

END ZONE

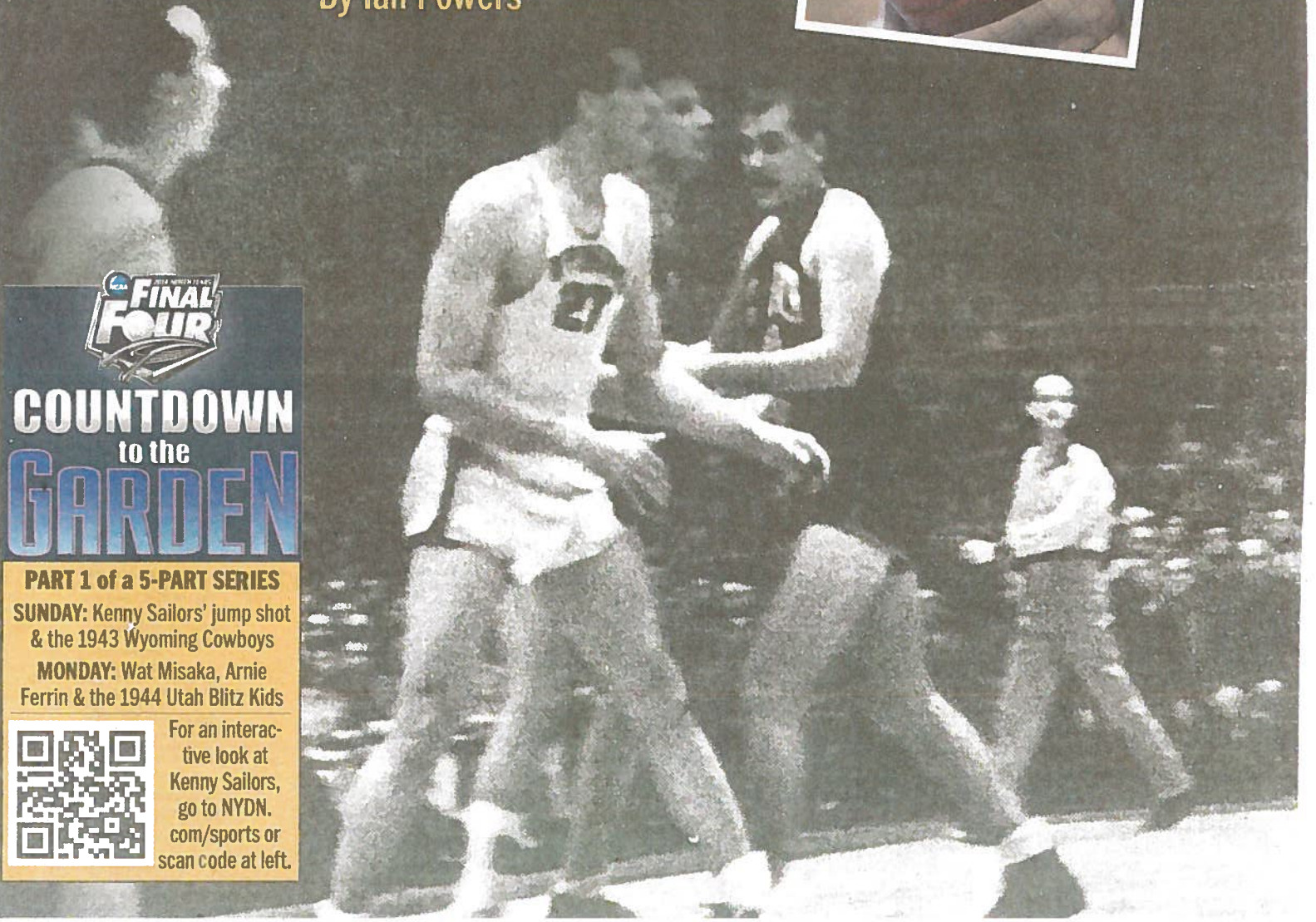
JUMP SHOT



HEARD 'ROUND THE WORLD

How Wyoming's Kenny Sailors pioneered the jumper, then lit up Garden 71 years ago for an NCAA championship

By Ian Powers



COUNTDOWN to the GARDEN

PART 1 of a 5-PART SERIES
SUNDAY: Kenny Sailors' jump shot & the 1943 Wyoming Cowboys
MONDAY: Wat Misaka, Arnie Ferrin & the 1944 Utah Blitz Kids



For an interactive look at Kenny Sailors, go to NYDN.com/sports or scan code at left.

LARAMIE, Wyo. — The little windmill is long gone, just a small patch of concrete marks where it once stood three-quarters of a century ago. The thawing remnants of another hard Wyoming winter hold back the scrawly brush that normally covers the spot.

Just a few feet away stands the base of the old farm well, on top of which lies a new backboard and basketball hoop, waiting to be attached to the house that now stands 20 feet away. The old house burned down decades ago and the land houses a show pig farm.

More than 80 years earlier, teenager Barton (Bud) Sailors nailed a cruder version of a hoop to the old windmill so his little brother, Kenny, could play basketball, at least when the boy wasn't hoeing through acres of potatoes with his mother, Cora Belle, or keeping jackrabbits from ruining the crops on the lonely stretch of farmland in Hillsdale, that Cora, a single mother, had bought with some inheritance money.

"(My mother) grew up on a farm and she didn't want to raise us two boys in the city, so she bought this farm down there in Hillsdale," says Kenny Sailors, now 93. "And we did all right on it. We didn't have any money, but we had plenty to eat during the Depression, which a lot of people didn't. We raised everything, you know. (Had a) big garden. Mom canned everything there was. We had livestock, so we had meat and we ate real well. But no money. Nobody had

any money in the Great Depression."

An unincorporated community with a population of 47 lying 25 miles east of Cheyenne, tiny Hillsdale was a town big enough for an athletic boy with golden locks and an aw-shucks smile to challenge his brother, nearly a foot taller, to a game of one-on-one basketball during their spare moments. Big enough, it turned out, for a future College Basketball Hall of Famer to find the divine spark that would spring the most innovative maneuver in the game — the modern jump shot — and charm basketball-loving cityslickers during a maddening run to 1945 NCAA title, the first NCAA championship played at Madison Square Garden.

On March 30, 1945, Kenny Sailors led a bunch of Wyoming kids — including an All-America center recruited from Indiana named Milo Komenich — in a game that "had everybody could ask for in the

way of a court contest — speed, crafty floor generalship, great shooting and fine defensive work," as the Daily News saw it.

He even wowed LIU's Hall of Fame coach Clair Bee, who wrote: "It was Ken Sailors, a great little player, who saved the situation because he is enough of an individual player to carry the load. . . . Play Sailors close, and he has the speed and dribble to go by you with a great change of pace. Play him out, and he dribbles up to you, steps back and sets — and he can hit."

"He's as good a man as ever walked out on this Garden court," said Manhattan coach Joe Dahar.

Sailors took advantage of flat-footed Georgetown for 16 points, the only scorer in double digits, to earn the tournament's Most Outstanding Player award as Wyoming beat the Hoyas, 46-34. Two days later on the same floor, Sailors' 11 points helped the Cowboys complete the first "mythical national championship" with a thrilling overtime win over National Invitation Tournament champion St. John's in a game to benefit the Red Cross during World War II.

The victory capped a whirlwind two weeks — "March-madness whistled up in the Garden" as Time Magazine put it — and ushered in a golden era solidifying the Garden as the Mecca of college basketball, where it staged seven NCAA championship games in eight years to parallel the prestigious NIT.

It was on a spring day in 1934 when a 13-year-old Kenny Sailors first conceived the shot that would spread all over the world. Then he was just a 5-foot-6 kid trying to shoot over his much taller older brother Bud, a star high school athlete in basketball and track.

"He'd swat every shot I'd take, he'd swat it down in my face," says Sailors, who still carries that easy smile and whose wavy blonde hair has gone white now. "So I got to thinking how on earth can I shoot a ball over that big clown?"

"And he'd just laugh, you know. He'd say, 'Kenny you're just not big enough to play basketball. You've got to be like me.' He's 6-5. He says 'you're going to have to find another sport.'"

In 1934, the game revolved around the tall center. After every made basket, the centers would jump ball again, until the rules changed in 1938.

Sailors continues: "And the idea was that, well, if I dribble up to him, don't get close enough that he can block it. Just dribble up to him. He's got to back up, or I'm going to go around him. He knew that. And I dribbled up to him and I just stopped and jumped. . . .

So I shot the ball, I don't know how, maybe I just threw it at the basket (two-handed). But nevertheless, it went in. And he said, 'Kenny, that's a good shot, if you can develop it.'"

Develop it he did. He worked on his shot tirelessly on the farm, and he continued working on it a couple of years later when the family moved 71 miles west to Laramie so Bud could play basketball at the University of Wyoming. Kenny's height peaked at 5-10, but his knack for high jumping helped him extend above the defense of taller players who were all schooled to never leave their feet.

It wasn't easy. There were no clinics or camps or even coaches who taught the shot. It was a shot born out of necessity. A shot born out of perseverance.

It took Sailors more than a decade playing in college and on an undefeated Marine Corps team to perfect the form that best resembles the jumper of today's game. Once he figured out how to control his body in mid-air, so his momentum wouldn't carry him into a defender for a foul, he finally mastered it.

Just a short time after returning from World War II, Sailors had returned to play out his last year of eligibility at Wyoming and found himself back at the Garden playing against Bee's LIU team in January of 1946. As the Daily News' Dick Young put it: "Little Kenny Sailors was his darling, dribbling, one-hand-shooting self as he clicked for 15 points and worked like a slave."

It was during that game that Life Magazine immortalized Kenny's jump shot, snapping a photo of him skying so high above a defender before releasing the ball that he appears to almost break through the Garden roof. The image of Kenny is the inspiration for a 22-foot statue that has been commissioned for the University of Wyoming's entrance to the Arena-Auditorium during a renovation project sometime after the spring of 2015.

Jack Rose, a basketball junkie who grew up in Montclair, N.J., remembers seeing the shot at Kenny's second trip to the Garden in 1942. "Here we're going to watch (St. Francis) play some place called 'Wyoming,'" says Rose, now 86, a two-time All-State player at Blair Academy who would go on to captain the Cornell team. "We said, 'Boy oh boy, (St. Francis) is just going to wipe them out.' Well, all of a sudden, as we watch the game there's this fella Kenny Sailors, who's the smallest guy on the court and he's running up and down and he jumps and he makes these shots. And we said, 'Well what's that called? A jump shot I guess, huh?'"

So Rose and his basketball rat friends went to work, attempting the maneuver for three weeks before giving up and going back to their two-handed set shots. Says Rose: "How did he ever do it anyway?"

But it wasn't all accolades and press raves. Sailors' first professional coach with the Cleveland Rebels — Dutch Dehnert — tried later in 1946 to rein in the shot. In the 1920s, Dehnert was an original New York Celtic along with St. John's coach Joe Lapchick and CCNY's Nat Holman.

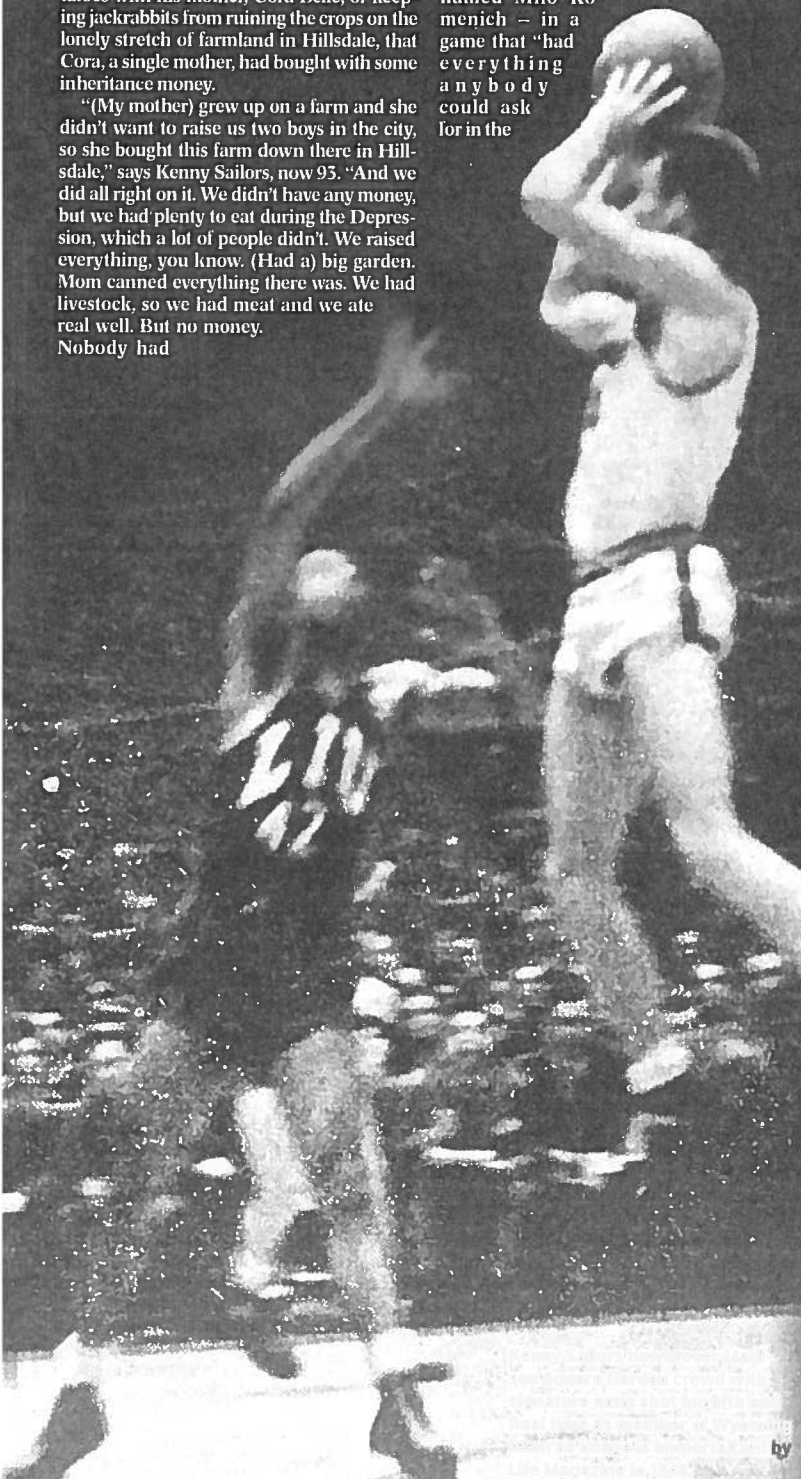
As Sailors recalls: "(Dehnert saw me scrimmaging), and old Dutchie he came over to me with that New York brogue, whatever you want to call it. 'Yuze guys. . . Sailors where'd you get that leaping one-hander.' I said, 'Dutch I don't know. I've been shooting that a long time.' He said, 'That will never go in this league.' meaning the pros. He says, 'I'll teach you how to shoot a good two-handed set.'"

By midseason, as his playing time dwindled, Kenny went to the front office to ask for a trade or his release. Within a few days, Dehnert was sent away on an extended scouting trip. "That's how they did it in those days," says Sailors, whose playing time increased after that under Roy Clifford.

Sailors arrived on the Wyoming campus in the fall of 1941, two years after future Hall of Fame coach Everett (Ev) Shelton became coach, believing he would play as many as three sports — football, basketball and wrestling. "(Shelton) said, 'if you're going out for football, just forget about basketball.' That's what he said to me. It really shook me, you know," says Sailors.

Shelton had to come to Wyoming to win a national championship like he had at the AAU level — AAU ball being shaped much

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Continued from previous page

differently in those days, when amateur players would work for companies and play for their sponsored teams, pros without being "professional." Shelton's grasp of the psychology of coaching young men set him apart from many of his peers. He harnessed his best qualities to get his Cowboys, which early in Kenny's career included legendary broadcaster Curt Gowdy, ready for a grueling road schedule — Wyoming played two-thirds of its games away from home during Kenny's career. Not many quality teams were signing up to come way out to Laramie, with its elevation of over 7,000 feet.

"(Shelton) really conditioned us to accept the fact that there's no difference in playing in these auditoriums and arenas back east. They're all the same," Sailors says. "Everything's exactly the same. . . . The only thing that a lot of players can't handle is the booing. When they get booed standing on the free throw line, they'll miss their free throws.

"And he said, what you've got to realize is they're not really booing, they're clapping for ya. . . . He said nobody boos a bum. They're booing because they're afraid of you."

Sailors' Wyoming teams played five games at the Garden, winning them all. The first trip to Manhattan to play CCNY — led by Red Holzman — during the holiday break of the 1941-42 season, opened Sailors' eyes to life outside of Wyoming.

"Yeah, it was a lot of fun for us, these country kids," Sailors says. "Most of us came off of farms or ranches . . . had never been outside of Wyoming before. We got to ride on the train. First time we ever rode on a train most of us. . . . Our big kids like Komenich, 6-8, 6-9, poor devil, the little old booths he had to sleep in, his feet would be sticking out that far over the edge."

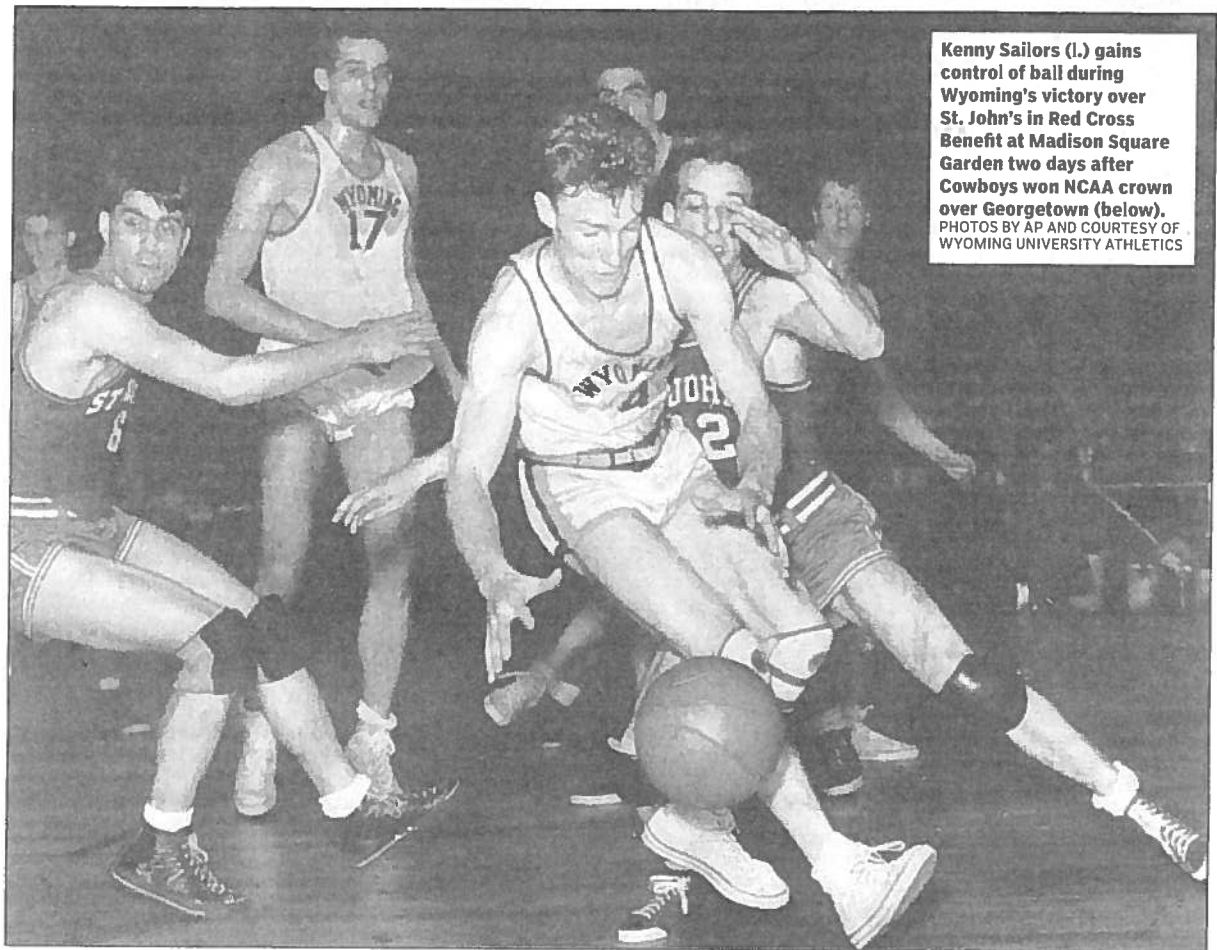
Long before the Naked Cowboy graced Times Square, the Wyoming Cowboys always created a stir in the same spot. Garden promoter Ned Irish, who would meet the Wyoming boys at the train station and have cars lined up to bring them to the hotel, always told the team to dress up like Cowboys.

"I just loved the idea of Irish making these guys wear cowboy hats and boots and wearing Pecos Bill kind of hats and coming up out of the subway into Times Square," says Kim Komenich, Milo's son, a Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer who directed a documentary about the 1943 team called "Cowboys," which premiered earlier this month in Laramie.

Sailors recalls: "We thought we were something. We really did. Those New York people turned pointing at us, making remarks, you know, and we got a real bang out of that."

The Cowboys would stay at the Paramount Hotel, a few blocks from where that incarnation of the Garden stood on the west side of Eighth Ave. between 49th and 50th streets. One day, the team was scheduled to go sightseeing, but Shelton led Sailors stay and hang out in Times Square.

"(There were) people everywhere. You could imagine coming



Kenny Sailors (l.) gains control of ball during Wyoming's victory over St. John's in Red Cross Benefit at Madison Square Garden two days after Cowboys won NCAA crown over Georgetown (below).
PHOTOS BY AP AND COURTESY OF WYOMING UNIVERSITY ATHLETICS

off a farm, country kid like me. I'd never seen more than 20 people in a bunch in my life, except maybe a ballgame. You go down there and there's thousands of them just milling around, you know. Packed so close you can hardly walk between them. The Wyoming kid comes to town."

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Former U.S. Sen. Alan Simpson was an 11-year-old in Cody, Wyo., in March of 1943. His father, Milward Lee Simpson, who would later become governor of Wyoming and a U.S. Senator himself, was a three-sport star at Wyoming in the 1920s and a member of the school's Board of Trustees in 1943.

"(My father) became a great fan (of Wyoming basketball). Once Kenny hit the scene, he was tickled to death to see him," says Simpson, who later played football and basketball at Wyoming and whose family often traveled more than 350 miles from Cody to watch games in Laramie and even some road games in Colorado and Utah.

As the 1943 season wore on, the whole state seemed to hang on every game the Cowboys played in the NCAA Western Regional (wins over Oklahoma and Texas) in Kansas City and then on to New York for the championship against Georgetown and the Red Cross Benefit game against St. John's.

"We always did listen (on the radio)," recalls Simpson, who lives in Cody today and remains friends with Kenny and sees him often at Wyoming games. "Sometimes, we'd have to drive out on a hill in the car

so we could get closer to a transmitter. There wasn't any television."

What Simpson and his fellow Wyomingites listened to was history. Although Wyoming had played at the Garden twice before and had also beaten St. Francis of Brooklyn earlier in December of 1942, the Cowboys were considered underdogs against Georgetown, whose 6-8 center John Mahnken outdueled George Mikan of DePaul in the Eastern Regional final at the Garden.

So on March 30, Wyoming found itself in a battle with the Hoyas, Mahnken kept Komenich in check, and the game was tied 10 times before Sailors and the Cowboys pulled away in the final five minutes for a 46-34 win and the NCAA crown.

With the NCAA final being played in New York, however, a new wrinkle emerged. The NCAA tournament would be played in the same building that had housed the National Invitation Tournament the week before. The NIT carried more prestige, being a year older and offering schools a guaranteed purse as well as a trip to New York City. The NCAA Tournament told schools it could share in the proceeds earned by the event, which compared to the billions involved in the tournament now wasn't a particularly promising venture since it had lost money in the inaugural tournament of 1939.

So even as the NCAA version was growing in popularity, the NIT was still the tournament, and its 1943 champion, the city darlings of St. John's, was considered the national champion by many, especially in



New York.

The Johnnies were one of Lapchick's special groups, led by star center Harry Boykoff, future Knicks coach Fuzzy Levane and Hy Gotkin.

"(They were) trying to claim part of the championship, that they deserved to be a national champion too," Sailors says. "And Shelton said, 'We don't want that, boys. We want it all or nothing. We're going to play St. John's if they've got the guts to play us.'"

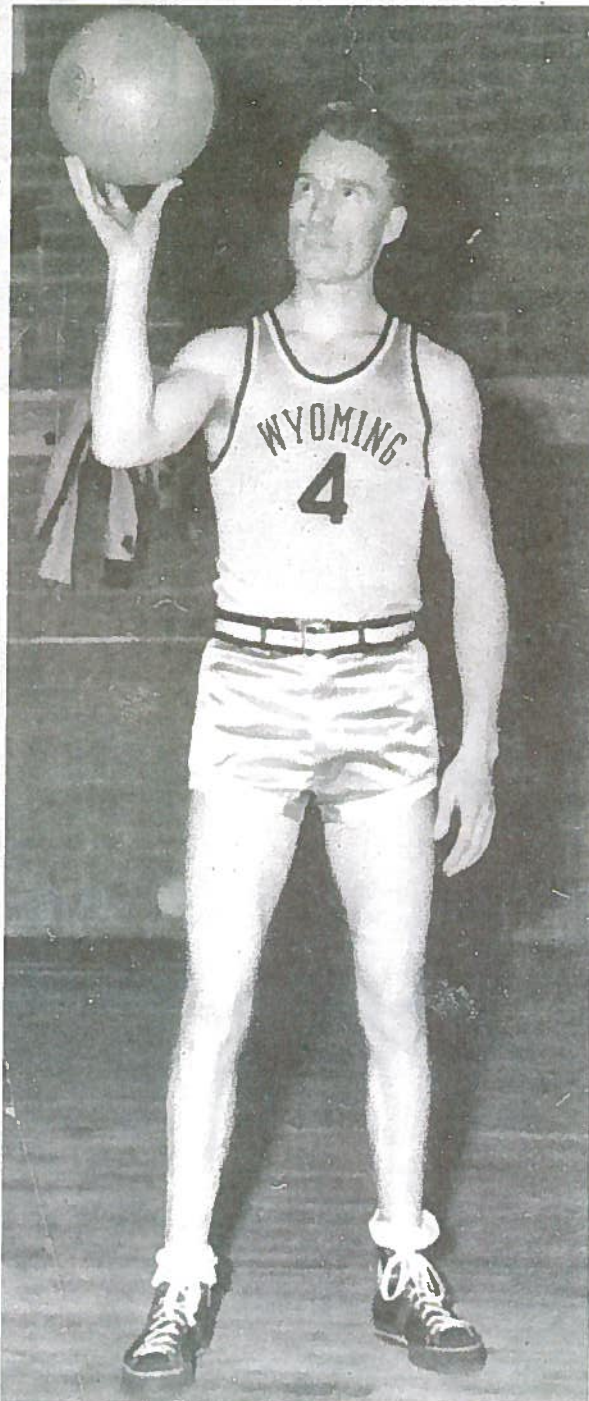
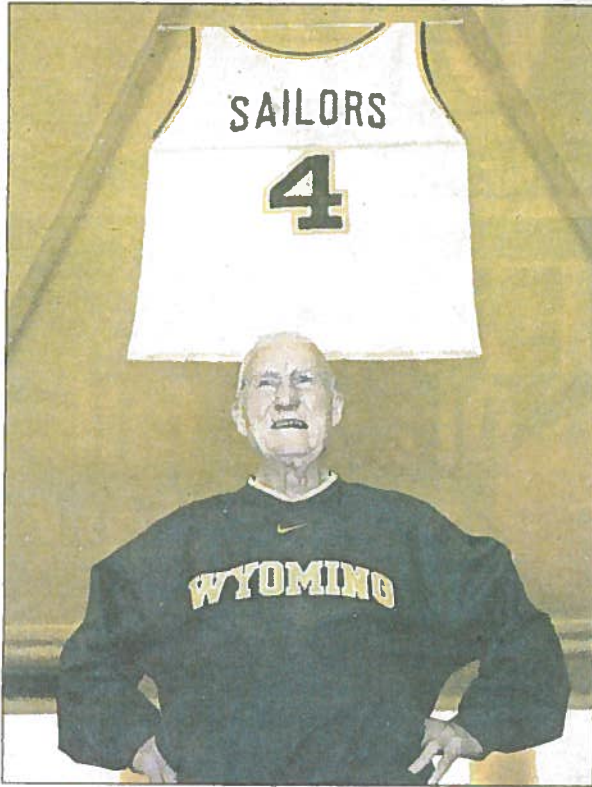
As Kenny tells it, Shelton approached Irish about the idea of the game, and the Garden visionary acted on it.

Says St. John's athletic director emeritus Jack Kaiser, who was a student at St. John's Prep at the time:

"I'd say the NIT had more clout and more prestige. But of course the NCAA was building as well. And it was great to have two tournaments of that stature at that time and to have their tournament winners meet — No. 1, just for interest of the basketball fans, coaches and players, and No. 2 for the benefit of the Red Cross."

And so an SRO crowd of 18,316 fans packed the smoke-filled Garden to witness the clash, which swelled the Red Cross coffers by \$29,000.

The game — between Cowboys and Indians no less — lived up to its billing, as the Daily News put it: "An overtime whooper-doooper that rivaled Custer's last stand for shooting



Kenny Sailors (clockwise from top) stars at Wyoming after developing jump shot on farm where old well, with modern day hoop on top, lies just few feet from patch of cement where windmill that housed Sailors' first hoop once stood, helping to make him legend for Cowboys who have retired only his jersey in their history. PHOTOS BY IAN POWERS/DAILY NEWS AND COURTESY OF WYOMING ATHLETICS

and breath-taking excitement.”
 The Redmen made up an eight-point deficit in a frenzy over the final two minutes to force overtime at 46-46. With Komenich having fouled out, versatile 6-6 forward Jim Weir took control in the extra period, scoring five of the Cowboys' six points for the 52-47 win and the undisputed national title.
 “That’s when the New York people really began to get on our side. When they saw that we weren’t just a fluke,” says Sailors, who earned All-America honors that season as well as the Chuck Taylor Award for national player of the year.

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 The Wyoming players and the rest of the world knew the celebration

wouldn’t last. Ten days after returning from New York, Sailors was off to Quantico, Va., for officers training in the Marines. A campus military leader, he was commissioned a second lieutenant. Most of the team went off to fight the war, depleting the roster so much that Wyoming didn’t field a team the next two seasons. Neither did a lot of schools.
 Sailors stopped off in Laramie on a 10-day leave to marry college sweetheart Marilynne Corbin and took her with him to the marine base in San Diego. He spent much of his time in the South Pacific serving on a troop transport on which he headed up a ship security detail and helped transfer wounded soldiers to better accommodations.

Unbeknownst to Sailors, his brother Bud piloted B-25 bombers for the Air Force in the same theater.
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 After Sailors returned for another All-America season at Wyoming, he would go on to play five years of professional basketball, averaging 17.3 ppg for the original Denver Nuggets in 1949-50. That was long enough to earn an NBA pension, and he used much of his salary to buy the Heart-6 Ranch in Jackson Hole, becoming a true cowboy and starting a hunting guide and outfitting business. He and Marilynne had a daughter, Linda, and a son, Dan. He also spent time working in Cheyenne, coaching some youth basketball and launching a short political career that

included unsuccessful runs for the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate.
 In 1964, the old Cowboy fulfilled a lifelong ambition by hitching up a trailer and driving the family to Alaska to start up another hunting guide and outfitter business 200 miles north of Anchorage. His son still lives there. While in Alaska, Sailors, looking for an outlet for Linda to play basketball, started up the girls basketball program at the local school and ended up winning four state championships over the years. He coached at clinics in Inuit villages in remote parts of Alaska.
 When Marilynne’s health began to decline in 1999, they retired back to Laramie, where Marilynne died

in 2002 (Linda has also since died). Over the last decade, Sailors has become a state treasure and school ambassador, living within walking distance of campus. He can still be seen at most Wyoming home games, although at 93, he doesn’t get to as many practices as he used to.
 “(He was) pretty revolutionary,” says Cowboys junior Larry Nance Jr., whose father was a three-time NBA All-Star and is maybe best known as the first Slam Dunk champion. “You always think of how Magic and Bird changed the game. The first person to do that was Kenny Sailors. It’s kind of cool that he’s here with us and that we get to see him almost on an everyday basis. He’s just your normal kind of guy and you’d never expect that.”
 Sailors was inducted into the College Basketball Hall of Fame in 2012, and his supporters have tried unsuccessfully to get him enshrined at the Naismith Hall of Fame. A new case is gaining steam to submit Sailors for his contribution to the jump shot.
 There has been a long-running debate over who actually “invented” the jump shot, a mystery that undoubtedly will never be solved.
 “There are a couple of people that claim it, but I think the person probably most likely to have actually used a jump shot was a guy named Kenny Sailors that played at the University of Wyoming,” Hall of Fame coach Bobby Knight said on ESPN last year.
 Lapchick told the Daily News upon his retirement in 1965: “Still, (Hank) Luisetti and Kenny Sailors of Wyoming have to be the two who most influenced the game in my time... Sailors started the one-handed jumper, which is probably the shot of the present and future.”
 Sailors himself won’t cop to it.
 “I never have gone around saying I’m the one who invented the jump shot,” he says. “Just leaving the floor is a jump shot and everybody shoots it because you leave the floor when you shoot a layup. And how would you know anyway if some kid back in hoe buck high school shot it way back in the 1800s?”
 Perhaps it is Sailors’ friend Bill Schrage, keeper of the history of all things Kenny Sailors, who best captures Kenny’s contribution.
 “Kenny pioneered, perfected and popularized the one-handed jump shot that’s used today,” says Schrage, a former professor at UTEP who retired to Laramie several years ago and befriended Sailors while volunteering at Wyoming basketball games. “Get all those words, especially one-handed ... today ... modern jump shot. That distinguishes it from anybody else who jumped off the floor to shoot it in some form.”
 Gaining enshrinement in the Hall is his out of his hands; Sailors just keeps it simple these days.
 “I’d like to live long enough to see that 22-foot statue they’re going to build of me shooting that jump shot over here if I could,” he says.
 At 93, planning that far ahead is not easy, but then again, neither was stepping back, jumping up and shooting that ball over his brother’s outstretched arms.