Kenneth L. “Kenny” Sailors
Medallion Service Award

by Julianne Coach Alumnae, Editor

Fast Facts:
BS Education, ’43
Resides in Laramie, Wyo.
Occupation: Retired professional basketball player, Alaskan aurora, high school coach,
Selected accomplishments: maximum selection, college basketball player of the year, 1943
World War II service in Marine Corps
UW Cowboy basketball all-century basketball team
University of Wyoming Intercollegiate Athletics Hall of Fame
Best known for: Inventing the jump shot and playing on UW’s 1943 NCAA championship team
Family: Wife, the late Marilynn Sailors; children Linda and Don Holbie; nursing, basketball, all
about sports

Kenny Sailors should be used to the accolades by now. Point guard for the NCAA 1943 championship Wyoming Cowboy basketball team and tournament MVP, three-time All-America selection, Number 4 Cowboy jersey retired. Now he has been awarded the Medallion Service Award from the University of Wyoming but seems uncertain what he did to deserve the honor.

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- Tom Burman,
UW Director of Athletics

Tom Burman, UW Director of Athletics, runs up Sailors’ accomplishments. “In my mind Kenny Sailors may be the most important UW student-athlete to ever wear the Cowboy or Cowgirl uniform. Mr. Sailors is credited with inventing the jump shot by many basketball historians. The jump shot changed the game of basketball in a similar fashion to how the forward pass changed the sport of football. Kenny’s playing career was interrupted due to World War II, where he served his country with honor and then returned to UW before becoming a professional basketball player. Kenny is a great asset to Laramie and the University of Wyoming.”

Sailors smiles modestly when he hears comments such as Burman’s but speaks firmly on the question of the jump shot. “No one really knows who took the first jump shot. But I worked at developing the shot and made it the shot that players still use today.”

Sailors isn’t too fond of the modern game in which players either slam dunk the ball or shoot a distant three without driving to the basket. But Sailors’ technique called for dribbling toward the basket, elevating an estimated 36 inches off the ground, seemingly freezing in the air while squaring the body and cocking the elbows, then releasing the ball with a flick of the wrist. “Nobody could block it,” he recalls with pride. “And it almost always went in.

Sailors graduated in 1943 and after a stint in the military returned to UW for one year to complete his eligibility. Then he went on to play basketball in the brand new NBA for five years starting when he was 27, the age at which many players were retiring. He played for various teams including Cleveland, Baltimore and Denver. But isn’t his basketball days serving as an ambassador for UW alone that this award acknowledges. It is his continued dedication to what he considers his home town of Laramie and the University of Wyoming. Sailors came to Laramie from Hillsdale, Wyo., because his mother wanted him to attend high school there. He went on to UW hoping to play both football and basketball but could only do one. Although his tuition was paid by the Elks Club he still needed money so he worked at the Student Union. He met his wife Marilynn Corbin, his best friend Stan Hartnaway, who would one day be governor of Wyoming, brought her by to introduce the two. Sailors was a member of the Phi Delta Theta fraternity, and she was in Kappa Kappa Gamma. Hartnaway convinced Sailors to invite Corbin to a fraternity dance. “She went to my dance, I went to hers, and we were off! Six months later we were married and we lived together for 60 years.”

After many years in Alaska, Marilynn became ill, forcing the couple to leave their work as outfitters and move to Idaho. When the passed away, Sailors returned to Laramie, where all three of their children had been born. Now Sailors can be seen at home basketball games studying the Cowboys and bise ‘em, bise ‘em, bise ‘em. He has never let anyone get people out of the way and get to the ball. If you can do that and get to the point where it doesn’t bother you, you’ll be a ball player. I know where he speaks. He recently played in the Senior Olympics and practices the jump shot, though now he only elevates 15 inches off the ground. He dismisses any notion that his days on the court are behind him. “Of course I still play. I’m only 87 years old!”

Now that Sailors is in Laramie he finds himself granting many interviews about his basketball days. He’s often asked if he expects to be named to the NBA Hall of Fame. “I’ll happen some day. It didn’t help me going to Alaska for 33 years where no one could find me. It doesn’t matter though. I belong to greatest Hall of Fame that any man or woman could belong to. It’s not down here, it’s up there. It only has one person on the selection committee, and that’s Jesus Christ!”