

Birth of the Jump Shot

HOW ONE MAN, AND ONE SHOT, CHANGED THE GAME OF BASKETBALL FOREVER

BY BRAD BOTKIN / February 13, 2015
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On the night of Dec. 30, 1942, a little 5-foot-10 Wyoming farm kid named Kenny Sailors dribbled up the floor at Madison Square Garden. Somewhere near the top of the key, he stopped, squared his hips and shoulders, and elevated. Suspended in the air, his legs hung loose beneath him. His elbow formed a perfect 90-degree angle. The ball rested atop his palm like a waiter's tray.

Jack Rose, now 86 years old, was in the crowd that night.

"He jumped up higher than all the defenders, and he shot it one-handed," Rose recalls. "We'd never seen anything like it. We all looked at each other like, 'What was that?'"

What it was, history has come to show, was a glimpse into the future -- a firsthand look at a shot so bold in its imagination, so revolutionary in its impact, that it would one day inspire comparisons to the wheel, the airplane, the computer.

"That was the shot," as current Wyoming coach Larry Shyatt puts it, "that changed

everything."

If you've never heard of Kenny Sailors, you're not alone. Chances are, you're also not from Wyoming, particularly Laramie, where Sailors, the man most widely credited as the inventor of the modern jump shot, is something of a folk hero. At 94 years old, he doesn't get out as often, or as easily, as he did a few years ago, but when he does he still happily poses for pictures around town. Still shakes a lot of hands when he's out to lunch. His No. 4 jersey, the one he wore when leading little ol' Wyoming on an improbable, Hoosiers-esque run to the 1943 national championship, is the only one hanging in the school's Arena-Auditorium rafters. As we speak, plans to erect a 22-foot statue of Sailors, which will stand in the arena's entrance, are underway.

"That's really going to be something," Sailors told CBSSports.com, shyly chuckling at the surreal thought of a statue being erected in his honor. "I guess it's quite a story. I've come to understand that more over the years."

There's no doubt that Kenny's story is an especially romantic one -- country boy on the farm, playing on a dirt court, shooting on an old iron rim that his brother Bud had nailed to a windmill. If it were a movie you would put an American flag waving in the background and cue the music, the setting perfectly classic in a tiny, unincorporated Wyoming town called Hillsdale. As best as Sailors can remember, it was 1934 when he took that first jumper. He was 13 years old, and as the saying goes, it was indeed necessity, if not outright desperation, that eventually gave birth to his grand invention.

"My brother Bud was five years older than me and he was 6-foot-5," Sailors said. "I was only about 5-8 at the time, and I couldn't even get a shot off over him, let alone make a basket. He'd swat it back in my face every time."

Kenny laughs as he thinks of Bud laughing all those years back, telling his little brother he should "find another sport," that he was too small for a big man's game.

"So one day, finally, I guess the good Lord just put it in my head that if I jumped up higher than [Bud], and if he didn't time everything just right and jump up with me, he couldn't block my shot," Sailors continued. "So that's what I did. I ran right up to him and jumped straight out of the dribble, and I shot it one-handed, because I found that I could get more height that way. I remember the first time I did it, Bud said to me, 'Kenny, that's a pretty good shot. You ought to try to develop that.' So from that point forward, that's pretty much what I did. I worked on that shot every chance I got."

With no model to emulate, Sailors spent most of his time serving as his own guinea pig, working out the kinks of an experimental action. There were so many moving parts -- the two-foot takeoff, the squaring of the shoulders, the shooting elbow rising tightly against his ribs to a high, soft release. But for Sailors, the biggest problem came after the shot.

"I couldn't stop my momentum from going forward, carrying me right into the defender,"

Sailors said. "I was always getting called for charges."

Needless to say, he figured it out. He had blossomed into a natural athlete, all-state in both football and basketball, state champ in the long jump and the mile. In the fall of 1940, Sailors opted to take his game, along with this so-called jump shot, to the University of Wyoming to play for legendary coach Everett Shelton -- who, as it happened, neither encouraged nor discouraged Kenny's shot.

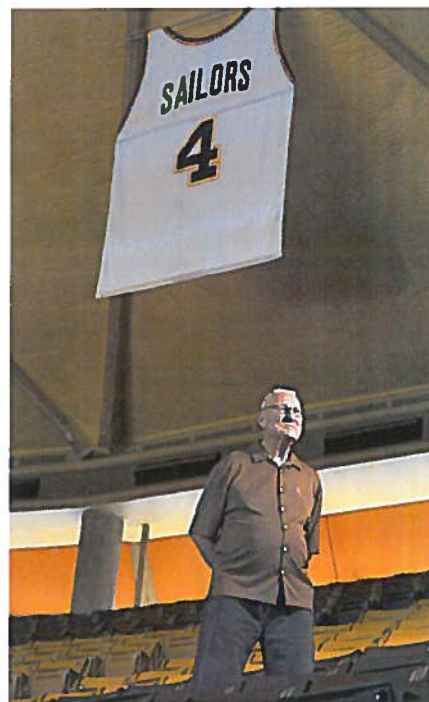
"I got some grief about it when I got to the pros. I remember old Dutch Dehnert [Kenny's coach with the Cleveland Rebels of the BAA, the league that preceded the NBA] said to me, 'Sailors, that shot of yours will never work at this level,' and he actually stopped playing me," Sailors recalled. "But Shelton, he just let me play."

It was a good decision on Shelton's part. The Cowboys became a force in relatively short order, and from the start it was clear that Sailors, a shooting and dribbling ace, was a player ahead of his time, old newsreel footage depicting a wiry little man operating on fast-forward while everyone else played to the paint-drying pace of the day. As sportswriter Chester "Red" Nelson put it on March 19, 1943, in his article for the *Rocky Mountain News*: "His dribble is a sight to behold. He can leap with a mighty spring and get off that dazzling one-handed shot. Master Kenneth Sailors is one of the handiest hardwood artists ever to trod the boards."

There are countless passages like this from over the years, quote after stately quote touting the gamut of Sailors' game, opposing coaches and players marveling at his "wizard" jump shot, "needle-threading" passes and "virtuoso" hands, Bill Roeder of the *New York World-Telegram* anointing him "the most adroit dribbler in basketball annals." It seems there was nothing the guy couldn't do with a basketball, a lofty assertion perhaps most validated by the observations of Ernest Mehl. Mehl covered AAU tournaments for years, which in those days showcased the premier players in the country, and Sailors, he said, was the best player he ever saw.

"Listen, Kenny is one of the kindest men you'll ever meet. There's truly not a bad word you could say about him," said former Wyoming coach Jim Brandenburg, who led the Cowboys to a Sweet 16 appearance in 1987. "But let me tell you, there was another side to him. That man was a competitor. He'd rip your throat out to win."

The more people you talk to, the more it seems that this assessment, above all others, cuts closest to the core of who Kenny Sailors is -- half sweet soul, half old-fashioned tough guy. This is a man, after all, who lived through the Depression. This is a Marine who fought in World War II and came out a captain. This is an athlete who, in a day and age when it was



Kenny Sailors' jersey hangs alone in Wyoming's Arena-Auditorium rafters. (Getty Images)

almost sacrilege to challenge tradition, dared to be different, consistently withstanding the pressure to conform that could've easily crushed his innovative spirit.

"Like any pioneer, Kenny got a lot of pushback," says Bill Schrage. "But he never wavered. When people told him that silly jump shot of his would never work, he kept at it. He believed in what he was doing. I like to say if he had been born a hundred years earlier, he would've been great leading a covered wagon on the Oregon Trail.

"He never would've turned back."

Schrage, who retired to Wyoming after a career in international affairs, might very well know more about Kenny's life than Kenny does. The two became friends in 2004, and since that time Schrage has poured over Kenny's story, tirelessly researching and documenting nearly a century's worth of information. We're talking family trees, military records, old newspaper clippings, box scores, stats, awards, photos, quotes -- and it's all meticulously catalogued, every source cited, every story confirmed two, three, four different ways.

All of this is to say, when Schrage tells you something about Kenny, you can believe it.

He won't tell you Kenny was the first modern jump shooter.

But he'll certainly tell you who *can* tell you.

Meet Jerry Krause, research chairman of the National Association of Basketball Coaches, and John Christgau, author of *The Origins of the Jump Shot* -- both of whom have worked this case to its last shred of evidence. All told, Krause and Christgau have devoted nearly 15 years of combined research to finding the original modern jump shooter, with the operative word being *modern*.

"That's the key. I wanted proof that a guy gathered, went straight up off two feet, facing the basket, and shot one-handed from an elevated position. That's the shot we see today," says Krause, who spent more than a decade looking into this, writing and talking to anyone and everyone with even the slightest connection to a supposed original jump shooter -- anyone who could provide any kind of evidence, be it a photograph or verifiable story, that could help get him closer to a conclusion.

"What I found," Krause continued, "was that a lot of guys shot some variation of a jump shot, a running shot off one foot or what have you. But Kenny's shot is the shot we see today. Was he the first? I don't think anyone could ever say that for certain. But what you can say, and I'm very comfortable saying this, is that Kenny was the first player to really develop the jump shot and use it consistently. The jump shot we see today is Kenny's shot."

Christgau concurs with every word of this, though he took a little different approach to his research, breaking the country into eight different regions.

"There wasn't really much national media back then," Christgau said. "If you lived in Minnesota, like I did, you didn't know what was going on in California. So there were probably a number of 'first' shooters in different areas, and I wanted to talk to the people

who knew those areas best. There were a lot of names thrown around. Jumpin' Joe Fulks. Bud Palmer, who was a great player with the New York Knicks. My college coach at San Francisco State told me that Hank Luisetti was the first jump shooter. So I called Hank, at the time he was living in Burlingame (Ca.), and he told me, 'I never had a jump shot. I had a running one-hander.'

"Another name you hear a lot is Belus Smawley, but Belus went up with his back to the basket and sort of twisted in the air," Christgau continued. "Yeah, he was jumping and shooting, but that's not the shot players use today. If you want to see the shot players use today, look at that famous picture that was in *Life* magazine, the one of Kenny shooting in Madison Square Garden. That shows it perfectly. That was the shot of the future."



This was the Life Magazine shot heard 'round the world. (Photo courtesy of Wyoming Athletics)

To Christgau's point, this iconic photo you see above, published in 1946, gave real life to a shot that had previously been something of a myth, a whisper in the basketball wind. Suddenly that picture was spreading around the country like wildfire. Everyone saw it. Christgau vividly remembers seeing it as a kid, and immediately thinking to himself, as though he had just seen Superman streak through the night sky, "Who is that guy?"

He was Kenny Sailors. The papers called him the "Wyoming Kid."

Three years earlier he had stormed the nation's biggest stage, dazzling the New York crowd as Wyoming dethroned powerhouse programs Georgetown and St. John's to become college basketball's unlikeliest king. Now here he was, less than a year removed from serving his country in the South Pacific, back at the Garden, flashbulbs popping as he introduced the world to the shot that would change basketball forever.

"It's the damndest story you've ever heard," Brandenburg said. "Now all we can do is hope that someone is listening to it."

Exactly one month ago Saturday, Kenny heard a knock at his door. It could've been a nurse coming to check his blood pressure, which happens multiple times every day at the Spring Wind assisted living center in which he now resides. But it wasn't.

It was Bobby Knight.

Turns out, the legendary coach was in Laramie to call the San Diego State-Wyoming game for ESPN that night, and when Wyoming assistant AD Tim Harkins put a call in to see if Knight would be interested in meeting Kenny, Knight jumped at the chance. Harkins says it was hard to tell who was more tickled to meet who.

"He's quite a guy," Sailors said of Knight. "He sure knows the game, and he sure seems to think a lot of me, which I appreciate."

Later that night, Knight used a portion of the broadcast to endorse Kenny not just as the original jump shooter, but as a great player who should be in the Hall of Fame. Shortly thereafter, Dick Vitale put out the following tweet:



Dick Vitale
@DickieV

Follow

Kenny Sailors ex-Wyoming star invented the jump shot. Should be in the HOF as contributor says Bob Knight & I agree! ncaa.com/news/basketbal...

5:15 PM - 14 Jan 2015

105 RETWEETS 73 FAVORITES

That's right, the man Red Auerbach once compared to Bob Cousy, calling him a "great, great player" and "one of the best dribblers" he ever saw, the man who more significantly moved the game forward than perhaps anyone in history, is not in the Hall of Fame.

He's in the college Hall of Fame, elected in 2012. But not the big one. Not the Naismith.

"It's a significant, significant oversight," said Krause. "It's a travesty, really."

Theories abound as to why, or how, Sailors has slipped through the cracks all these years. Some say the Hall has leaned more and more toward honoring NBA legends, which is unfair to Kenny in that the NBA wasn't around for most of his career, and when it was, only in its infancy. Kenny did play three seasons in the NBA, one each with the Denver Nuggets, Boston Celtics and Baltimore Bullets, and in the 1949-50 season his 17.3 points per game was good enough for fourth in the league. Still, as mentioned earlier, the AAU was where all the best players played back then, and there Kenny was a two-time All-American. He was also a two-time college All-American.

At the 1990 Final Four in Denver, as part of a celebration of the [NCAA Tournament's](#) first 50 years, five players were recognized as the tournament's All-Decade players. Kenny was honored for the 1940s. The other four? Bill Russell, Lew Alcindor, Magic Johnson and Patrick Ewing. Not exactly bad company.

So what gives? How is Kenny Sailors not in the Hall of Fame? Jacob Hamilton, an independent filmmaker who is currently directing a documentary about Kenny's life, wonders if he has simply been forgotten.

"He basically disappeared from basketball for 30 to 40 years when he was done playing," Hamilton said. "He dropped off the map. I think that has at least something to do with it."

It's true. Kenny did more or less disappear, moving to Alaska after his playing days were over to run a big-game hunting and fishing outfitting service with his wife, Marilynne, who had a breathing condition that made living in the high Wyoming altitude very difficult. For Kenny, family has always come first, and the outdoors have long been one of his passions. Basketball was something he did, something he was good at, something that for a short time helped him earn a living and provided him with an NBA pension. But for a man who defined such a major part of the game, the game has never defined him.

It's not like that these days. The sports stars of today hardly get to be human, and what they do on the court or the field has become, at least in the public eye, something of a life or death situation. Kenny fought in a war. He won a seat on the Wyoming legislature in 1954 and ran for the US Senate in 1962 and 1964. He has lived long enough to see his beloved wife of 59 years, along with two of their three children, pass away. He could never lose perspective on what has been a truly extraordinary life.

"In my office, I have a huge picture of that Wyoming national championship team, with Kenny in the middle holding the MVP trophy, and I will always have that picture in my office," said Shyatt, who currently has Wyoming one game out of first place in the Mountain West Conference. "But I'll tell you what, the times that Kenny comes over here and sits down with me or my son, Jeremy, we rarely talk about basketball. We talk about his life experiences. He gives Jeremy little nuggets of wisdom, and I appreciate that more than anything. He is a good, good man."

Still, being a good man doesn't get you into the Hall of Fame. Shyatt knows this. That's why he's part of a group that has come together to promote Kenny's story (since Kenny would never do it for himself). This group, which has submitted a package to the Hall of Fame containing video and written tributes detailing the considerable merits of Sailors' career, also includes, among others, Wyoming AD Tom Burman, Harkins, Brandenburg and Krause.

Truth be told, the whole state of Wyoming is behind this thing. Bobby Knight has put in his two cents. So has Dick Vitale. Even former Michigan State coach Jud Heathcote, who of course coached Magic Johnson and the Spartans to the 1979 NCAA title, is doing all he can. Heathcote says he still remembers the first time he saw Kenny shoot his famous shot. It was 1946, and he was so enthralled with what he saw that day, so certain that he had witnessed



Kenny stands with Bobby Knight, who has long endorsed Sailors for the Hall of Fame.

the shot of the future, that he made a special trip back the next day to watch Kenny play again.

"I had never seen anyone before who could do that," Heathcote said. "I was mesmerized."

This Saturday, as has become tradition during the NBA's All-Star weekend, the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame will announce both its 2015 direct elects as well as a pool of finalists, from which the remaining elects will be announced during the Final Four. Right now, at this very moment, a lot of people in Wyoming are sitting on pins and needles wondering if Kenny's name will be called. People desperately want this to happen for him while he's still around to appreciate it.

"I'm 94 years old. I don't get excited about too much these days," Sailors jokes. "But yes, it would mean a lot to me to get into the Hall of Fame. You bet it would. Basketball has done a

lot for me."

Brandenburg, upon hearing this, can only chuckle at Sailors' unending humility.

"He's got that backwards," Brandenburg says. "Nobody has ever done more for basketball than Kenny."