

TOMMY JOE EAGLES

*Note: This is the **second** in a series of three feature stories on this year's inductees into the Louisiana Basketball Hall of Fame and this year's recipient of the LABC's Mr. Louisiana Basketball award. The 2018 inductees will be former McNeese State University and Southeastern Louisiana University coach E.W. Foy and former Louisiana Tech University coach Tommy Joe Eagles. Mr. Louisiana Basketball for 2018 is former Nicholls State University player Cleveland Hill.*

EAGLES SOARS INTO LOUISIANA BASKETBALL HALL OF FAME

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Written for the LABC

RUSTON, LA – That early day in August of 1994, Louisiana Tech University was entirely gracious when the request came: Tech's Thomas Assembly Center, the site of so many celebrations involving Tommy Joe Eagles, was needed by the Eagles family for one more.

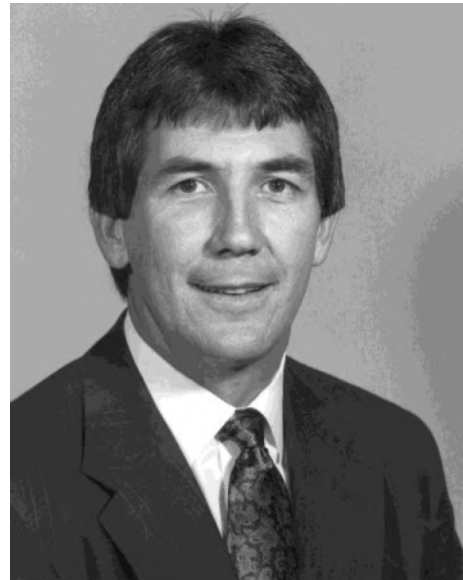
Temple Baptist, the home church of the Eagles family — Tommy Joe and Connie, teenagers Jamie and daughter Katie — held 500 people, maybe 600. The general feeling was that considerably more people, some friends and others fans, would want to attend the funeral for Eagles.

They did: between 1,500 and 2,000 came to celebrate once more the life of Eagles, who'd passed away July 30 from an undetected abnormal heart condition at age 45.

A man with a deep faith in God, Eagles had often said he'd be much more alive when dead than he was while on the Earth, and he was plenty alive during his 45 years here, a whirlwind of basketball and championships and Sunday school, friends and school and Connie and kids.

Now his name and achievements will also live on in the Louisiana Basketball Hall of Fame. He will be inducted into the hall during the Louisiana Association of Basketball Coaches' 44th Annual Awards Banquet on May 5 at the Embassy Suites Hotel in Baton Rouge. The banquet is sponsored by the Baton Rouge Orthopaedic Clinic.

Eagles was just recently inducted into the Louisiana Tech Athletic Hall of Fame in September. As head coach at Tech from 1985-89, Eagles won 87 games and lost only 40, a



68.5% career winning percentage. He was a Southland Conference, American South Conference, and Louisiana Coach of the Year. His teams won two conference regular season championships and three conference tournament titles. He led Louisiana Tech to two NCAA Tournament appearances and two NIT appearances, including a third-place finish in the NIT in 1986. And he posted four straight 20-win seasons: 20-14, 22-8, 22-9, and 23-9.

His relationship with Tech began long before he became the Bulldogs' coach. From his near-to-Ruston hometown of Doyline, he came to Memorial Gym to watch Scotty Robertson coach the Bulldogs on a court where he would soon star.

But first there was a state title to win in Doyline, which the Panthers, led by the Louisiana State Player of the Year, did. And because he and Connie had begun dating as high school juniors, recruiting him to Tech was much easier than it might have been otherwise.

“I think because I came here,” Connie smiled and said, “that’s the reason he came.”

After being a consistent contributor off the bench for three seasons, Tommy Joe was named by Robertson to be co-captain with George Corley of the 1970-71 team.

Although a knee injury and surgery before that senior year cut down on Tommy Joe's playing time (he averaged 1.4 points per game), by no means did it cut down on his ability to lead.

“His fierce competitiveness, leadership, and his ethics and morals went way above the rest of us,” said Corley, an opponent in high school but a fellow Bulldog for four years. “If we were doing something wrong, Tommy Joe was the one who got us back in line.”

“He was the guy at halftime, if he felt like you weren't doing your job, he knew how to come and talk to you,” Corley said. “He didn't sit in the corner. (Coach Robertson) leaned on him if we had a problem on the team. He was the kind of guy who would get it done in the dressing room and on the court.”

That 1970-71 team earned the No. 1 national ranking in the AP College Division Top 20 poll (the first such honor ever for a Louisiana Tech athletic team) after a 104-93 victory over then No. 1 Southwestern Louisiana inside a jam-packed Memorial Gym. The Bulldogs ended the season with a 19-point win over No. 1-ranked New Orleans in the NCAA College Division Tournament to finish 23-5 with a second straight Gulf States Conference title.

Now Eagles' dream was to coach at Tech. After stops at nearby Simsboro High School — three seasons and a state finals appearance — and at Cedar Creek High School in Ruston — five seasons, a 130-37 record and three state titles — he did in 1979.

New Tech head coach Andy Russo and assistants Eagles and Steve Welch began recruiting some serious talent to Ruston.

“Tommy Joe and Steve Welch were very good recruiters,” said Dave Nitz, the voice of the Bulldogs for the past 44 years. “They went out and found them. Tommy Joe was great at that. His personality lent to it. He had that knack for making you feel comfortable when you were around him. His personality was just infectious.”

He went to New Orleans and came away with 6-foot-11-inch “Big Willie” Simmons. He went to Summerfield and landed a 6-foot-9-inch forward named Karl Malone. He went to Shreveport and found a point guard named Wayne Smith, who started every single game of his collegiate career as a Bulldog, all 127 of them.

“Tommy Joe started recruiting me in 1980 when I was a sophomore at Trinity Heights,” said Smith, a 1,000-point scorer and passer extraordinaire with 712 career assists, second most in program history. “Just the passion and quality that I got to experience for the next two years being recruited by him. There was a bond there from the start.”

“I visited other schools, but in the end it came down to the person who recruited me,” Smith said. “That was the tiebreaker. He invested so much time and energy. The relationship was so strong. It was an easy decision.”

Tommy Joe was suddenly part of Bulldog basketball greatness again, this time as an assistant coach and in a new 8,000-seat home named the Thomas Assembly Center.

Smith, Malone and Simmons formed a foundation that helped produce hands-down the greatest season in program history. In 1984-85, the team went 29-3, was ranked as high as No. 7 in the nation, and advanced all the way to the Sweet 16 of the NCAA Tournament before dropping a heartbreaking 86-84 overtime loss to Midwest Regional No. 1-seed Oklahoma.

A few days after the end of that memorable season, Russo left for the University of Washington and Eagles, on April 3, 1985 — his 36th birthday — was named Tech’s head coach.

“Everything I have done since playing here has been directed at someday becoming the head basketball coach at Louisiana Tech,” said Tommy Joe at the press conference, birthday cake included. “It is the job I had always hoped for, and it is every bit as exciting as I felt it would be. I don’t think it is any secret how much I love Louisiana Tech. This is one of the happiest days of my life.”

But happy was not a good way to describe Eagles in the winter of 1985-86. The Bulldogs fell to 16-13 after a one-point loss to then-Northeast Louisiana in the Southland Conference Tournament. As thoughtful and compassionate as he was off the court, he was just that competitive on it.

“He could definitely separate the two, on the court and off it,” said Katie Eagles, 16 when her father passed away.

“Off the court, around town or at church, he was a different personality than what he was on the court, in practice, or in the locker room; he was much more laid-back,” said Dickie Crawford, who was recruited by Russo and played four seasons for Eagles at Tech; he also attended church with Eagles and was an elementary student at Cedar Creek when Eagles was the coach and assistant principal/disciplinarian “and every student,” Crawford said, “was afraid of getting sent to the office.”

“I remember him taking a basketball and kicking it all the way up (in the seats) in the Thomas Assembly Center,” Smith said. “It was almost like things changed after that Northeast loss. I remember coach getting in my face and this big NCAA ring up against my leg.”

Because of a National Invitation Tournament call, the 1985-86 season wasn't over. The Bulldogs beat Northern Arizona by six in Flagstaff, then beat McNeese St. in Ruston, and then earned a one-point victory at Providence. Tech had risen from a one-point loss in the SLC Tournament to the NIT Final Four in Madison Square Garden.

Despite losing to Ohio St. in the semifinals, the 'Dogs defeated Florida for third place in the consolation game. Fueled by a fierce Tommy Joe Eagles, Tech would win championships in each of the next three seasons.

“As far as extreme competitiveness, that was every day,” Crawford said. “Every practice and every game. That was just who he was. There was no one more intense, aggressive, and competitive. He did not like to feel his team was out-coached or under-prepared. I remember how angry he was when we were having a difficult time beating a lesser-talented UNO team coached by (former Bulldog player) Tim Floyd during the 1988-89 season. They beat us both times we played in the regular season; Coach Eagles made sure that did not happen during the conference tournament.”

Tech lost each of those regular-season games by 10, then beat UNO in the league tournament by 22.

“You don't have enough time for me to go over all the intense moments I was a part of with Tommy Joe — and you don't have enough paper,” said Greg Haddox, a player for Eagles at Cedar Creek and one of his assistants at Tech. (Once Haddox made the mistake of committing two fouls in the first half and had to watch from the bench as his team trailed; at halftime, he ducked just in time to miss Eagles' sport coat flying over his head and into the locker room wall behind him. “I got the message,” Haddox said. “Played the whole second half. Didn't foul out.”)

“His will to win was off the charts,” Haddox said. “Winning was important, but playing hard and playing sound was just as important. Some of the most intense moments were when we were winning games but not executing the way we were supposed to. But I think that's a quality that made him a great coach; he strived for perfection. The perfect game's not out there, but he strived for it.”

“As intimidating as he was, he truly cared about each player and wanted to see them be the best person, student, and athlete they could be,” Crawford said. “He had high expectations for everyone on and off the court. Because he cared, he was not going to expect anything less.”

He left Ruston for Auburn in 1989, but after five years and just one winning season and one post-season appearance, he resigned. He was named head coach at UNO in the spring of 1994. Two months later, the guy who’d helped prepare Karl “Mailman” Malone, Randy White and P.J. Brown for the NBA was in Utah to see Robertson, his dear friend and former coach, and to help some former Auburn players at an NBA camp. After throwing a short pass, he collapsed. Paramedics were unable to revive him.

That Saturday in Utah, a career and a life ended. A legacy did not.

The following Tuesday afternoon, a raised stage, tastefully decorated, along with a pulpit and piano, were in place along the south baseline. The casket was just beyond the foul line. Nothing seemed right, including the order of service bulletins instead of game programs clutched in helpless hands.

And then...a woman’s voice began singing, full and deep, very slowly and clearly, and it cut the silence and made it even more silent, if that’s possible. Shayla Blake, a young bride then, was singing “Holy, Holy, Holy,” a hymn Jerome Vasocu had suggested when Connie had looked at him two nights before and asked, “What are we going to do?”

Vasocu had played ball on weekends with Eagles when the two were boys and Vasocu would come to Doyline with his parents from their Minden hometown to visit his grandparents. They’d played against each other in high school. Vasocu ran track at Tech while Eagles played basketball, and he and Nancy had double-dated who knows how many times with Tommy Joe and Connie. As young married couples one night at a now-long-gone Mexican restaurant off West California in Ruston, they’d actually been approached by a waiter who said, head hanging, “I’m sorry, but the manager says that we can no longer offer you free chips.”

“Night after night,” Vasocu said, “we wore them out. So they cut us off. Can’t blame ’em...”

Friends, fun and young and healthy and happy. But now...

Vasocu had been asked 48 hours earlier to prepare the service and offer the eulogy, something he wasn’t sure he could do. Dr. Bob Mcgee, pastor at Temple Baptist at the time, with confidence and encouragement told Vasocu that he could do it and that he should do it.

Vasocu contacted the talented young musician Blake, married to Mack Blake, a former player for Eagles at Cedar Creek. There is a picture framed today at the Blake’s home of Eagles and a young Mack Blake holding up the state championship trophy during an on-court celebration.

“Coach Eagles would pass by Mack’s house when he was in junior high and see him in the yard and yell out the window of his car, ‘You’re gonna be on my team one day!’” Shayla said. “He was so encouraging to him. He’s one of those people who made such an impact in Mack’s life. Coach Eagles taught the college class in the Sunday school Mack attended; Mack was always so impressed that even after an out-of-town game on Saturday night, Coach Eagles would always be in Sunday school, never even late...”

“He comes as close to walking the walk that he talks as anyone I’ve ever known,” Haddox said. “If he tells you something, he’s either going to do it or he already has it done. A man’s man.”

And now it’s the last game, and Shayla is singing, and then Mack harmonizes, it’s slow and rich, and then Shayla begins to play, very bare, the piano...

*“Holy, Holy, Holy,
“Lord God Almighty,
“Early in the morning
“Our song will rise to Thee...”*

“I get chills now,” Vasocu said, “just talking about it.”

If you were there that day, suddenly a welcome prisoner of the moment, you probably will too. Even though you didn’t and couldn’t understand why you were there and, more profoundly, why Tommy Joe was not.

“It’s just such a reverent song,” Vasocu said. “It’s my favorite hymn; it goes back to my childhood. It calls us into God’s presence. We needed that then. I know I needed that.”

*“Holy, Holy, Holy,
“Though the darkness hide Thee...”*

“I just think God had his hand on Tommy Joe,” Connie said. “He would go on basketball trips and he would get in late on a Saturday night and he’d be teaching a Sunday school class on Sunday morning. He was a really good father as well. My children were blessed. I got a lot of letters from his players after he passed away.”

Vasocu knows it will “sound hokey for some people,” but even as he was sitting on the stage, concerned with the task he’d been charged with, the eulogy in his hand and the casket at the foul line, he felt a gentle breeze come over him in the middle of the music. A literal wave of cool wind.

“From that second forward,” he said, “I went into some sort of spiritual overdrive.”

With a remarkable calmness, he was able to speak of his friend, of his friend’s life, and of his friend’s legacy, from sweaty boyhood weekends on ballfields, from basketball to baptism,

from “no more free chips” for poor young couples to rich relationships with friends and families. He was able to speak about Tommy Joe.

“I got through it,” he said. “I felt like I was able to honor Tommy Joe and the Lord, as well as honor Connie’s trust.”

After that service, the feeling that something of great value had been lost was inescapable. But so was the certainty that something far more magnificent, something far more glorious and filled with wonder, had been gained. If you knew Tommy Joe, you knew that’s what he would have wanted.

In addition to the Louisiana Basketball Hall of Fame induction, the May 5 awards banquet will include recognition of Louisiana’s major college, small college, junior college and high school players and coaches of the year, the top pro player from the state, and the presentation of the LABC’s Mr. Louisiana Basketball award to former Nicholls State University player Cleveland Hill.

The Louisiana Basketball Hall of Fame is sponsored by the LABC. The Hall of Fame was created in 1975 to honor former great basketball players and coaches from Louisiana colleges. More information about the LABC and the Hall of Fame can be obtained by visiting their website at www.labball.com.

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