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POINT AFTER BY ALBERT CHEN

# JUMP START KENNY SAILORS

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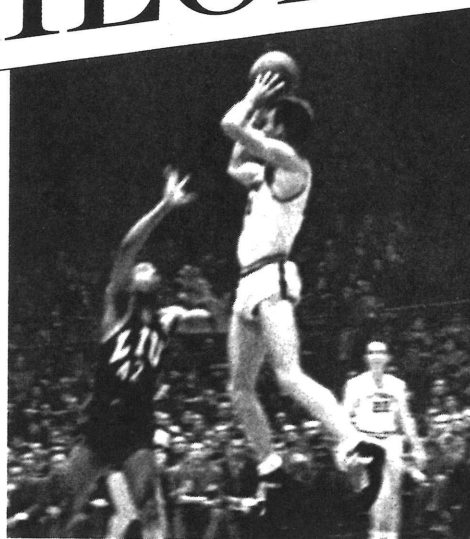
**E REMEMBERS THE** first time it happened. It was 1934, an afternoon on the farm in southeastern Wyoming, and Kenny was an impossibly skinny 13-year-old playing a game of one-on-one with his older brother, Bud, on the makeshift court where they spent their days. The ground was dirt, the ball was leather with laces, and the rim was a rounded piece of pipe attached to a windmill. Kenny was tired of watching all his shots get swatted away by Bud, who was 6' 5". So on this afternoon he decided to try something different from the two-handed set shot: He jumped off the ground and shot the

ball with one hand. "I don't remember if that shot went in or not," Kenny says, but he does remember what Bud said afterward: "That's a good shot. You should keep working on that."

Kenny Sailors is 92 and largely forgotten—except in Laramie, where he lives and is known as the floor general of Everett Shelton's Cowboys teams that dominated the college game in the early 1940s with their weave offense. Sailors led Wyoming to its only national championship, in '43, when he was named the NCAA tournament's Most Outstanding Player as well as college basketball's player of the year. But Sailors was also a revolutionary who changed the game by developing and ultimately popularizing the modern-day jump shot. His radical innovation, which landed him in *LIFE* magazine in '46, and his dazzling ballhandling made him the most dynamic college player at the time. "Once I started using [the jumper], I realized I could get this shot off over anybody," says Sailors, who was 5' 10" in college. "It paid off every time I ran into a six-foot-five player who could give me trouble."

With his frenetic, freewheeling style, Sailors was ahead of his time. When his first coach in the pros, Dutch Dehnert of the BAA's Cleveland Rebels, saw him shoot, he told Sailors, "I need to teach you a proper two-handed set shot. That shot will never go in this league." Dehnert played Sailors sparingly but a coaching change soon landed Sailors in the starting lineup, and he went on to have a fine professional career: three years in the BAA and two years in the NBA, where he was the top scorer for the original Denver Nuggets in 1949–50. But he spent most of his time stuck on losing teams and was out of the pros by the time he was 30.

By then a scattering of players were shooting the one-handed jump shot, and somewhere along the way history forgot with whom it originated. For years the Basketball Hall of Fame credited Glenn Roberts, and a number of other players have received recognition as well. But Sailors's passionate fans, who have pushed for his induction into the Hall, have long and loudly asserted that each of those other players shot a variation on his jumper. Sailors's shot is the true original of the modern version. However, he says, "I never claimed to be the first person to jump in the air to shoot the ball, and to be honest, it's not important to me if



## ANCHORS AWEIGH

Sailors first left the ground out of necessity, then saw his creation take over the game.

the debate is ever truly settled. I don't think it can ever be set straight."

Sailors, whose wife, Marilynne, died in 2002, lives quietly in an assisted-living facility a few steps from the Cowboys' basketball arena. He is a fixture at both men's and women's games, where people ask him all the time about the greatest team in Wyoming history. And of course, people ask him about the shot he unleashed that afternoon 79 years ago.

A few years back a fan named Jack Rose e-mailed Sailors to say that as a teenager he and some friends took a train to Madison Square Garden for a doubleheader. "Some team from Wyoming was playing," wrote Rose, who would go on to captain the basketball team at Cornell, "and your performance was so terrific we could hardly [wait to] get back to the playground to work on our 'jump shot'—but we just couldn't master it! For years we always remembered that night with you, and we'd always say, 'We know who invented the jump shot.'" □