

# THE BLACK COLLEGE SPORTS BLOG

A diary of commentary on the world of Historically Black College and University Sports

## DEAN SMITH'S REAL LEGACY

*UNC head coach Dean Smith learned a lot from black college coaches and players, perhaps more than you think*

by Lut Williams

Former University of North Carolina head basketball coach Dean Smith died Saturday night at the age of 83.

Those who didn't see him or his Tar Heels play over the 36 years (1961-1997) he led them to a then-record 879 wins, missed a treat - a true genius at work with his players and teams.



**DEAN SMITH:** The great but self-effacing coach succumbs.

UNC won 13 Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) Tournament titles during his tenure, made it to the Final Four 11 times and won two (1982 and 1993) national championships. Smith also coached the U. S. Olympic team to the gold medal in 1976.

His teams were as unselfish as legions of coaches, players and friends say Smith was as a man. In other words, his teams reflected his personality. They epitomized teamwork and team-

play.

Just like late great former UCLA head coach John Wooden, Smith was ahead of his time. He realized things, from a basketball perspective, that it took others a little longer to figure out. Things like, that a certain kind of player or players could do more for your team and program than anyone.

Wooden figured that out and turned UCLA into the preeminent college basketball program in the history of college basketball with his mid-to-late 1960s thru the mid 1970s run through the NCAA Tournament. He did it primarily with players the likes of Walt Hazzard, Kenny Washington, Fred Slaughter, Lucious Allen, Mike Warren, Lew Alcindor (Kareem Abdul Jabbar), Keith (Jamal) Wilkes, Sidney Wickes, Curtis Rowe, Henry Bibby, Richard Washington and Marques Johnson as his stars.

Wooden's Bruins won an unprecedented 10 NCAA national championships in a 12-year period (1963-75), seven in a row from the 1966-67 thru 1972-73 seasons.

But what Wooden did out West at UCLA took a little more time in the segregated South where Smith operated. But in true genius fashion, Smith found a way.

## FINDING THE PROTOTYPE

While Wooden was mixing his roster with a slew of black players, Smith focused on one, a New York wunderkind named Charles Thomas Scott.

Scott was born in Harlem but only spent one year at Stuyvesant High School in New York before transferring to Laurinburg (N. C.) Institute, a prep school known for attracting talented high school players from the North to the tiny campus in Southern North Carolina. The most noted Laurinburg graduate was **Sam Jones**, who by this time



**JONES:** From NCC and CIAA stardom under McLendon to NBA stardom under Auerbach.

(1965-66) was a star guard on the Boston Celtics dynasty teams that won ten NBA championships during his 12-year career. Only teammate Bill Russell has more NBA championship rings (11).

The story goes that when legendary Celtics head coach Red Auerbach came South to the ACC looking for the best player, late former Wake Forest head coach Bones McKinney told him he was not in the ACC but at **North Carolina College** (now **N. C. Central**) of the **CIAA** where the 6-foot, 5-inch Jones starred in the 1951-54 and 1956-57 seasons. The Celtics picked Jones with the eighth pick in the first round of the 1957 NBA Draft. And the rest, as they say, is history.

I doubt any of that was lost on Dean Smith.

Late legendary Hall of Fame basketball coach and pioneer **John McLendon**, who recruited Jones from Laurinburg and coached him at NCC, and like Jones is in the Laurinburg and NCCU Halls of Fame, told me a couple of stories about Smith and Scott before he passed in 1999.

## STORY ONE

McLendon, again for those who don't know, won eight **CIAA** championships at NCCU (1941-52) and went on to become the first college coach in history to win three consecutive national (NAIA) championships (1957-59) while head coach at **Tennessee State**. Six-seven scoring marvel **Dick Barnett** was his lynchpin at TSU. He became the first African-American head coach in professional sports in 1962 when the Cleveland Pipers of the old American Basketball League, owned by George Steinbrenner, hired him. He also became the first African-American head coach at a predominantly white university at Cleveland State in 1966. In 1969, he served a short stint as head coach of the American Basketball Association's Denver Rockets (later the Denver Nuggets).

I wanted to write a book and do a documentary about coach McLendon's extraordinary life and career and was having discussions with him about the same when he called me one Sunday afternoon from his home in Cleveland. As it happens, we were both watching a game between the Indiana Pacers and Orlando Magic in the 1995 NBA Eastern Conference finals. Larry Brown was the Pacers head coach.

"Have I ever told you about Larry Brown and Charlie Scott," coach Mac asked me. I braced for a revelation. "No," I said.

He went on to tell me that in 1967 after his stint at Laurinburg, Scott was prepared to join him on the **Kentucky State** team he was then coaching when he got a call from Brown. Brown, who played for Smith at Carolina, had returned as an assistant coach at UNC after a short stint playing professional ball.

"He called me and said would I mind if they brought Scott in on a visit to North Carolina." Brown explained that Scott could not only be a player that would greatly enhance UNC's fortunes but, as the first African-American scholarship basketball player at Carolina, open the doors for many to come after him.

Coach Mac said he did not object but told Brown that it was completely Scotts' decision.

A little while later, McLendon said, he got a call from Scott.



**COACH McLENDON:** With his trophies.

“I don’t want to go up there,” Scott told the coach about UNC while crying on the phone. McLendon said he told him that while he understood his feeling, it was an opportunity that he should at least explore.

Scott took the visit, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Smith had his prototype. And he quickly earned Scott’s respect. He called him by his name, Charles, the name he preferred, rather than the ‘Charlie’ sportswriters used.

Smith took Charles to his church, a truly integrated church in Chapel Hill.

Scott went to Carolina and turned the place and the ACC out. The previously lilly white conference had literally never seen anything like him. He averaged 22.1 points and 7.1 rebounds during his three-year stay at Carolina including 27.1 points his senior season. He was a two-time All-American and three-time all-ACC selection while leading Carolina to their second and third consecutive Final Four appearances in 1968 and 1969.

His dazzling array of uncanny fall away jumpers, spins and athletic moves dazzled and brought pizzazz to the league. Despite his extraordinary talent and output, Scott was passed over for ACC Player

of the Year his junior and senior seasons in favor of John Roche, a white player from South Carolina. It was one of the few slights Scott said he felt while at Carolina.

For Smith, I believe Scott *was* the prototype or blueprint – between 6-4 and 6-7, coachable, athletic, a great shooter, a la Jones and Barnett.

What followed at UNC were Bill Chamberlain, Al Wood, Walter Davis, Michael Jordan, Vince Carter and Jerry Stackhouse. And success. They all fit the bill.

Of course, it didn’t hurt that Smith added to that success by throwing in talented ‘Bigs’ – the Bob McAdoos, James Worthy, Sam Perkins and Brad Daughertys of the world, or the cerebral ‘points,’ the Phil Fords, Kenny Smiths, Derrick Phelps or Jimmy Blacks – but the blueprint, the prototype was central. Smith followed it for 30 years.



**THE MVPs:** The coach and his star pupil.



**SCOTT:** The prototype.

## STORY TWO

The other Dean Smith story was actually told to me by Coach McLendon on the same day he called me about Scott and Brown. It was later confirmed by late legendary **Winston-Salem State** (1946-93) Hall of Fame head basketball coach **Clarence “Big House” Gaines**. It involves Smith and some of the basketball innovations he is credited with.

In the late 1950s during national basketball clinics, in the true racist fashion in fashion then, black college coaches like Gaines and McLendon were never called upon to lead sessions on coaching philosophy and techniques. It was thought they had nothing to contribute. That was perhaps until McLendon broke down numerous barriers on and off the court during his historic runs through the NAIA with his fast-breaking Tennessee State teams.

Hallmarks of those TSU teams were their full-court, relentless defensive pressure, supreme physical conditioning and all-out hustle. Each player was expected to go in and give maximum effort before making way for a sub, and let the coach know when they were tired. McLendon, in fact, believed that fatigue was more mental than physical. The constant pressure, he thought, would demoralize the other team, many times causing

them to fail to get the ball past halfcourt. A timeout by the opposition was a signal victory for the Blue Tigers who would then, as the coach taught, sprint to the bench.

Any of this sound familiar. It will to keen Smith observers.

McLendon told me of one game where after getting the other team to call a timeout early in the game, Barnett, his star pupil, came sprinting towards the bench, and in the process knocked over players, coaches, chairs, cups and towels. When McLendon finally reached his young star sprawled on the floor and littered with debris, Barnett looked up and said, "Coach, we made 'em call timeout." Such was the unbridled enthusiasm with which McLendon's teams played.

McLendon relayed his strategy to fellow coaches during a session of the National Association of Basketball Coaches (NABC) in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Included in that strategy was something he called "Two in the Corner," a delay tactic he used to salt away victories in the days before the shot clock. According to McLendon and Gaines, after the session, Smith asked McLendon if he could come to his room to talk more in detail about his various strategies and techniques. Smith came and they went over many of his philosophies including what later became known and popularized as Smith's 'Four Corners.'

"One of the biggest problems I have with him is that he never stood up and told the truth about the Four-Corners and all he learned from Coach Mac," said noted black college historian, **Fred Whitted**, of Smith.



**SMITH:** Innovator or imitater?

## THE FINAL TALE

"He was always a step ahead," said ESPN analyst and former coach, Dick Vitale of Smith. I couldn't agree more.

It's a shame that Smith's failing health over the years since his retirement robbed us of the opportunity to hear his analysis of basketball games. His insight and perspective, I think, would have elevated our understanding of the game's nuances like no other. And his humility would have been refreshing.

Quite similar to coaches Wooden and McLendon, Dean Smith was more than just a great genius coach. He was a genius off the court as well. He was smart enough to recognize the time he lived in, a time of segregation in all of America, not just the sporting arena, and what a real man was required to do.

As such, he challenged the prevailing racist notions about sports, basketball in particular, as well as in many other aspects of American life. He took stands not only on matters of civil rights and inclusion, but others such as ending the Vietnam War and the death penalty. In addition to his coaching prowess, for those reasons, above all else, to my mind he is a hero.

Dean Smith joins my Mount Rushmore of great college basketball coaches along with Coaches McLendon, Wooden and Gaines.

Rest in peace, Coach Smith. Your place is secure.

