

Colorado Classics: Cliff Meely, former CU basketball All-American

By Irv Moss *The Denver Post The Denver Post*

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Cliff Meely says he'll leave it to others to determine his place on the list of all-time basketball greats at the University of Colorado.

He says so with the subtle confidence that his playing record speaks for itself and loudly enough to be judged at the top.

The reality is that it would be a reach to put anyone else at the top. What about Chauncey Billups? He was very good, no question, but he played only two years before leaving for the NBA. Jay Humphries was an electrifying talent in the 1980s who set school marks in steals and assists. And if you go way back to the 1950s, Burdette Halderson led the Big Seven in scoring one year, was an All-American and then won two Olympic gold medals.

But no serious ranking of all-time CU basketball players would be accurate without Meely at the top. It has been 42 years since Meely played at CU, but his average points per game (24.3) over three seasons remains a school record, as does his rebound average (12.1).

"Whatever I did, I did it so our team could win," Meely said. "They retired my uniform, and that was a great honor. I don't decide how good I was compared to others. Somebody else will have to decide that."

Meely retired last May after 27 years of instruction and counseling in the Denver Public Schools. He lives in Boulder and has season tickets to CU's basketball games. Like all other Buffs fans, he's pulling for CU to make it into the NCAA Tournament.

The NCAA Tournament was part of Meely's career, albeit not a pleasant memory. Meely was a sophomore in 1968-69, his first year at CU, when he led the Buffs in scoring at 23.8 points per game. CU won the Big Eight, went 21-7 and advanced to the NCAA regional tournament in Manhattan, Kan., the Buffs' first NCAA appearance in six years. CU's first opponent was Colorado State. The Rams won 64-56, a crushing blow to CU's in-state pride, but CU bounced back to beat Texas A&M 97-82 in the third-place game.

Meely led the Buffs in scoring all three years he played in Boulder, including averaging 28.0 points as a senior. Meely, who played at 6-foot-8, 215 pounds, led the Big Eight in scoring during that 1970-71 season. His 30.5-point average in conference play was the highest in Big Eight history.

Other marks add to Meely's status as CU's best all-around and most dominant player. He recorded 54 double-double performances in his 80 games, and 23 of the 54 were figures of at least 15-15. On Feb. 13, 1971, Meely scored 47 points and hauled in 25 rebounds in a 99-69 home victory over Oklahoma.

Meely found his way to Boulder by way of Chicago — and Sterling. He played a year at Northeastern Junior College in Sterling, where he earned All-America honors, before transferring to CU in 1968.

"My first visit out here was in January," Meely said. "It was cold in Chicago and I was impressed by the blue sky and the Flatirons, and I fell in love with the mountains."

Meely credits Buffs coach Sox Waltham with playing a major role in his success.

"My pedigree was Chicago, and I thought I was a pretty good player," Meely said. "But Sox's style of coaching fit me, and the results showed. The reason I was successful was how he worked with me when I first arrived."

Waltham also helped him adjust off the court. Of the few black students at CU, most were fellow athletes.

"It was the 1960s, and there were social and racial conflicts," Meely said. "My coach and my teammates made it easier for me. I don't recall having a lot of racial issues."

For Meely there was something more important than the basketball.

"My greatest achievement was getting a degree," Meely said. "I had fun in college, but when I talk to young people, I tell them my main objective was to get a degree."

The Houston Rockets took Meely with the seventh selection in the 1971 NBA draft, and he played in the league for five seasons and later in Europe before retiring. He found that in the pros, his defensive prowess came to the forefront. He always seemed to draw the other team's top offensive player.

Things have slowed down in retirement.

"I'm taking a year off for myself, and I'm not finding it to be a tough thing to do," Meely said. "If I get bored, I'll find something to do. I'm trying to decide what I want to do in my second life. My achievements in basketball jump out at me a little bit more now. It's exciting for me right now to just watch the games at CU. I love basketball. It was my life for a long time."

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Meely file

Born: July 10, 1947, in Rosedale, Miss.

High school: Harlan in Chicago