

Larry Birleffi



Kenny Led The Way

Let it be said for the record that Kenny Sailors, the Wyoming basketball legend, did not discover America. I still say Christopher Columbus did. I happen to know where he was buried.

Kenny Sailors did not lead the first pack trip into Yukon or land the first 30-pound salmon in the Alaskan rivers of Gakoma.

Kenny Sailors did invent the jump-shot in basketball as a kid out of Hillsdale, Wyo. — as a matter of self defense.

Don't take my word for it. Bob Cousy, one of the greatest, says so. So do several of the great coaches of all time, Joe Lapchick of St. John's and former coach Ray Meyer of DePaul.

And this past week, more relevant historic authenticity was given to the Sailors' saga of the jump shot by a columnist in the Arizona Republic, Bob Cohn.

I've received enough of Cohn's columns this past week to paper one wall in the Old West museum. Max Osborn sent me a clipping through Jim Tilker. The Ottos, one of my more dependable of my great au courants around the world, sent me another one. So did Lenny Burman and Paul Godfrey and Eric Haag through sons Dick and Oscar Bridges.

It proves several things. Wyoming fans love great past traditions, Cohn's column is well read, and a lot of Wyoming people spend winters in Phoenix.

Now don't laugh at this, but I worked out regularly, some 50 years ago, with Kenny Sailors at the ol' half acre, between classes — or rather we skipped classes. Now, I know you're picturing Jonathan Winters trying to cover Michael Jordan, but I was a wispy, 5-foot-8 whirling dervish myself.

We'd play one on one, to 40 points. He's spot me 38 points. Most days I'd get edged out, 39-40. This kid was so quick, he'd take two dribbles, jump and shoot, with one hand. He was so quick you couldn't shove him, push him, hold I him or step on his stomach.

Cohn points out that Sailors is vacationing in Sun City, Ariz, visiting his brother, and looking for a vacant lot or a spare gym to shoot some hoops. I believe it. Kenny, at 72, is sinewy as ever. Same weight, same waist as his college days. That squares up perfectly. Kenny hasn't changed, never will change. He was preaching isometrics and physical fitness before Jane Fonda was born.

His jump shot and dribbling artistry changed the game and led Wyoming to an NCCA title, and then a victory over the NIT winner in a benefit game.

When you watch the kids of today, jump shooting and slam dunking with amazing agility, just remember Kenny Sailors.

He started it, 50 years ago.

Bob Cohn's column, at least recognizing Sailors' contribution to the game, now in its 100th year, gives us a chance to ask the question once again for the hundredth time over the years.

Kenny Sailors belongs in the National Basketball Hall of Fame. From an elegiac age, through his great years of Wyoming, and performing for a half dozen teams in the gestating years of the NBA, and through his coaching years in Alaska, strictly for the love of the game, Kenny has been a great tribute to the sport.

It's time his name is included in the Shrine with the immortals of the game..

ON THE AIR



BOB COHN

The Arizona Republic

Here's tale behind start of jump shot

If you know of any outdoor basketball courts in Sun City, or better yet, have a gym you wouldn't mind loaning out for a little while, please notify Kenny Sailors.

"I can't find any places to shoot around, he said.

To most 71-year-olds, this is not a problem. But it is to Kenny Sailors, the inventor of the jump shot.

That's right, the inventor of the jump shot. Who says? Joe Lapchick, the late, great coach at St. John's, said in 1965, "Sailors started the one-hand jumper." Former DePaul coach Ray Meyer acknowledged that others had claimed to invent the jumper, but these were players whose feet barely left the ground. Said Meyer, "Kenny was the jump-shooter that we know today. Kenny went up in the air."

There you have it. So when you watch Jimmy Jackson, Tracy Murray, Hubert Davis and everyone else in the NCAA Tournament spot up, squat up and let fly, think of Kenny Sailors. It had to start somewhere. As for Sailors himself, he prefers to low-key his contribution.

"How would I know if I was the first one?" he asked. "There was no one else shooting it, I know that. But there could have been someone, somewhere."

Man for all leagues

Maybe. But basketball was a game of two-handed set shots and the occasional hook until Sailors and his one-handed jump shot helped lead Wyoming to the 1943 NCAA basketball championship. And after Sailors served a hitch in the Marines, he dusted off the jumper and took it to the NBA, when the infant league was comprised of such franchises as the Cleveland Rebels and Chicago Stags and Providence Steamrollers. Sailors played for all of them.

Sailors, a 5-foot-11 guard who was even better at handling the ball and playing defense than he was at shooting, also played for the first incarnations of the Baltimore Bullets and Denver Nuggets, and for the Boston Celtics. He helped break in a new Celtics coach, Red Auerbach. As his pro career was drawing to a close, Sailors roomed with the first black to play in the NBA, Chuck Cooper, and shared his wisdom with a rookie guard named Bob Cousy.

"I tried to teach him a jump shot, but he never really developed one," Sailors said.

Cousy managed to get by, anyway. When Sailors retired, he turned down coaching opportunities, choosing instead to return to Wyoming and open a boys ranch. He and his wife, Marilynne, are spending their first winter in Arizona. The rest of the year, they live in Gakona, Alaska, where Sailors and his son, Dan, own Alaska Wild Country Guides and Outfitters. If you want to fish the Gulkana River for king salmon or hunt Dall sheep in the Wrangell Mountains or take the family on horseback to camp out on Bear Lake, call Kenny.

Sailors is an avid lover of the outdoors, and he looks it. With his taut build and crew cut, it's easy to picture him lofting his jumper over befuddled Georgetown defenders, as he did at Madison Square Garden to help the Cowboys win the NCAA Tournament. Sailors was named most valuable player.

Here in Arizona, Sailors is able to see his older brother, Bud, a retired Air Force colonel who lives in Wickenburg.

Bud actually was the start of it all.

Family affair

Bud Sailors, who is 6-foot-5, towered over Kenny. He was all-state in high school. They would play one-on-one on the family ranch in Hillsdale, Wyoming, using a hoop Bud nailed to a windmill. Bud kept blocking Kenny's shots. About the time Kenny reached the eighth grade, he figured out what to do about it.

"I just got tired of him stuffing the ball down my throat," Kenny Sailors said. "I started lunging into the air. I was always a good jumper."

Sailors kept working on the shot, perfecting it, learning how to hang in the air and release the shot precisely at the top of his jump. As opponents caught on to Sailor's unique shooting style, they tried unique means of defense. Defenders would tell Sailors what they would do to him. Sometimes, they did it.

"I remember coaches trying to get their players who were guarding me to unnerve me by riding up under me when I jumped," Sailors said. "So I had to compensate for that, by coming down with an elbow."

Sailors has been watching the NCAA Tournament, marveling at the athletes and how the game has changed. Like the three-point shot. It's enough to make Sailors want to forget what he invented.

"I've told young coaches," Sailors said, "that I'd go back to the two-handed set shot. It's a much easier shot. You don't have to leave the floor.

"If I was playing, I'd go back to it. I really would."