





# THE COWBOY WITH A JUMP SHOT

*Former Wyoming All-American KENNY SAILORS*

*led the Cowboys to the 1943 NCAA title*

By Lew Freedman

If there is a special event scheduled at the University of Wyoming — you name it — for the basketball team, the football team, or any athletics get-together, the Cowboys count on Kenny Sailors being on the premises and offering a wave to the crowd.

They are glad to have him and Sailors, at 91, the oldest living Most Outstanding Player of the NCAA Division I Men's Basketball Championship, is glad to be there. If the event involves the basketball team, Sailors in the flesh is standing beneath a Sailors piece of memorabilia that is a symbol of the most honored, admired and historically pleasant sports memory in the school's history.

An over-sized version of his basketball jersey from the 1940s hangs from the rafters at Arena-Auditorium, known to opponents as "The Dome of Doom."

In 1943, when Sailors was introducing the embryonic jump shot to anyone who saw him play, from the Rocky Mountains to Madison Square Garden, Wyoming won the NCAA championship and Sailors had the individual trophy bestowed upon him.

Sailors is a native of Wyoming and although he spent a good chunk of his adulthood in Alaska living in a remote log cabin with his late wife Marilynne, he is back in Laramie celebrating the twilight of his life in the place that provided him with a national reputation.

*< The 91-year-old Sailors is a fixture at Wyoming men's and women's games at the Arena-Auditorium.*

Photo by Andrew Carpenean



# THE COWBOY WITH A JUMP SHOT

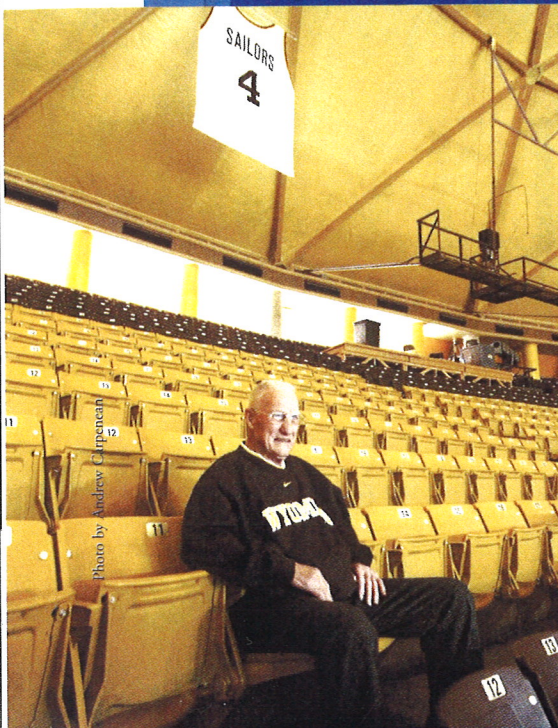
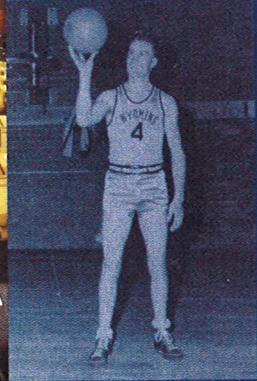


Photo by Andrew Carpenter

< Sailors' No. 4 is the only jersey that has been retired at Wyoming's Arena-Auditorium.



Not only was Sailors a sharp-shooting, 5-foot-10 guard for the Cowboys when they defeated Georgetown, 46-34, in that NCAA championship game, Sailors helped his university gather an avalanche of publicity because of the new-fangled shot he popularized.

At a time when basketball was played below the rim, when players were scolded if they didn't pump up two-hand set shots, Sailors was a revolutionary. When Sailors shot, he jumped off the ground, straight up, and released his shot at the top of his leap. Although there are isolated instances of the occasional jump shot being used by other players before him, Sailors is regarded as the father of the jump shot, even its inventor, because he was the first and only player using it on the national stage and his form exactly mirrors the jump shot as it is now employed.

"I've never said I invented it," Sailors said recently. "Some writers have said so. Who would really know who was the first person who jumped in the air? Maybe somebody back in the 19th century jumped in the air and shot the ball. Most people say that I developed the shot that is being used today."

Forget that 19th century stuff. Hoops inventor James Naismith didn't tack up his peach basket until 1891 and basketball was a flat-footed game for several decades.

In some ways the Cowboys were the mystery team out of the west when they advanced to the NCAA championship. Sailors was the top offensive player, but the team under coach Everett Shelton was well-balanced. Sailors grew up in Hillsdale, 25 miles east of Cheyenne during the Depression. His father wasn't around and he and his brother Bud worked hard on the farm to help feed the small family.

Kenny and Bud played basketball on gravel in their backyard in their free time. The only problem was that Bud was three years older and eight

inches taller. Somehow, Bud got all of the tall genes in the clan. Bud kept blocking Kenny's shot when they played one-on-one and younger brother got to thinking.

Tired of being manhandled by Bud's big, looming paws, the younger Sailors came up with a plan. The next time the siblings played, he began jumping when he shot. Sailors, foreshadowing his other trademark, was also a superior dribbler. He combined his two skills to elude his brother's defense and stopped and popped. It is a play that occurs dozens of times a game now, but in the late 1930s when Sailors was in junior high, such a move was unheard of.

"I don't care how tall you are," said Bud, some years ago, "you're either going to foul him or he's going to make it. That was the first I'd run into it."

That was the first time just about anyone had run across a jump shot. Sailors perfected the shot in high school and used it with lethal authority at Wyoming where he became a two-time All-American. Not that he was on campus on a full-ride scholarship. Sailors had to work to earn his tuition and books, acting as a dormitory waiter. It was not a responsibility that he resented; he considered it a privilege to play basketball for the school and gain a free education.

Like Bud, all of Sailors' teammates are now deceased, including famed broadcaster Curt Gowdy, who graduated before the championship run. In an interview long after they shared the court, Gowdy described Sailors as "a great dribbler, and very, very quick, like a rattlesnake."

Given that they came from rattlesnake country, it was an apt analogy, because Sailors could strike with sudden swiftness. Sailors has pretty much out-lived his playing contemporaries and assuredly the coaches who watched the shot help transform the game. But before their passing, several, including Joe Lapchick of the Original Celtics, gave Sailors his due. Lapchick said Sailors was "one of the most influential players of the century." The late Ray Meyer of DePaul fame said, "Kenny was the jump shooter that we know today. He got off the floor."

There was no shot clock in the 1940s and fast-breaking was limited, so game scores were low. Wyoming began its run in the eight-team NCAA tournament in 1943 with a victory in the West Region semifinals, defeating Oklahoma, 53-50. A win over Texas, 58-54, propelled the Cowboys into the championship game against Georgetown. The Hoyas topped New York University and DePaul in the East Region to set up the showdown against Wyoming.

Attendance was 13,300 at New York's Madison Square Garden for the



## THE COWBOY WITH A JUMP SHOT



< Sailors (back row, second from right) and his Cowboy teammates accept the 1943 NCAA trophy. Sailors scored 16 points as Wyoming defeated Georgetown, 46-34.

Wyoming-Georgetown game. The score was a ridiculously low 18-16 Wyoming lead at the half. The Cowboys picked up the pace somewhat in the second half en route to their 12-point margin. Sailors was the only player in the game in double figures with 16 points. Wyoming's second leading scorer was Milo Komenich with nine points. Georgetown's top scorer was William Feeney with eight points.

"Georgetown didn't give us that much trouble," Sailors recalled.

In an unusual development, Wyoming then challenged NIT champion St. John's (New York) to a game at a time when the NIT was on par with the NCAA and sold the idea to Garden impresario Ned Irish, who later ran the New York Knicks. Wyoming burnished its reputation by besting St. John's, 52-47, in overtime to benefit the Red Cross and received a three-foot-tall trophy that calls the Cowboys world amateur champions.

"We knocked off St. John's," Sailors said, "and they didn't ever expect that."

Fans back home were going delirious as word of both major triumphs reached them, but it took some time for the Cowboys to return home to the ranch. They took the train from New York. When the players arrived, Sailors, Komenich and Jim Weir, all three of them All-Americans, forward Floyd Volker, Jimmy Collins, Jim Reese and the others, marveled at the reception. No one counted, but they thought thousands of people awaited them at the station.

"Then they put us all on a fire truck and wheeled us around town," Sailors said. "They went crazy. They had an official parade the next day. They shut the school down for three or four days."

In some ways it seemed that the party never ceased. The players were recognized and feted wherever they went. However, the statue of limitations has probably passed on what would be NCAA violations concerning freebies. The players couldn't pay for a meal at a restaurant or go shopping without a passionate fan picking up the tab.

"When I went to buy a suit coat, they just gave it to me," Sailors said. "It got kind of embarrassing to go in anywhere."

That was Sailors' junior year. World War II was raging and after the 1943 season he went into the service for the duration of the war. Sailors returned to Laramie to complete his education and graduated in 1946 — when he was named All-American again and won the Helms Foundation award as player of the year. Then he played five years in the new NBA, scoring more than 17 points per game one season.

After retiring from basketball, Sailors moved to Gakona, Alaska, a spot on the highway 200 miles from Anchorage. He alternated between work-

ing as a hunting guide and teaching school and periodically coached basketball. His last coaching job was on remote, bear-infested Admiralty Island, where he coached the Angoon High School girls in the late 1980s.

Sailors moved back to Wyoming more than a decade ago and has been a fixture at Wyoming games since. The over-sized No. 4 jersey hanging above the court has occasioned at least one good laugh. A youngster approached him at the arena one time, gazed at Sailors' still-slender frame, and looked up the banner-sized jersey.

"Gee, Mr. Sailors," he said. "You were a lot bigger when you played."

Actually, Sailors is still a pretty big man on campus. The school considers him a treasure and current coach Larry Shyatt said Sailors is a piece of living history that can inspire present-day teams.

"He's had a great effect on our team," Shyatt said. "The best part of the whole scenario is that he's still around. It's a delight to have him around."

Sailors may still look trim, but his once dark, wavy hair, is cut into a gray flat-top. It is really only a few years ago that Sailors stopped fooling around in gyms taking jump shots. On occasion Sailors drops into practices (to watch, not play) and players individually run up into the stands to greet him.

"I want to make sure they visit him," Shyatt said. "He addresses the players sometimes. He lets them know how important teamwork is and you don't know what you can do until you do it. He doesn't have to say anything. His presence is important."

As Sailors, Shyatt and all of the Cowboys who have passed through campus in the nearly 70 years since Wyoming claimed its only NCAA basketball championship know, those types of accomplishments don't come around every day.

For a man his age, Sailors is in sound shape. He tries to walk a mile or more each day, unless he is snowed out, and then shifts his exercise attention to an indoor bicycle. He keeps an eye on the Wyoming men's and women's teams, follows the Mountain West Conference, and enjoys the plethora of college games available on television almost every night of the week.

Nothing beats going to the Arena-Auditorium, though, saying hello to the fans, and watching this generation of his old team play live.

"They still treat me pretty good around here. It's the only one up there," Sailors said of his uniform. "That's pretty special."

Sometimes during games Sailors gazes up at the sky to see the jersey he made famous. He thinks back to the grand time in his life when Wyoming was the best team in the nation and permits himself a smile.