

## Former CU Buff Leason McCloud proved nay-sayers wrong

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NEWTON, Kan. -- On July 4, 1942, a timeless American love story was at long last formalized in the heartland.

Leason H. McCloud married his beloved Martha on that summer day just north of here in Salina.

McCloud, 93, has some trouble remembering the details of his noteworthy playing career at the University of Colorado, which also concluded with a Hollywood ending 70 years ago.

But "Pete" -- nobody close to McCloud has called him Leason since he was a mischievous little boy -- doesn't have to close his eyes to see his beautiful bride.

"Her picture is right there, and right there, and right there, and right there," McCloud says while pointing to Martha's shrine inside his room at the Newton Presbyterian Manor nursing home. "She's still in my heart."

And so are the Buffaloes he ran with a lifetime ago.

McCloud was Forrest B. "Frosty" Cox's best offensive player on the distinguished 1941-42 team, which gave CU fans something to cheer about before the roars at Balch Fieldhouse were muted by the bombs of World War II.

"He was a great scorer," said Bob Kirchner, Cox's defensive stopper from Topeka, Kan. "There were a number of us from Kansas, at least four or five. We may have had more Kansas boys than KU. ...

"(KU head coach) Phog Allen only asked one of us to play for him -- Pete McCloud."

The Buffs opened the season with 14 consecutive wins and closed the campaign as one of the "Final Four" teams left vying for the NCAA championship.

McCloud and teammate Robert Doll both earned All-American honors that spring.

Seven decades later, McCloud was honored by CU as one of the school's "living legends." He received a plaque that is also displayed proudly in his room, along with some black and white photographs from his playing days with the Buffs.

Sports writer Frank Kraway wrapped up McCloud's senior season in a 1942 Denver Post article as follows:

McCloud's one-handed shot was the most phenomenal in these parts in some time and absolutely unstoppable when he was having a good night -- which was practically every night he played.

In addition, he was cool, heady and saved his shots for the most important moments. It was his hot streaks that broke the backs of C.U.'s opponents more than anything else.

'I'll show you'

McCloud was born "in the sticks" of rural Missouri where the family resided in a log cabin.

His father, Sidney, worked as a fireman and later drove a truck for a Chat mine.

His mother, Mary, delivered eight boys. Leason -- the only sibling still living -- had brothers Elmer, Harry, Robert, Wesley, Leslie, Fredrick and Bill.

In 1927, McCloud moved into an uncle's basement in Newton and did his best to catch up in school.

"Mrs. Wayne was the teacher. The schooling I had had been very cursory, and I had to walk four or five miles to get to school down in the hills in Missouri," McCloud said. "When I got to Newton they didn't know what grade to put me in, so they put me in the third grade. ...

"The other kids knew I didn't know the things that they knew. They made fun of me, and Mrs. Wayne straightened them out and took me under her arm and taught me third grade on the side. Very good teacher."

McCloud's older brother Leslie played on the Newton High School team. It didn't take long for Pete to catch on.

"I remember the first shot I ever took," McCloud said. "All my brothers had a goal up outside and they played basketball. I had shown no interest in basketball, but one day I came outside and one of them threw me a ball. I picked it up, shot it, and it went in.

"From then on they were hounding me to death to play basketball because I was tall and lanky."

A few years later McCloud told a cousin that he planned to go out for the junior high team.

"He laughed and said, 'You couldn't make anybody's team,'" McCloud said. "I said, 'Well, I'll show you.'"

McCloud remembers seeing a player in California, most likely Stanford legend Hank Luisetti, using a running one-handed shot to dominate opponents during the era of the two-handed set shot.

The seed was planted. And Newton junior high coach Walter Willis, a math teacher with a brilliant basketball mind, influenced McCloud's game as it was developing.

"Walter Willis said, 'I think I will try to teach you that one-handed shot,'" McCloud recalled. "He showed me how it went and didn't let me do nothing but practice at that shot."

But the town of Newton wasn't quite ready for a hoops revolution.

"I went on my way home from basketball practice one day and stopped down to the YMCA for a scrimmage," McCloud said. "Somebody fouled me as I went to shoot my shot and it went over the top of the basket.

"I was a laughing stock. I still remember that. Very embarrassing."

'And she stayed'

McCloud was 6-foot tall and destined for stardom when he stepped on the court at Newton High School.

However, Frank Lindley was an old-school coach even by 1930s standards.

"Mr. Lindley said, 'We'll have none of this showboating,'" McCloud said. "That was his term, showboating. He wanted me to shoot free throws underhanded, he wanted me to shoot two-handed, and he didn't want my girl to be in the stands."

McCloud was willing to adhere to Lindley's fundamentals.

Banning Martha from games? That was a deal breaker.

"I said, 'No sir!' I told him I was through with basketball if I couldn't have her there," McCloud said. "And she stayed."

Eventually, Lindley allowed McCloud the on-court freedom to shoot his potent one-handed shot. With the legendary coach and consummate small-town star on the same page, Newton High School won the state basketball championship in 1936 and 1937 with a runner-up finish in 1938.

"Lindley was an excellent coach," McCloud said. "I love him dearly."

Kansas is known as the "Cradle of Basketball" for good reason. Dr. James Naismith, the game's inventor, began coaching the Jayhawks in 1899.

The man who built Kentucky's blue blood program, Adolph Rupp, was born in Halstead, Kan., and played at KU.

Dean Smith, the architect of North Carolina's dominant NBA factory on Tobacco Road, played at Topeka (Kan.) High School and was a member of the Jayhawks' 1952 national title team.

The long list of basketball royalty who honed their skills in Lawrence, Kan., includes Wilt Chamberlain, Danny Manning and Paul Pierce.

McCloud was recruited to KU by Dr. Forrest C. Allen.

Only an event as consequential as the Great Depression could force a boy from Kansas to say no to the larger-than-life coach known as "Phog."

Shortly after graduating from Newton High School, his father died from a severe case of blood poisoning.

It appeared that young Pete's basketball dreams were over as reality slapped him in the face.

"I had my mother and two brothers to take care of. When Phog Allen called me to go up there I said, 'I'm sorry, but I can't go. I don't have any money and I need a scholarship or something. I have to take care of my family,'" McCloud said. "There was nobody else. I was the oldest one at home and I was

already working on railroad cars. As I remember it, (Allen) said, 'I don't think you could make my team anyway.'

"That's all I heard from him."

'A sight to behold'

McCloud tried to forget about what might have been at KU while working hard to put bread on the table.

That winter a life-changing opportunity McCloud had never even considered presented itself.

Cox, a former KU player and assistant coach under Allen who had also grown up in Newton, contacted Lindley about sending some of his boys out to Boulder to play for the Buffs.

"Mr. Lindley called me in and said, 'I want you to go out to school in Colorado,'" McCloud said. "I said, 'Ha, there's not much to that idea. Who's going to take care of my mom?'"

Lindley convinced his star pupil that the community would make sure that his family was taken care of.

McCloud reluctantly packed his bag and headed west, where a scholarship to play at CU was waiting.

"I went home and told my momma, and she cried her eyes out," McCloud said. "She said, 'That's what you oughta do.' Mr. Lindley and his group supported her and paid her rent and everything. I didn't know that at the time. I just know he said, 'You're going.' And when Mr. Lindley said you were going, you were going."

McCloud's high school coach even paid for a new wardrobe before putting him on a bus to Boulder.

The road less traveled went through a sea of wheat fields and farm towns marked by their towering grain elevators before reaching the majestic Rocky Mountains.

The moment the Flatirons finally came into view, McCloud knew he wasn't in Kansas anymore.

"It was a sight to behold," he said. "Still to this day, I can see those mountains. I loved them. Boulder was beautiful and the campus was beautiful."

'It's really a jolt'

Cox was building a program for the bright basketball lights of New York and Kansas City using players from the Sunflower State.

John Ravenscroft played for Lindley in Newton before continuing his career at CU from 1937-39. He won four state championships as a high school coach in Kansas and is a member of the state's athletic hall of fame.

Gene Grove (1937-40) and Paul Schmidt (1939-41) were also part of Cox's Newton pipeline.

McCloud was a physical force on the Buffs' talented freshmen team in 1939.

What Cox couldn't see was that the promising new player's heart was broken.

"I was lonesome," McCloud said. "I had a girlfriend back home who I had promised to marry. Every time we got home from a trip I wrote letters to her."

Martha was back in Newton working at an insurance company, a furniture store and a grocery store.

Meanwhile, her homesick fiance was feeling guilty about enjoying the college experience on a pristine campus in Colorado.

"She was a stout girl," McCloud said. "She took care of herself and her mother and everything. She was quite a woman."

If not for Schmidt, an old friend and CU roommate, McCloud would have been on the bus back to Kansas after his first semester.

"He shepherded me, you might say," McCloud said. "He told me that she would wait for me. When I finally got it knocked out of my mind that I should quit worrying about her and start worrying about basketball, it was a big change for me."

With McCloud focused on studying and scoring, the Buffs quickly emerged as one of the nation's elite teams during his sophomore season (1939-40).

Cox's squad grabbed headlines on the East Coast over the holidays with wins at St. Joseph's and St. John's, and a hard-fought overtime loss at Duquesne.

CU went on to win the Mountain States title that season with an 11-1 record in conference play.

The 15-2 Buffs were rewarded with a postseason trip to New York. On the hallowed court inside Madison Square Garden they captured the National Invitation Tournament with a 52-37 victory over DePaul in the semifinals and a 51-40 triumph in title game rematch with Duquesne.

McCloud set the NIT Madison Square Garden scoring record. CU was ranked No. 1 nationally as the Buffs headed for the NCAA Tournament in Kansas City, Mo.

"I remember traveling with the group wearing my heavy overcoat and my cap. I think I must have been pretty good to go to New York," said McCloud, whose memory gets fuzzy when he's given a chance to brag about individual accomplishments. "I just can't imagine that place, even now. It doesn't seem real. When we got into Madison Square Garden, I looked around and there were people everywhere. I had never played before that many people. It was a growing experience."

The Buffs, the first team to participate in the NIT and NCAA Tournaments in the same season, lost to USC and Rice to end the March madness.

Jack Harvey, a senior, earned his second All-American honor that season. George Hamburg, Bob Doll and McCloud established themselves as three of the country's top underclassmen.

"I guess I did pretty good from some of the stuff I read. I didn't get scared. I just went ahead and did what I had to do," McCloud said. "I look back at that and right now it's really a jolt. I can't hardly even fathom going to some of those places."

'Oh, joy!'

The Buffs -- dressed for success with their classic suits, ties and Fedoras -- boarded the train for New York to begin the 1941-42 season and returned home from the East Coast trip 4-0.

CU shredded their old rivals -- Utah, Denver, Utah State, Colorado A&M, Brigham Young and Wyoming -- one by one in the Mountain States Conference, also known as the "Big Seven" during the era, winning 11 times in 12 conference games.

A game story from the Jan. 10, 1941, edition of the Daily Camera read:

Before a crowd of 4,500 spectators, Colorado University's Buffalo cagers blew the lid off the conference competition on Friday night by easily steam rolling to a smashing 49-39 win over Utah University's Redskins, considered one of the top teams in the loop.

CU's 14-game winning streak came to an end with a 40-39 loss to the Cowboys in Laramie. Cox is credited with giving the Cowboys' historic gym at the time its nickname: "Hell's Half Acre."

Kenny Sailors, who many historians credit with inventing the modern jump shot, would go on to lead Wyoming to the NCAA championship in 1943.

But this was the Buffs' time.

McCloud scored 22 points to clinch his second consecutive conference scoring title and led CU to its third Mountain States championship in four years with a 57-46 victory at Utah State on March 7, 1942.

The Buffs' nine road wins that seasons are still a program record.

With McCloud's one-handed shot, Doll's equally devastating hook shot, Kirchner's rebounding prowess, point guard Heath Nuckolls' scrappiness, and George Hamburg's leadership, the CU five was a serious threat to cut down the nets.

In those days only eight teams made the NCAA Tournament field. Dartmouth, Illinois, Kentucky and Penn State represented the East Region. CU, Kansas, Rice and Stanford made up the West Region.

The Buffs-Jayhawks draw in Kansas City, Mo., made for a juicy story line in the national quarterfinals.

Pupil schooled teacher as Cox's crew prevailed 46-44 over Allen and mighty KU for CU's first NCAA Tournament victory.

"Oh, joy," McCloud says when asked about beating the Jayhawks. "Yes, I loved it. I remember we played pretty good as a team. It seemed like I scored pretty good, but I can't remember very much."

Hamburg shut down KU star Ralph Miller, who went on to become a Hall of Fame coach at Iowa and Oregon State.

On the other end, McCloud poured in 19 points.

According to coverage in the March 21, 1942, edition of the Daily Camera, that stat line could have been even more impressive but CU's offensive star developed a stomach cramp in the second half.

"I scored 19 points? Good. It probably should have been 29 points," McCloud said. "With Phog on the bench that was pure joy. That sort of settled the score."

Two days later, the Buffs lost 46-35 to eventual national champion Stanford in the semifinals. McCloud was held to just three points (one made field goal, one made free throw).

Doll and McCloud were on the Look, Pic and Time magazines' All-America squads.

During the group's three-year run together on the varsity team, the Buffs compiled a 43-12 record with an NIT championship and two NCAA Tournament appearances.

CU suspended the basketball program for the 1942-43 and 1943-44 seasons due to World War II.

But for McCloud, who enlisted in the Air Force as an aviation cadet, the only thing that mattered was that the honeymoon was about to begin.

'Been a good life'

Leason H. McCloud became "Pete" nearly 90 years ago.

His uncle, Peter Beck, owned a saw mill in the hills of Missouri. A steam engine supplied power for about 20 workers to place logs on a conveyor belt that fed them into the teeth of a menacing blade.

One day a 4-year-old McCloud was playing on a gigantic pile of sawdust while the men had gone inside the cabin on lunch break. The curious kid climbed onto the conveyor belt and pulled a lever.

Suddenly, little Leason was being moved toward the whirring saw as if starring in a horror movie.

"About 15 or 20 men scrambled out of the cabin to shut the machine down," McCloud said. "When it was stopped, one of the men said, 'Who the hell do you think you are?' I said, 'I'm Peter Beck.'"

"That didn't stick, but Pete did."

During McCloud's playing days at CU, some teammates altered the nickname to "Pushin' Pete" because of his unique, silky-smooth one-handed delivery.

"Those guys were sort of dumb about the shot," McCloud says with a laugh. "They didn't know what was happening to them. It seemed like I didn't either."

McCloud said teammates also dubbed him the "Great American Eagle of the Hardwood" because of his large nose.

By the end of McCloud's magical run with the Buffs, they had to call him a two-time Mountain States Conference scoring champion and an All-American.

McCloud left CU for the U.S. Air Corps, quickly changing uniforms a few hours shy of a degree to enlist in pilot school.

Before his World War II service got off the ground, however, the Air Force required the high-scoring collegiate standout to participate in a high-altitude test inside a pressure chamber.

During the test, one of McCloud's eyes came out of its socket. He remained in the Air Force, teaching calisthenics and even playing for an all-star military basketball team, but never saw combat action.

"They put me in that thing and I got to 39,000 (feet of pressure) and this eyeball right here popped out," McCloud said. "You never saw so many men scurrying and yelling, 'Get the doctor! Get the doctor!' I couldn't do anything but sit there. It didn't hurt very much, it just came out. They rushed me to their doctor and put me in the hospital for a couple days. Eventually, the eye sucked back in. ...

"But that washed me out of the program. That didn't make me very happy."

The smile returned on Independence Day in 1942 when Pete and Martha were finally married.

They were together throughout Pete's military service, his brief semi-professional basketball career, his 33 years working for Continental Airlines and for five years at the nursing home.

The couple had three children, four grandchildren and six great-grandchildren.

McCloud's better half passed away on March 5, 2011, but the love story is alive and well.

"It has been a good life," McCloud said.