

WATCH KENNY JUMP

People have, for decades. That's because Kenny Sailors is the man who first decided to shoot a basketball while airborne. The shot took him to an NCAA championship, the NBA and, finally, Angoon, Alaska.

By LEW FREEDMAN
Daily News sports editor

ANGOON — The man who invented the jump shot stood behind the foul line in the gym of the Angoon School, cradling a basketball in his sturdy hands.

He dribbled the ball, shifting it right, shifting it left, and abruptly jumped. His shoulders square to the basket, his legs straight, right arm extended, the man who invented the jump shot let the ball roll off his fingers. The ball swished through the net.

"I bet I scored a thousand points off this one shot alone," he said.

A thousand more than anyone would have dreamed.

Kenny Sailors, the man who invented the jump shot playing one-on-one against his big brother on a Wyoming ranch during the Depression, is the Thomas Edison of basketball. His invention lifted the sport out of the dark ages.

The basketball of Sailors' adolescence was a tamer game. In the 1930s, a jumper was a dress, not a basketball weapon; downtown was the place you went on Saturday for a movie, not a place you shot from; and a one-hander was the president waving to a crowd.

Coaches thought shooting a basketball was like driving a car — two hands on the wheel for safety — and that jumping was something you did into a lake.

That was before Oscar Robertson. Before Elgin Baylor. Before Jerry West. Before Magic, Isiah and Bird. They did not learn how to fly from Kenny Sailors, but in a sense they learned how to shoot from him. The jump shot made them famous, but Kenny Sailors made the jump shot famous.

They don't even know who he is, but they owe Kenny Sailors.

SMALL TOWNS & BRIGHT LIGHTS

They love their basketball in Southeast Alaska. On game nights towns shut down and fill gymnasiums. Angoon, an Admiralty Island Tlingit Indian village of some 600 people, is such a town:

Kenny Sailors, 68, coaches high school girls basketball here. In a school with 37 kids in grades 9-through-12, there are 15 girls on the basketball team.

The man who invented the jump shot has seen brighter lights: playing for Wyoming, he was the Most Valuable Player of the 1943 NCAA tournament and was a star guard the first five years the NBA existed.

But he has also seen smaller towns: as a kid in Hillsdale, Wy. the closest neighbor was a half mile away. Kenny Sailors probably knew better what to expect from Angoon when he moved here in September, 1987 after 22 years as a big-game hunting and fishing guide in Gakona, than Angoon knew what to expect from him.

"At first it was 'A Boston Celtics player? Here? What?'" said senior Michelle Howard. "But he doesn't talk about it. Only when you ask. It was kind of neat to see. Last year when we got to different towns people asked for his autograph.

Alaskans' favorite kind of big shots are the kind who don't know that they are. That's Kenny Sailors. There's no swagger in his walk, no braggadocio in his speech. He's 5-foot-11, got a gray-haired brush cut, wears glasses, sweaters and white socks with his shoes, and he doesn't make a big deal out of very much — especially himself.

The only time Sailors wants kids living in the past is in his social studies class. He wants them to walk out knowing the history of the US of A, not the NBA.

Sailors felt he was rusty after 14 years out of the classroom. But last spring the students voted him teacher of the year.

"He's considered a treasure," said Angoon Principal Ronald Gleason.

Just back from a 16½-hour ferry ride from Kake, where his team lost two games, Sailors sat in his classroom bantering with Athletic Director Rick Anderson and boys basketball coach Bill Noonkesser.

It's all teasing.

"He's the ugliest coach I've ever worked with," said Noonkesser.

Sailors laughed.

"It's a good place to coach," said Sailors; his voice soft and tinged with a western twang. "Everybody's gung-ho about basketball. The parents, the teachers,

"But they don't know the rules," said Anderson. "That's how Sailors can buffalo everyone."

Sailors laughed again and spread his hands as if to ask "Why me?"

Gleason makes Sailors sound like someone who's earned every Boy Scout merit badge.

Occasionally, you're exposed to genius, said Gleason. "If you're lucky enough you can share in that genius. He's a role model. He embodies what you want athletes to do. He's a self-made athlete. He embodies discipline, initiative, dedication, perseverance, sportsmanship and citizenship."

People ask what Sailors is doing in Angoon, but it really isn't that mysterious. The biggest loves of his life, besides Marilynne, his wife of 45 years, are basketball and the outdoors. Here he has a basketball team and more bears than people in his neighborhood.

When he and Marilynne moved to Admiralty Island last year, Sailors said it was to scout new bear hunting grounds. But he also said this about staying active: "As you get older, it's like whisky. You either mellow or go sour."

After 23 years in Alaska, Sailors is a sourdough, not a sourpuss. A sourpuss doesn't make it in a small town. On a windy and rainy night Sailors was 10 minutes late

for the 8 p.m. practice. His team huddled in the doorway of the gym and when he climbed out of his truck one player said, "You're late." Someone else said, "Coach, we're freezing."

"You'll never know what I go through," Sailors said to a visitor.

The man who invented the jump shot put his key in the lock, held the door open for the players, then entered the gym, groped for the lights, and rolled the balls out of a closet. He has no assistant coach, no team manager. Sailors does it all. There aren't even any cheerleaders: Sailors' 20-5 team had so much fun last year that word spread and the cheerleaders became players.

For the next two hours in a gym lined with banners proclaiming Eaglette supremacy and pennants announcing victories in Alaska AA tournaments, Sailors ran the team through a brisk workout. They ran layups and sprints, scrappy, scramble drills and defensive sets.

"Get that ball!" Sailors shouted. "Thatta girl. No easy ones."

Sailors is a pretty good cheerleader himself.

The players split into teams and shot free throws and layups in a race to 21 points.

"I make everything competition," said Sailors. "Sometimes I buy the winning team a Coke."

To the players, Sailors' background gives weight to the plays he diagrams, and they like his manner.

"He doesn't get mad," said player Denise Starr. "He doesn't ever yell. Unless we don't pay attention."

When practice ended Sailors kept one basketball out and demonstrated his own jump shot. Sailors still plays for a team in the local recreational league.

As the girls emerged from the locker room they saw Sailors shooting. "There's Sailors showing off," said Howard, the 6-2 center Sailors calls "Big Girl."

Sailors grinned. "They laugh at me," he said. "They think I'm too old to play." Then the old man sank a 15-footer.

WHERE IT STARTED

It began in the backyard in Hillsdale, 25 miles east of Cheyenne. Kenny and Bud nailed the hoop up themselves, tacked it onto the windmill. They shot at it for hours with the cows the only witnesses for miles in the flat country.

Bud was three years older and about eight inches taller then, so he won all the time. Kenny dribbled to the basket on the hard-packed gravel court, stopped and shot. Wham! Bud slapped the ball back in his face. Every time.

Sailors idolized his brother, a high school star who later played a season for the University of Wyoming, but it got on his nerves.

One day, trying to elude the big paw of his big brother, Sailors left his feet to take his shot. The jump shot was born.

"It was just a weapon that came naturally," Sailors said some 55 years later as he thought back to his junior high days. "He was big, but he was fast enough to stop my drive. I just did it out of necessity."

Bud, 71, a retired Air Force colonel living in Wickenburg, Ariz., said his brother's dribbling quickness gave him the mobility for the new one-handed jumper.

"We played quite a bit before he figured out he could dribble and get that one-handed shot on me," said Bud. "That was the first time I'd run into it. I was almost 6-5 already. I don't care how tall you are, you're either going to foul him or he's going to make it. He was real accurate with it."

Shooting a one-handed jump shot is as natural as breathing for the basketball player of the 1980s, but in the 1930s and 1940s, it was outrageous.

"If your feet left the floor," said Sailors, "you were a freak. You were on the bench. It's hard for people to believe."

Coaches didn't bench Sailors. He was too good. He was all-state in high school and a two-time All-American at Wyoming, in 1943 as a junior, and in 1946. In between, he spent three years as a captain in the Marines.

Curt Gowdy, the famous sportscaster, was Sailors' backcourt partner two years, though not the championship year. Gowdy, who has seen uncounted thousands of players, insists that Sailors is one of the best.

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

With a spectacular shot. All through high school, all through college, Sailors never saw anyone else leave his feet to shoot.

In a section called Inventions That Changed the History of Sports in the "1988 Old Farmer's Almanac," there is a passage about Sailors. It reads, in part "...though the style of the 1930s was to shoot with both feet firmly on the ground, Sailors jumped in the air and released a one-handed shot to get over his taller brother." Also, "Joe Lapchick called Sailors one of the most influential players of the century."

Now deceased, Lapchick, a member of the Original Celtics of the 1920s, was quoted in 1965 as saying "Sailors started the one-hand jumper, which is probably the shot of the present and the future."

The pedigree of Sailors' jumper is well-established, but it is hard to prove he invented it. It couldn't be patented or copyrighted.

Sailors never staked a claim himself. He said he rarely thought much about it until basketball historians and sportswriters began contacting him with increasing frequency.

"I don't say that I'm the first guy who ever shot a jump shot," said Sailors. "I'm sure there must be some kid somewhere who jumped in the air and shot a ball somewhere. But the old-timers credit me with it."

Ray Meyer is one of those old-timers. The retired DePaul University coach knew Sailors in the 1940s and remains a friend.

"There's a lot of people who say they shot it before him," said Meyer. "There's one right here in Chicago who says he shot it in 1925. But if he did jump he didn't jump over two inches. Kenny went up in the air."

"Kenny was the jump shooter that we know today. He got off the floor."

One reason for disputes is Hank Luisetti. Luisetti, from Stanford, was the first to popularize the one-handed shot. But it wasn't a jumper. Luisetti took the game from the two-handed set shot to the one-handed set shot. Yet somehow over the years, the two developments — one-hander and jumper — blurred in the public mind.

"He kind of got overshadowed by Hank Luisetti," said Wayne Patterson, research director of the Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield, Mass., of Sailors. "You think of a change in the way of scoring and you think of Luisetti. He's credited with the one-hand shot. The average fan is not going to know the difference between the two."

"But we put out what's called an honorable events list every year and we credit him (Sailors) with being the first one to use the jump shot in competition."

Strange that Sailors should be overshadowed by anyone. He glittered on Broadway in 1943.

Sailors was a sensation when he brought his jump shot east to Madison Square Garden and scored 16 points as Wyoming won the NCAA title over Georgetown, 46-34.

The New York Times game description read this way: "Sailors was the key man. His ability to dribble through and around any type of defense was uncanny, just as was his electrifying one-handed shot."

In the arena where the trophy resides, there is instant recognition of Sailors' name in the athletic department 42 years after his final game for the Cowboys.

Sailors averaged 15 points a game in the 31-2 championship season and in 1946 he was the Helms Foundation College Basketball Player-of-the-Year. This year USA Today selected an all-time NCAA team. Sailors was picked for the team of 1939-49.

"He's considered one of our two or three all-timers," said Sports Information Director Kevin McKinney. "He was our first great player. A lot of people say he got us in the big-time."

McKinney, who has worked at the university for 21 years, was too young to watch Sailors take jump shots, but he knows his Cowboys' history.

"I know everybody was just stunned around here when he did it," said McKinney. "He's an historical figure around here."

Larry Birleffi, who has written about or broadcast Wyoming basketball for nearly 50 years, went to school with Sailors. He said

Sailors was always in the gym practicing that crazy new shot.

"We thought it was a little radical really," said Birleffi.

By the time Sailors finished at Wyoming, said Birleffi, "he was a household name."

Enough of one to later become a two-term state legislator.

'A STRANGE LEAGUE'

The National Basketball Association was founded in 1946, the year Sailors left college. Televised games are now shown in some 75 countries. Then the league wasn't even known in 75 cities.

Sailors played most of the Cleveland Rebels' games during the 1946-47 season and averaged 9.9 points per game. The Cleveland Rebels? You bet. Plus the Chicago Stags, the Providence Steamrollers, the St. Louis Bombers, the Sheboygan Redskins, the Anderson Packers, and Tri-Cities Blackhawks. All soon-to-be defunct teams.

"It was a strange league," said Sailors. "Teams came in for a couple of months."

This was also the NBA before the 24-second clock, three-second lane violation and 10-second half-court rule.

Floyd Volker, the only other member of the 1943 Wyoming starting five still alive, and who played a season with Sailors in the NBA, likened Sailors' dribbling prowess to the Harlem Globetrotters' Marques Haynes.

"Two men couldn't take the ball away from him," said Volker.

Sailors loved the no-backcourt rule.

"I dribbled out the clock," he said. "If there were more than two guys on me I'd look for the open man. You had the backcourt, you see, and it was tough to corner a guy."

Scores were much lower and only one man, Joe Fulks of Philadelphia, scored more than 20 points a game in the league's first season. Fulks shot one-handed, but didn't use a jump shot. Sailors played with and

against the NBA's other earliest stars such as Max Zaslofsky, Bob Davies, Jim Pollard, and George Mikan, the first great big man.

"He could play," said Sailors of the 6-10 Mikan, who starred for the then-Minneapolis Lakers. "He used to say, 'If your wife's counting on this playoff money, throw the ball to George.'"

Sailors, who was 26 when he turned pro, played five seasons for Cleveland, Providence, the original Denver Nuggets, the Boston Celtics and Baltimore Bullets. He was a second-team all-pro, averaged in double figures, and had a career high 17.3 points a game with Denver in the 1949-50 season.

Sailors never planned to play professionally, but was steered to Cleveland by Otto Graham, the Hall of Fame football quarterback for the Cleveland Browns, who had played college basketball at Northwestern.

"They took me on my reputation," said Sailors.

Only Sailors' reputation was not so special with Cleveland Coach Dutch Dehnert. Dehnert, like Lapchick, was a member of the Original Celtics. But he didn't have Lapchick's vision. When Dehnert saw Sailors' jump shot he scoffed.

"You'll never go in this league with that kind of shot."

Of course Dehnert was wrong and Sailors outlasted him in the NBA.

In 1950-51, his last season, Sailors roomed with Charles Cooper of the Celtics, the NBA's first black player.

"It was pitiful," said Sailors. "They wouldn't let him stay in the same places as us. When I'd say something he'd say 'Ah, Sailors, it'll shape up. Give it time.'"

In the NBA of the 1980s, even benchwarmers have six-figure contracts. Sailors made about \$7,000 a year. He had endorsements for Bennett's Prune Juice and bubble gum — and the team got the profits.

In his whole pro career, said Sailors, he only saw one other man shoot a jumper. Belus Smawley, who played for St. Louis, shot a fall-away jumper with two hands. Sometimes he fell so far away he landed flat on the floor, said Sailors.

The true jump shot was still in the NBA's future.

STILL LEAN

From the window of the Sailors' cozy apartment facing Chatham Strait, whales, eagles and grizzly bear can be seen. This is why they live in Alaska.

After leaving the NBA, Sailors, Marilynne and their three children lived on a dude ranch in Jackson Hole, Wyo. It was appropriate that Sailors played college basketball for a team called the Cowboys. In his heart, he was one. He hunted big horn sheep and rode horses in Wyoming's vast open spaces. It was only much later, when the kids graduated from high school, and the open spaces filled up, that the family moved to Alaska.

Sailors taught school and coached in Glenallen. He roughnecked in the Copper

River Valley. He hunted and fished, caught kings and killed bears. Once, while riding a horse, a grizzly straightened up in front of him. The horse broke into a cold sweat and began shaking, said Sailors.

Sailors probably could have dribbled around the bear, but the horse didn't have the same presence of mind.

"He nearly had a heart attack," he said.

Sailors is still lean and vigorous. Marilynne is too. For them, basketball in Southeast is just one of a series of adventures. Some day they will leave Angoon. But not to retire.

"We're going to Arizona to hunt rattlesnakes," said Marilynne.

She means it, too.

The Sailors' have scrapbooks in Angoon and they have trophies and other memorabilia in safe-keeping at their old house in Gakona. But Marilynne thinks there's one more basketball honor her husband should get.

"I'd like to see Coach in the Hall of Fame," she said. "I think he deserves it."

People don't think of Edison every time they flick a light switch. And they don't remember basketball's dark ages every time they pop the jumper. Still, it could happen. A Hall of Fame committee screens nominations every year. It doesn't matter how long a player's been out of the game.

And, of course, Sailors has never left the game.

The man who invented the jump shot is still taking them. The man who invented the jump shot still puts points on the board in the rec league. At age 68.

"I've got two or three good jumps left in me," said Sailors.

Two or three? Sure. Retirement hasn't yet crossed the mind of the man who invented the jump shot on a windswept prairie a half century ago.