

# JUMP SHOT



**KENNY SAILORS**

Basketball Innovator  
and Alaskan  
Outfitter

**LEW FREEDMAN**

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# Contents

Acknowledgments.....	vii
Introduction.....	1
CHAPTER 1: The Jump Shot's Beginnings.....	5
CHAPTER 2: Becoming a Player.....	19
CHAPTER 3: Wyoming Hoops.....	27
CHAPTER 4: A Special Someone and a Special Season.....	37
CHAPTER 5: Conference Champs and NCAA Bound.....	53
CHAPTER 6: National Champs.....	63
CHAPTER 7: The Jump Shot's Evolution.....	73
CHAPTER 8: Back in Wyoming.....	81
CHAPTER 9: Going Pro.....	89
CHAPTER 10: Steamrolled Out of Providence.....	99
CHAPTER 11: Retirement.....	115
CHAPTER 12: Hunting Wyoming's Wild Country.....	125
CHAPTER 13: Cowboying Up and on to Alaska.....	135
CHAPTER 14: Alaska Life.....	147
CHAPTER 15: Alaska Adventures.....	157
CHAPTER 16: Back to Basketball in Alaska.....	173
CHAPTER 17: Return to Wyoming.....	183
CHAPTER 18: A Hall of Famer.....	193
Sources.....	201
Kenny Sailors Basketball Honors and Statistics.....	205
About the Author.....	209



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# Introduction

KENNY SAILORS IS A REMARKABLE MAN. He is a one-time college basketball star at the University of Wyoming where he introduced the use of the jump shot as a potent weapon to the sport, and when the NCAA basketball tournament celebrated its seventy-fifth anniversary in 2013 Sailors was the oldest living most outstanding player.

At the time Sailors was ninety-two years old and could look back on a life well lived, a life of grand achievement, and a life of contentment.

In 1943, when the Wyoming Cowboys won their only NCAA title, Sailors, a 5-foot, 11-inch guard, was selected as the outstanding player of the tournament. After that he played during the first five years of the NBA's existence, a role that had him shifting from team to team during the unstable years of the fledgling league.

Always an outdoorsman, and really a cowboy at heart (not only a representative of a school that had that nickname applied to its sports teams), Sailors and his wife, Marilynne, known as Bokie, operated dude ranches, camps for boys, and hunting camps in Wyoming. Then, in 1965, they left behind their childhood homes and set out for Alaska.

For the next thirty-five years Sailors worked as both a hunting guide and as a high school basketball coach in remote Alaska communities. In 2000, Sailors returned to his native Wyoming and he presently resides in Laramie, just a short distance from the site of his collegiate athletic triumphs.

One day in 1988 when I was working as sports editor of the *Anchorage Daily News*, Alaska's largest newspaper in Alaska's largest city, I received a letter from

a one-time professional basketball player whom I had heard of, but really knew little about. It was Kenny introducing himself to me.

At the time Sailors was living in the community of Angoon on Admiralty Island in Southeast Alaska and was coaching the girls' basketball team. It was uncharacteristic of the generally modest Sailors to pen such an introductory letter, but if his intent was to gain some attention for his small-school high school team, it worked.

The more I learned about this fellow living in a remote corner of the state, the more intrigued I became, and soon enough I was flying to Admiralty Island to meet him. I should note that I am usually averse to flying on small airplanes, but I convinced myself this one time it was worth it.

The first leg of the trip was an easy one, a jet ride to the state capital of Juneau. It was the second hop that had me concerned. Heavily sedated so I wouldn't get airsick, I was joined by *Daily News* photographer Bob Hallinen as the only passengers in a four-seat floatplane that carried us to a landing dock next to Admiralty Island.

Although the coming and going part to and from the island in the small craft was not the highlight of my life, spending time talking basketball with Kenny Sailors was one of them. He and his gracious wife, Marilynne, hosted us for several days. Seemingly we met everyone on the island, all of whom raved about what a great guy Sailors was, and I had a treat discussing basketball history.

Long after the magazine-length story appeared in the newspaper Kenny and I stayed in touch. To some extent, despite his success and his claim to fame as being the innovator of the jump shot, he was a forgotten basketball figure. Living in Wyoming and Alaska for decades had kept Sailors out of the mainstream.

My visit with the Sailors at Admiralty Island was the beginning of a great friendship that has continued for more than twenty-five years. Kenny and I shared many experiences, from visits to his cabin home two hundred road miles from Anchorage, to taking brisk, few mile walks together on selected mornings. I should note that while Kenny is thirty years older than I am, he was still pretty much able to walk me into the ground with his pace during those little hikes through the woods. As far as I could tell the old athlete was still in darned good shape.

Kenny lived in bear country and I was always worried that a large, furry creature with sharp nails might sneak up on us, but Sailors did not seem particularly concerned that would occur and it never did.

We shared a fishing boat on the Gulkana River and family members joined me for horseback riding at Kenny's guiding headquarters in Gakona, Alaska.

We also shared time in Denver in 1990 when the NCAA men's basketball championships were conducted there and part of the week's theme was "A Salute to Rocky Mountain Basketball." Sailors was invited to speak at the kickoff dinner, which I also attended, and we sat in the stands together for the tournament semifinals at the Final Four.

It is difficult to imagine the sport of basketball without the jump shot. It is a fundamental part of every player's game. However, one does not have to borrow an H. G. Wells time machine to be reminded that in the 1940s just about everyone employed a set shot from outside and that it was taboo for a player's feet to leave the hardwood while taking a shot at the basket.

The two-hand set shot was the weapon of choice for the outside shooter. When a player was left unmolested by the defense some twenty-five feet away from the hoop he took a shot with both feet planted and both hands on the ball. Once in a while a comparative daredevil would take a one-hand push shot.

There have been various claimants to the honor of being the inventor of the jump shot. Hank Luisetti of Stanford was an acclaimed player who took a one-hand shot. However, despite those various believers and supporters of other players, many famous witnesses say that Sailors was indisputably the player who shot the jump shot that all basketball fans have come to know and that all future players have come to use.

Sailors himself never made the specific claim that he actually invented the jump shot, admitting that someone, somewhere may have taken one in a game here and there that he never knew about. Yet when Sailors was competing for Wyoming, no one else was taking jump shots in games. When Sailors was playing in the NBA, no one else was taking jump shots in games.

There is no doubt that Sailors was the first high-level practitioner of the shot and his reputation was solidified and assured for that historic accomplishment in November of 2012 when he was enshrined in the College Basketball Hall of Fame in Kansas City.

It was on that memorable day Sailors's innovation and achievement was formally ratified. The man that gave the world the jump shot was feted and honored with induction into a hall of fame that will forever celebrate his accomplishments and contributions to basketball.

For those of us, friends and relatives, who had long known Kenny's story, it

was a heartfelt moment of pride and although he had waited many decades for such recognition, it was one that provided a glow for Sailors, too.

As the star of an indoor game, it might be seen as ironic that the rest of Sailors's life revolved around the outdoors. When he stopped getting paid to play basketball he spent the rest of his working years as a hunting guide in some of America's wildest places.

Viewed as a whole, Kenny Sailors's life story is a tale of basketball and the outdoors, and of Wyoming and Alaska.

—LEW FREEDMAN, AUGUST 2013





Author Lew Freedman (left) and Kenny Sailors on the campus of the University of Wyoming in November of 2013. (Photo by Bill Schrage.)

## Praise for Kenny Sailors

"He was a great dribbler and very, very quick, like a rattlesnake. His quickness was the main thing I remember about him. He was a good shot. He was a spectacular player to watch."

—**Curt Gowdy**, sportscaster and University of Wyoming alumnus

"He's one of the best I've ever seen, and I mean in playmaking above all. He's the boy who sets everything up."

—**Ray Meyer**, DePaul men's basketball coach, 1942–84



In November 2012, at the age of ninety-one, Kenny Sailors was inducted into the College Basketball Hall of Fame.

**K**enny Sailors was a basketball star, and the inventor of the jump shot. As a youngster, five-foot-seven Kenny played basketball against his six-foot-two older brother, so in order to get off a shot, Kenny had to jump up over his much taller sibling. That is how his signature shot was born, and Kenny popularized and perfected it in college and professional basketball.



He attended the University of Wyoming and was named MVP in 1943 in college All-American basketball. After World War II, Kenny spent five years as a player in the newly formed NBA. He played in Denver and several other cities whose team names have now changed, but he also played for the Boston Celtics with Bob Cousy. After he retired from pro ball, he moved to Alaska and in 1965 settled in the Glennallen area, where he was a fishing and hunting guide in the Wrangle Mountains for thirty-five years.

He now lives in Wyoming and regularly attends Cowboys practices and home games.



Coauthor **Lew Freedman** is the former sports editor of the *Anchorage Daily News* and the author of more than twenty books focused on Alaska, including *My Season on the Kenai* and *Lowell Thomas Jr., Flight to Adventure*.

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