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colorado classics

Burdie Haldorson, CU's two-time basketball Olympic gold medalist

Reporter Irv Moss writes about stars from the past

By Irv Moss
The Denver Post

Posted: 04/06/2010 01:00:00 AM MDT



Burdie Haldorson stood tall at CU, on two U.S. gold-medal Olympic teams and on one of the greatest AAU squads. (Denver Post file photo)

All Burdette "Burdie" Haldorson had to do was mention Lockett-Nix to sharpen the focus on a six-year span in his basketball career that made him one of Colorado's favorite sons in the sport.

Lockett-Nix was a Cinderella team in the 1955 national AAU basketball tournament. Its lineup included Haldorson and some of his University of Colorado teammates who had just finished third in the NCAA Tournament, CU's second trip to the Final Four.

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The Buffaloes lost 62-50 in the NCAA semifinals to eventual champion San Francisco, led by Bill Russell, then defeated Iowa 75-54 to earn third place.

Luckett-Nix represented the names of two Boulder businessmen who sponsored entry into the AAU tournament. Fans from throughout the country streamed into Denver to watch the week-long event.

"With all the NBA teams on the East Coast in those days, the AAU tournament made Denver the basketball capital west of the Mississippi," Haldorson said. "There was a lot of good basketball played by a lot of very good players."

The names of the teams sometimes belied the quality of the tournament. At first glance it might be difficult to take serious Fiber McGee and Mollys (Los Angeles), Everybody's Drug (Eugene, Ore.), or Poudre Valley Creamery (Fort Collins). But there also were the Phillips Oilers, Peoria Cats, Akron Goodyears and Denver-Chicago Truckers, names that suggested power and performance. And nobody would think they had a patsy when they played the Quantico Marines.

Luckett-Nix came to the AAU tournament without a full roster of players but made it to the championship game, where it met mighty Phillips at the Denver Coliseum.

"We got beat on a last-second shot," Haldorson

recalled.

For years afterward, any basketball story told in these parts had to include details of that game, including how Jim Walsh of Phillips nailed a long set shot as the buzzer sounded to beat Luckett-Nix 66-64.

CU's run to the Final Four in Kansas City began a string of successes for Haldorson, a 6-foot-8 center. He earned Olympic gold medals in Melbourne (1956) and in Rome (1960). In 1958, with the Cold War with the Soviet Union heating up, Haldorson was a member of an AAU team that played on a goodwill tour behind the Iron Curtain.

"Because of the timing, that was really something," Haldorson said. "That ranks pretty high with me among my basketball accomplishments."

Haldorson joined the Oilers for the 1955-56 season and was teammates with Walsh and Chuck Darling, who had gained All-America status at Iowa after playing at Denver South.

It was a smart move. Phillips won the 1956 AAU Tournament, giving the Oilers entry into the Olympic Trials. Phillips won the trials' round-robin tournament, and its starting five, including Haldorson's CU teammate Bob Jeangerard, along with coach Gerald Tucker, spearheaded the Olympic team. The U.S. defeated the Soviet Union 89-55 for the gold medal.

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"The first Olympic experience ranks at the top," Haldorson said.

He rates the Final Four experience second among his all-time accomplishments and the 1960 Olympics third. He is one of only 11 men to win two gold medals in the sport.

But he also believes the 1960 Olympic Trials in Denver featured one of the greatest assemblages of basketball talent, including Oscar Robertson, Jerry West, Jerry Lucas, Walt Bellamy, Bob Boozer and Terry Dischinger. The U. S. beat the Soviets 81-57 in the deciding game.

Robertson "averaged double-double figures for a season," Haldorson said. "When a player does it in one game today, they think they've done something."

Haldorson was tempted to play in the NBA. But even a call from Vince Boryla, the general manager of the New York Knicks, couldn't change his mind.

"I told him if I didn't make the Olympic team, we'd talk," Haldorson said. "At one point, I was close."

After his playing days, Haldorson stayed with Phillips for a time before opening his own company in the gasoline-and-oil business.

Asked to describe his game, Haldorson said, "I could shoot from outside pretty well."

He could rebound pretty well too. His average of 13.8 boards in his



senior season is still a CU record.

Haldorson bio

Born: Jan. 12, 1934, in Austin, Minn.

High school: Austin

College: Colorado

Family: Wife Kaye, daughters Linda and Kari, son Brian

Hobbies: Golf, reading for entertainment

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