in NCAA opportunities, there was the close 62-50 loss to Duncan’s Wake Forest squad in 1996. ULM cut the lead to eight with 3:06 remaining and held Duncan to 10 points. But the Demon Deacons shot 24 free throws to ULM’s four to survive.

Teamwork still produced individual accolades for players. Seven of his players earned SLC Player of the Year honors, to go along with five SLC Newcomer of the Year selections and 46 all-conference picks. Sixteen of Vining’s players were 1,000-point scorers and seven-footer Wojciech Myrda set the NCAA record in career blocked shots in 2002.

“Coach Vining is a good teacher,” said Terry Martin, who played on Vining’s first NCAA Tournament team and later served as his assistant coach. “He knew how to relate to the

players and get them to understand what he wanted them to do. He was also a good motivator. He motivated people to play above their abilities.”

Just as Vining was part of Fant’s coaching tree, several of his former players have also enjoyed success in the profession. In the Monroe area, Martin at Richwood and Casey Jones at Ouachita have won state championships at their respective high schools while Neville’s Phillip Craig has enjoyed recent success with his program too.

“It’s a testament to Coach Vining that he had such a great influence on so many of his players that they decided to go into that field,” Jones said. “A lot of us have been fortunate to have some success.”

Additionally, former Vining assistant Jesse Burnette is head coach at Carroll High School while current ULM coach Keith Richard is also a former Vining player.

“It means a lot and I follow them,” Vining said. “They’ve kept me involved in high school basketball. I stay in touch with them. They were big attributes to us as players and they’re continuing on with that. It says a lot about their character and the ability they had to take it from playing to coaching.”

Spearheading a difficult overhaul at ULM now, Richard recently organized a reunion of that 1981-82 team that was the first in school history to reach the NCAA Tournament.

“That was a great success to have all those guys back and pulling for him,” Vining said. “We had a chance to visit and bring back some of the good times that we really had.”

Camaraderie and fellowship were important to Vining and remain a big part of his lasting impact.

“He always had good relationships with his players,” Casey Jones said. “When you can have that kind of relationship with your players, they’ll do anything for you. That’s something I took from him. You’ve got to be in tune with what your players are doing.”

Added Martin, “He made everybody feel comfortable and it was like a family. It was a family atmosphere. He would take time to talk to you any time and he always had an open door. Looking back at that time, the family atmosphere was the most important thing in being able to go out on that floor to give it your all for him and for the school.”

The Hall of Fame induction ceremonies will be held in conjunction with the Louisiana Association of Basketball Coaches’ 38th Annual Awards Banquet at the Embassy Suites Hotel in Baton Rouge. The banquet is sponsored by SportsCare, the Baton Rouge Orthopaedic Clinic and Chesapeake Energy Corporation.

In addition to the induction of the new Hall of Fame member, 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 New Orleans sportswriter Bill Bumgarner.

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 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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